



Moving forward from interpersonal trauma

Week 10: Effective Communication, Looking Back and Looking Forward

Research tells us that for communication to be effective, assertive communication is key

Assertiveness

What assertiveness is not...

Assertiveness often gets a bad name. We often imagine stropky women demanding the right to have the toilet seat left down written into law and failure punishable by flogging. We imagine hard-nosed businessmen never backing down and getting their own way at any cost. This is NOT what assertiveness is about.

What assertiveness is...

Assertiveness is about respecting yourself and others. This is about accepting your own helpful and unhelpful bits and the good and bad in others. It is about having self-esteem that is based on a balanced, accepting view of yourself not on how you think others see you.

When you are assertive you do things for others because you want to, not because you hope they will like you for it.

Why do many Survivors have Problems with Assertiveness?

Abuse damages our self-esteem making us think that we are worthless, that what we do doesn't matter. We learn to believe that people don't care about us or can't be trusted. As we have talked about, these thoughts are often based on

messages our abusers have given us either in words or through their actions. The big challenge is to overcome these messages and replace them with others ones that are not based on what the abuser wanted us to think.

Assertiveness is about accepting yourself and valuing yourself and others. It is about saying that you have as much value as the next person (but not more) and that you have rights that others should also respect.

Why is Being Assertive Important

Being assertive is important because

- **It helps us develop our self-esteem.** Put another way, not being assertive will eat away at our self-esteem. Poor self-esteem is one of the risk factors of depression.
- **Being assertive helps us see that we are valued for ourselves,** not just for what we do for people. This helps us feel better about ourselves
- **Not just saying ‘yes’ to everything, makes us feel less stressed**
- **Expressing our feelings leads to us feeling less frustrated inside** This can help to avoid our temper flaring up
- **Being assertive is about good communication.** Good communication leads to good relationships
- **People who are assertive are generally confident** and confident people are usually happy in themselves.

Please look at the handout on ‘Your rights and the rights of others’

Patterns of Communication

There are basically three patterns of communication when it comes to assertiveness:

- PASSIVE
- AGGRESSIVE
- ASSERTIVE

We will look at each of these in turn. Fill in the questionnaire about communication style. It is important not to get into giving yourself a hard time if you recognise unhelpful patterns. You have done what you had to in order to survive. Now it’s your turn to work out more helpful patterns for yourself. Tick the boxes that best describe you and see which one gets the most ticks. Put stars

in the ones you want to have and see which is the one you are hoping to become!

Assertiveness Skills

Safety hint: If you are currently experiencing domestic abuse, changing the way you relate to your partner may not be safe. Please think about getting safe then definitely get assertive.

Like making any change in life, becoming more assertive can be frightening. You may have to get out of habits that have been there all your life. Some friends or partners, who valued you for your non-assertiveness may not like it and might try to undermine you. There may be conflict with others (and yourself) as you change your behaviour and your relationships. Difficulties with your relationships may be something you want to discuss with your supporter, they might suggest you get some more specialist help with this.

Some hints to improving assertiveness

Learn to look out for you own body language and think about what this is communicating.

- Are you slouched over, backing away, wringing your hands and covering your mouth?
- Are you leaning over someone, in their personal space and pointing your finger?
- Do you hold yourself up straight (but relaxed), keep your body 'open'? That is, don't cross your arms and legs over your body

Think about your eye contact

- Are you looking down or looking away?
- Are you staring someone down?
- Try to give firm eye contact without staring

Think about the way you are speaking.

- Are you hesitant, full of pauses and uuummmhhh? Are you speaking very softly, whining or is your voice dropping away?
- Are you abrupt and clipped, speaking too fast? Sarcastic, sometimes shouting?
- Try to keep an even steady pace, be sincere and clear with a good volume for the situation.

Think about what it is you would like to say,

- Be specific and direct
- Stick to your statement, repeating it several times if necessary
- Don't apologise (unless you have clearly done something wrong)
- Don't put yourself down 'I'm so useless for this to happen...'
- Be clear without blaming the other person *'It really annoys me that you always ask me to do things at the last minute. Could you please give me more notice next time?'*
- Be prepared to ask other people's opinions.
- Don't threaten or blame.
- Don't pad *'If this isn't too much trouble, I hate asking, I know I am a nuisance, but if you could give me a moment to explain that I ordered steak and you have brought me beetroot'* instead try *'I ordered steak and you brought me beetroot, you need to change this for me'*
- Don't get side tracked into arguments but stick to your position. If the waiter says *'I am sure you ordered beetroot, I will check your order for you'* you don't say *'thank you for your time in checking this for me, I'm sorry to be a nuisance'* instead you say *'I ordered steak, please take away this beetroot and bring me the steak'*. You will feel wonderful!!
- If what you need is different from someone else needs, be prepared to compromise. For example, if an exhausted friend asks you to babysit tonight, but you had planned an early night, you could say *'I can't do it tonight, but how's about I come by tomorrow and take them to the park'*.
- Be honest. It's ok to say *'I feel scared'* or *'I feel guilty'*.
- Accept compliments!!
- Give compliments
- Accept constructive criticism

Saying NO!

Somewhere down the line, many of us come to believe that to say NO was a no-no.

We started to believe that if we said 'no' we were uncaring and selfish, that we would hurt and reject the other person, making them too upset to continue as our friend/lover/parent/colleague.

This is not true. YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO SAY NO. The other person can cope with this-you are not rejecting them, just their request.

The next time someone asks you to do something. STOP. Listen to your body. Do you feel enthusiastic? Do you have that sinking feeling? Listen to what your body is telling you.

Stall for time, ask for more information, and ask for some time to think about it. This gives you a chance to plan how you are going to respond and not just jump in with a 'yes'

Practice saying 'no' without giving lots of excuses and explanations. But feel free to say things that are honest such as 'I find this difficult to say..' 'I feel guilty..' (Remember you are refusing the request not the person).

Take responsibility for your decision and don't blame others.

Don't hang around! If you do you may find you change your mind or backtrack.

Example

Anne: I'm really excited, I've got a week off in May and I got a cheap deal and I'm going to Spain for a week

Pam: Really, that's weird. I've got a week to take and would love to go to Spain...hey why don't I try to book the same deal.. It would be great, we'll go dancing, have some fun...fantastic idea!

Anne: (who has always dreamed about being away on her own and this is the first chance now the kids have grown up) Uuuuummm, I guess so

Or she could say

Anne: (having just returned from her assertiveness class)- This is awkward to say, but I want to go by myself, I've always wanted to do that

Pam: Oh Ok, I understand (possibly feeling a bit hurt but she'll get over it, she's your friend and a sensible adult).