COUNSELLING SERVICES

ASSERTIVENESS SKILLS WORKBOOK

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• Student Commons building • E337
## How Assertive are You?

Answer the following questions honestly. They will help you gain insight into how assertive you are, as well as what areas you can improve upon in your life. Assign a number using this scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>score</th>
<th>Statements of Assertiveness</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Always</td>
</tr>
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</table>

1. I seem to stand up for myself as well as I would like to.
2. I hesitate to accept invitations to social gatherings because of “shyness.”
3. I am extremely careful to avoid hurting other people’s feelings.
4. When I am requested to do something that I don’t want to do, I insist upon asking why.
5. I would rather apply for a job by writing letters than by going through a personal interview.
6. When I am with a group of people, I express my opinion.
7. People take advantage of me.
8. I don’t enjoy starting conversations with new acquaintances and strangers.
9. When I am wrong about something, I freely admit it.
10. I find it embarrassing to return something I’ve purchased.
11. I am open and frank about my feelings.
12. During an argument, I am afraid that I will get so upset that I will shake all over.
13. If a person in authority accused me of doing something I did not do, I would make sure s/he hears my point of view.
14. I tend to be overly apologetic.
15. If a close and respected person were annoying me, I would hide my feelings rather than express myself.
16. If someone Borrows $10.00 from me and seems to have forgotten about it, I remind her/him about the debt.
17. I have a hard time saying “no” to people.
18. When someone shows that they love or care for me, I just don’t know what to do.
19. When someone interrupts me in the middle of an important conversation, I ask him/her to wait until I have finished.
20. I avoid asking questions for fear of sounding stupid.
Assertiveness

What does it mean to be assertive?

Learning to be assertive is like learning anything. It takes education to learn how to do it and practice to build confidence with a new skill!

Assertive communication involves standing up for your own rights but with respect for the rights of others. Therefore, assertive behaviours relay your needs and requests in a straightforward manner, while still providing an open and respectful dialogue.

By being assertive, you recognize that everyone has equal rights to expressing themselves. Assertiveness allows you to feel positive about yourself by the way you treat others, leading to an increase in your self-esteem.

What assertiveness is not...

Assertiveness does not involve manipulative, submissive, aggressive or passive aggressive behaviours.

- **Manipulation**: This occurs when people attempt to have their needs met by making others feel guilty or sorry for them. Those who manipulate often take on the role of a victim or martyr.

- **Passive**: Giving in to other’s preferences while ignoring your own rights or needs. When being submissive, you do not let others know what you are thinking or what you prefer. Often, you feel guilty when you do express your feelings.

- **Aggressive**: directly standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a way which is often dishonest, usually inappropriate and always violates rights of the other person

- **Passive aggressive**: Being passive aggressive involves concealing your true emotions towards a person or event and instead, expressing anger in a contradictory way.
What can You do to be More Assertive?

Learn your rights

• All human beings have certain basic rights. By being assertive, we recognize these rights and take responsibility in protecting them when they are disregarded by others.

• Some personal rights that are important, but often forgotten, include:
  
  • The right to ask for what I want
  • The right to say no to requests or demands I can’t meet
  • The right to express all of my feelings, positive or negative
  • The right to change my mind
  • The right to make mistakes and not be perfect
  • The right to follow my own values and beliefs
  • The right to determine my own priorities
  • The right to my own needs for personal space and time

Recognize barriers to assertiveness

• Self-defeating beliefs: Beliefs that are unrealistic and negative self-statements. Often times we aren’t aware of when we think negatively towards ourselves and how this affects our behaviours. The more positively we think, the greater our self-esteem will be.

• Skills deficit: Many skills needed to become assertive aren’t taught to us in school. Lacking verbal and nonverbal skills become a barrier to being assertive. Attending workshops, counselling and/or practice can help develop these skills.

• Anxiety and stress: Even though we may know how to be assertive, stress and anxiety may become barriers to implementing this behaviour. By managing everyday stressors, assertive behaviours will become easier to implement.

• Cultural influence: In some cultures, assertiveness is not valued as much as it is in Western societies. If this is the case for you, it is helpful to understand the benefits of being assertive, while comparing it to being non-assertive, aggressive or passive aggressive.
Components of Behaviour Addressed in Assertiveness Training

Non-Verbal Behaviour:

• **Non-assertive**: Characterized by moving away behaviours e.g., downcast eyes, shifting of weight, slumped body, wringing of hands, whining, hesitant behavior or giggly tone of voice
• **Aggressive**: Characterized by moving against behaviours e.g., glaring eyes, leaning forward or pointing a finger, raised, snickering or haughty tone of voice
• **Assertive**: Characterized by facing up behaviours e.g., good eye contact, standing comfortably but firmly, strong steady voice

Verbal Language:

• **Non-assertive**: Includes qualifiers e.g., (maybe, I guess, I wonder if you could, would you mind very much, don’t you think)
• **Fillers**: (E.g., ug, well, you know)
• **Negators**: (E.g., it’s not really important, don’t bother)
• **Aggressive**: Threats, put downs, evaluative comments, sexist or racist terms
• **Assertive**: “I” statements, co-operative words, emphatic statements of interest.

Emotional:

• **Non-Assertive**: internalizes feelings and tensions
• **Aggressive**: Inappropriate anger, rage, hate
• **Assertive**: Awareness of feelings; deals with feelings as they occur
Communicating Assertively

Making requests

• Be clear about what you want
• Listen for alternatives or compromises
• Don’t say “no” to yourself and don’t apologize
• Don’t down play the importance

Handling Criticism

• Relax and listen carefully. Paraphrasing can help
• Avoid long, self-critical or rational excuses
• Stick to the issue. Avoid counter-attacks
• Ask for examples and suggestions
• Use “I” statements. Share your feelings about the criticism
• Keep your voice low and speak slowly

Saying “No”

• Think it over first and/or ask for time to consider your options
• Be brief! Give your explanation for your answer, but not an excuse
• It may help to mention your feelings and thoughts about the request
• Don’t forget, you can always change a “yes” to a “no” and saying “no” doesn’t mean you should feel guilty

Giving Criticism

• Plan in advance what you want to say. Use examples, but don’t overload a person
• Give positive feedback
• Concentrate on the problem
• Set aside an appropriate time and place
• Maintain eye contact; look and sound serious
Practice assertiveness

- **Saying “No”**: Remember the importance of your rights and beliefs. Think about the other person’s request, acknowledge their request and say no firmly while explaining your reasoning

  - Ex., “I understand that you’d really like to get together tonight (acknowledgement). It turns out I’ve had a really long day and feel exhausted (explanation), so I have to say no (saying no)”

  - Ex., You’re in the bank and the teller asks for the next customer in line. Although it is your turn, someone else steps forward. You say ________________.

- **Making requests**: This is an important step in becoming assertive. When making requests, you simply have to ask in a straightforward manner. Always be sure to use assertive and respectful non-verbal behaviour. Stay calm! When asking, try to have only one request at a time and be specific about what it is that you would like. Remember to use the “I statements” previously discussed and never be apologetic.

  - Ex., Michelle would like to study in quiet but her boyfriend, John, tends to distract her with loud music and activities that can be done elsewhere. If you were Michelle, how would you request that John be more conscientious of your rights? Remember to evaluate your rights and consequences of the actions. Express your request directly.
How to Practice Assertiveness?

In order to respond assertively try phrasing your request using what is called a **DESC script**.

The DESC script was developed by Sharon and Gordon Bower and is discussed more fully in their book, *Asserting Yourself*. DESC stands for Describe, Express, Specify, and Consequences. Try practicing the script for several situations that you just identified. You should try writing the script out and practicing it before you talk to the person.

- **Describe**: Describe the behavior/situation as completely and objectively as possible. Just the facts! "The last time, my brother George came to visit, I cleaned the entire house all by myself."

- **Express**: Express your feelings and thoughts about the situation/behavior. Try to phrase your statements using "I", and not "You". Beginning sentences with "You" often puts people on the defensive, which means they won’t listen to you. "As a result, I felt exhausted and angry."

- **Specify**: Specify what behavior/outcome you would prefer to happen. "I would like the two of us to work on cleaning the house."

- **Consequences**: Specify the consequences (both positive and negative). "If we both work together, the house will be cleaned up faster and we can all enjoy his visit together." Or "If we work together, I will be less tired and irritable."

![Passive Assertive Aggressive](image)

Source: Adapted from Positive Coping Skills Toolbox VA Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Centers (MIRECC) http://www.athealth.com/Consumer/disorders/assertiveness.html
# Rules for Assertive DESC Scripts

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
<th><strong>DON’T</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DESCRIBE</strong></td>
<td>D1. Describe the other person’s behaviour objectively</td>
<td>D1. Describe your emotional reaction to it</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D2. Use concrete terms</td>
<td>D2. Use abstract, vague terms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>D3. Describe a specified time, place and frequency of the action</td>
<td>D3. Generalize “all the time”</td>
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<td>D4. Describe the actions, not the “motive”</td>
<td>D4. Guess the person’s motives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXPRESS</strong></td>
<td>E1. Express your feelings</td>
<td>E1. Deny your feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E2. Express them calmly</td>
<td>E2. Unleash emotional outbursts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>E3. State feelings in a positive manner</td>
<td>E3. State feelings negatively</td>
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<td></td>
<td>E4. Direct yourself to the specific offending behaviour, not to the</td>
<td>E4. Attack the entire character of the person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>whole person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPECIFY</strong></td>
<td>S1. Ask explicitly for change in the person’s behaviour</td>
<td>S1. Merely imply that you would like change</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S2. Request a small change</td>
<td>S2. Ask for too large a change</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S3. Request only one or two changes at a time</td>
<td>S3. Ask for too many changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S4. Specify the actions you wish to see stopped</td>
<td>S4. Ask for changes in traits or qualities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>S5. Take account of whether the person can meet your request without</td>
<td>S5. Ignore the other person’s needs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>suffering large losses</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>S6. Specify what you are willing to change to make the agreement</td>
<td>S6. Consider that only the other person has to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONSEQUENCES</strong></td>
<td>C1. Make the consequences explicit</td>
<td>C1. Be ashamed to talk about rewards/punishments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C2. Give positive reward for change</td>
<td>C2. Give only punishments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C3. Select manageable rewards and punishments for the outcomes</td>
<td>C3. Make exaggerated threats</td>
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DESC in Action

**Poor Scripts**

D  You never do your part of the group assignment on time!

E  What’s with you?! You’re so lazy!

S  When are you going to get your work done?!

C  If you continue to miss group deadlines, we’ll kick you out of the group!

**Better Scripts**

Your part of the group project was due today and I didn’t receive it.

I feel irritated and frustrated when I am waiting on your work. I need it to be able to finish my part of the group assignment.

I would like to have your work in by no later than this Friday.

If you can meet this deadline, we all will be able to get our work in on time and not get a penalty for lateness.

Practicing Assertive Scripts

• Example 1: With my boyfriend who is aggressive with me.
  • D:________________________________________________
  • E:________________________________________________
  • S:________________________________________________
  • C:________________________________________________

• Example 2: _________________________________
  • D:________________________________________________
  • E:________________________________________________
  • S:________________________________________________
  • C:________________________________________________

• Example 3: _________________________________
  • D:________________________________________________
  • E:________________________________________________
  • S:________________________________________________
  • C:________________________________________________