

Handout 12.1: Assertive Behavior, Aggressive Behavior, and How to Take the High Road

Assertive behavior is expressing feelings, wants, or opinions in ways that respect the rights and opinions of others. Assertive speech usually involves “I” language, but in certain contexts, “I” language can be aggressive, communicating hostility or disrespect.

Aggressive behavior is expressing feelings, wants, or opinions in ways that violate or disrespect the rights or opinions of others. It includes violation of your rights by physically forceful behavior but also occurs when others put you down or attempt to force or impose their desires or even just their opinions on you. Aggressive behavior is disrespectful, violates ethics of social communication, and influences people negatively. Almost all “you” statements with negative content are aggressive—not assertive.

TYPES OF AGGRESSIVE OR DISRESPECTFUL REMARKS AND EXAMPLES

“You” Statements

Accusatory “You” Statements

- You’re immature [lazy, codependent, rude, selfish, crazy, manipulative, lying, in denial, and so on].
- You don’t know what you’re talking about.
- You’re just like your mother [sister, grandmother, and so on].
- You’re making me angry.

Orders (with the implied subject “you”)

- Shut up.
- Keep quiet.
- Go away.

Shoulds (which represent others trying to impose their will on you)

- You should [do something or feel a certain way].
- You shouldn’t [do something or feel a certain way].

- You're supposed to [do something or feel a certain way].

Types of "I" Statements That Are Aggressive

"I" Statements of Anger

- I'm pissed off.
- I'm angry.
- I'm getting mad.
- I feel resentful.

Aggressed-upon "I" Statements

- I'm getting screwed.
- I'm getting a raw deal.

"I" Statements of Masked Aggression

- I feel that you are narrow-minded.
- I think you're selfish.
- I think you're a liar.
- I feel that you're insensitive.

"I" Statements of Scorn or Total Disrespect

- I resent you.
- I don't trust you.
- I don't care about you.
- I don't respect you.
- I hate you.

Aggressive Questions

- Why are you being defensive [selfish, so needy, such a wimp, in such a bitchy mood]?

ASSERTIVE WAYS OF RESPONDING TO DISRESPECTFUL AGGRESSIVE COMMENTS

Effectively dealing with aggressive words requires that you respond to the aggressive *style* of the communication and disregard its content. Being defensive or attacking back isn't a good strategy. For example, if someone says you're stupid, you might respond with the statement "That's an unkind thing to say." This focuses on the fact that something unkind was said, not on the subject matter. Similarly, the statement "Your saying I'm stupid doesn't mean I'm stupid" is neither defensive nor aggressive, so it won't get you sucked into an argument about whether or not you're stupid. In addition, you could say, "It hurts my feelings." Here are some more examples of assertive responses to verbal aggression, followed by some examples that pertain to specific situations:

- Your saying that I'm lazy [or whatever] doesn't mean it's true.
- I don't deserve to be talked to that way.
- That's not a nice thing to say.
- That's a hurtful (or unkind, or nasty) thing to say.
- I would appreciate it if you didn't talk to me that way.
- If you're going to continue to talk to me that way, I'm going to end this conversation. (If the disrespect persists, say, "I have to go," "I'll talk to you later," or "Good-bye.")
- I would appreciate it if you could say that in a nicer way.
- Could you please say that in another way?
- If you never say that again, I'll be better off and you and I will have a better relationship.
- I know you mean well, but it doesn't help for you to say that.

Saying No

Don't give reasons or excuses why you don't want to do whatever the person wants you to do. Reasons and excuses just provide fuel to the person to try to talk you out of your decision. Remember: Your reasons for whatever you want to do (or don't want to do) are *your property*, and you have no obligation to disclose those reasons if you don't want to.

- I'm not interested. Have a nice day. (Then hang up, close the door, or keep walking.)
- I'm not interested. I don't want to take up any of your valuable time.
- I won't be able to make it. Thanks for asking.
- Sorry, I can't make it. (This is useful when someone asks you to do something you don't want to do, like go on a date.)
- If the person persists, you may wish to repeat yourself once; for example, Again, thanks for asking, but I won't be able to make it.
- If the person is pushy and tries to get you to disclose your reasons, you may wish to say something like "Personal reasons. I'd rather not go into it. I have to go now."
- I'm not going to change my mind. I have nothing to talk to you about. Please stop calling me. I have to go now. Good-bye.

Assertive Requests

Assertive requests communicate *directly* that you want something and say what it is that you want:

- I would appreciate it if you would keep the noise down.
- I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't smoke in my room.
- It would really please me if you would do me a favor.
- I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't borrow my belongings without my permission.
- It would make me happy if we could go to a movie that I like.

Assertive Escalation and Demanding Respect

This strategy involves establishing consequences. You must clearly state what you'd like to happen and be clear about how you will respond if the person doesn't agree to your request:

- If you don't stop putting me down, I'm going to have to end this conversation.
- If you won't go with me, I'll go with a friend. I'd rather go with you, but if you don't want to, I'll go with someone else.

- I told you before that I'm not interested in getting intimate. Please respect my rights and stop pressuring me. If you don't stop, I'll have no choice but to stop seeing you. I mean it!
- If you don't stop bothering me, I'll have no choice but to call the probation officer and tell them you violated the restraining order [tell the manager, end our relationship, and so on].