

Assertiveness for carers

"Assertive behaviour is being able to say what one feels, needs or wants in a confident manner, without putting others down in doing so. The word 'assertive' does not describe a person, but a person's behaviour at a particular time in particular circumstances. For example, it is possible to be assertive with friends but non-assertive with one's partner or with one's manager". (Joanna Gutmann, 1993)

Carers may have particular difficulty making their needs for support known to family or friends. They may also have difficulty dealing with health care professionals and service providers. As a carer there may be times when it is difficult to say "no" as you may think the needs of others are more important.

Being assertive means having the ability to communicate in a direct, honest and open manner without demeaning others, while letting others know what your needs, thoughts and feelings are. By doing this you may feel you have more control of your life and are less likely to feel like you are being taken advantage of.

So why aren't we all practising assertiveness as part of our everyday lives? There seem to be a number of blocks which prevent effective assertiveness in our lives. Some examples of these are: fear of failure; fear of hurting other people's feelings; fear of not being liked; and fear of rejection. Obviously the other main reason for lack of assertiveness could be lack of role models or opportunities to learn assertiveness skills.

How can assertiveness help carers?

Assertiveness techniques can help carers to:

- communicate better with family, friends and service providers
- develop a positive frame of mind
- manage the caring role more effectively

Assertive vs non-assertive or aggressive behaviour

There are three basic behaviour styles:

NON-ASSERTIVE behaviour is passive and indirect. It can communicate a message of inferiority. By being non-assertive we allow the wants, needs and rights of others to be more important than our own. Non-assertive behaviour helps create 'win-lose' situations. A person behaving non-assertively can lose (or at best be disregarded) while allowing others to win. Following this road often leads to feeling like a victim.

AGGRESSIVE behaviour is more complex. It can be either active or passive, direct or indirect, honest or dishonest – but it always communicates an impression of superiority and disrespect. By being aggressive we put our wants, needs and rights above those of others. We attempt to get our way by not allowing others a choice. Aggressive behaviour is usually inappropriate because it violates the rights of others. People behaving aggressively may 'win' by making sure others 'lose' – but in doing so set themselves up for retaliation.

ASSERTIVE behaviour is active and direct. It communicates an impression of self-respect and respect for others. By being assertive we view our wants, needs and rights as equal with those of others. We work towards 'win-win' outcomes. An assertive person wins by influencing, listening and negotiating so that others choose to cooperate. This behaviour leads to success without retaliation and encourages open, honest relationships.

As you can see there are big differences between all three behaviour styles. What behaviour style do you adopt most frequently? Is it working for you or would you like to develop a more assertive approach to help communicate and meet your needs and wants? Have a think about these questions and in the next issue we will look at the benefits of assertive behaviour and give some tips on how to become more assertive.

What are the benefits of assertive behaviour?

- A greater chance of getting what you want, because your needs are clearly and confidently expressed
- Increased self-confidence because of successful outcomes
- Greater self control, because more thought has gone into how to say what you want and the likely reaction
- Greater influence, because ideas expressed clearly and logically are more likely to be accepted by other people
- Reduction in personal stress, because you don't feel put upon or put down or used or abused.

Tips on becoming more assertive

"Own" your message. Use "I" language to make what you want, think, and feel as clear as possible.

For example, "I want to..." or "I feel..." rather than "You make me feel".

Rather than saying, "You should...", try saying, "I'd really like it if you..."

Don't use generalisations such as, "You always..." or "You never". Focus on the most recent case, saying, "I noticed today you..." or, "When you do that I feel..."

Avoid becoming emotional when describing how something makes you feel. It may also be appropriate to give some explanation as to why the situation or other person's behaviour makes you feel that way. Focusing on your feelings has two important effects: it invites the other person to see things from your point of view and, unlike statements of the facts as you see them, your own feelings cannot be disputed.

Be specific about the action required from the other person, taking into account their rights, needs and feelings. If necessary and appropriate, clearly describe the consequences of the other person's behaviour not changing.

Carer Life Course



Do not be apologetic about your feelings, rights or opinions. Say “no” to unreasonable requests, also without being apologetic. Even offering an explanation is strictly optional.

Only address one issue at a time, rather than listing everything you believe the other person has done wrong.

Maintain eye contact (if culturally appropriate) and use tone of voice and body language to reinforce your message.

Assertiveness is a skill that can be learned like anything else, and which you can develop and strengthen over time. Some statements typical of assertive behaviour are listed below. You might like to cut this section out and display it somewhere prominent as a reminder about communicating assertively.

Being assertive means:

- I ask for help when I need it
- I am honest and direct about my thoughts and feelings
- I consider my needs as important as other people's am able to turn down requests that seem unreasonable or unfair
- I speak up and share my views if I disagree with other people's opinions
- I am confident about my opinions and decisions
- I am able to accept that someone else may have a better idea or solution to a problem than I do
- I can accept positive criticism and suggestions
- I directly address things that bother me

Find out more about assertiveness

Your local library should have books on communication and assertiveness or you may be able to take a course at your local WEA (Workers Educational Association) or evening college.

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