



This month. . . . Assertiveness!

Want to share your story?

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Assertiveness - a brief 'how to' guide

August 2006

By Cindy Trevitt, Counsellor

“Many of us spend our whole lives running from feeling, with the mistaken belief that you can not bear the pain. But you have already borne the pain. What you have not done is feel all you are beyond that pain.”

- Kahlil Gibran

Assertiveness. Well, I'll admit that this subject has been pretty bandied about in this world. To me, the term 'assertive' is somewhat overused – to the point where it almost has no meaning. I'm working on an article about Non-violent communication (check the end of this article for details on my upcoming workshop) and it seems to me that I can't write about this without there first being a preamble about assertiveness. And the more I think about it, the more I believe that assertiveness is still vastly underused (in my humble opinion). So, before I move on to more advanced methods of communication I'm going to start with the basics.

Typically, there are **four primary communication types**:

- * **Passive** is often associated with the fear of hurting the feelings of others, with pleasing others and an over-riding concern to seek a harmonious relationship with others at the expense of our own integrity. Often it is precisely the so-called easy-going person, who appears on the surface to fit in so well with the plans and agenda of the group, who actually ends up being relatively invisible, because no one really knows what she likes or what he really wants. When we express ourselves in an apologetic, diffident, or self-effacing way, others can easily disregard us. Passive behaviour is a failure to engage properly with life, and it usually results in others deciding how we should spend our time.
- * **Passive-aggressive**: Guilt and blame is the key to getting your own way with passive-aggressive behaviour. It is a form of manipulation and involves playing the martyr

so that the other person feels so guilty that they give in to you. It is a way of indirectly sabotaging, negating or subtly digging in your heels without claiming responsibility for your own feelings and actions.

- * **Aggressive behaviour** is concerned with self-centred, inconsiderate, selfish activity, where a person focuses exclusively on their rights, their needs and their feelings, and neglects the well being of the other person. It can be demanding, threatening, manipulative, and is often concealed behind a seductive façade of charm. It is ultimately self-serving and often relates to self-aggrandizement and the need to preserve power and status.
- * **Assertiveness** is about conveying what we really want in a clear, honest, unambiguous way, in a manner that respects our rights, our needs and our feelings and also the rights, needs and feelings of the other person. Being truly comfortable with being yourself means you can:
 - Express your opinions while respecting the opinions of others.
 - Express your anger and irritation openly.
 - Refuse requests.
 - Speak up in small groups fairly frequently.
 - Celebrate in style!
 - Make complaints.
 - Criticize without feeling bad.
 - Look at people when you are talking to them.
 - Apologize only when it is genuinely due.
 - Make requests and ask for help.
 - Express affection openly.

Which communication type are you?

- * If someone asks you your opinion or what you would like to do, do you often say, "I don't know"? - *Passive*
- * When you're mad at someone, do you stonewall? Remain silent? Leave the room? – *Passive aggressive*
- * Do you slam doors, drawers, and windows? – *Passive aggressive*
- * Do you hang on to things, remaining silent only to one day blow up? – *Passive becoming Aggressive*
- * If you find your feelings are hurt, do you make sarcastic remarks? – *Passive aggressive*

- * Do you use humour to relay your feelings? – *Passive aggressive*
- * Do you tell everyone else but the person you're angry with about how you feel? – *Passive aggressive*
- * Do you hold in your feelings only to burst into tears later and when someone asks you, "What's wrong?" you say, "Nothing"? - *Passive*
- * Do you blast people with your wrath until their hair blows backwards? - *Aggressive*

If you said yes to any one of these, then chances are you have used a communication style other than assertive and perhaps could use a communication tune-up.

Who can define assertiveness? A common misconception is seeing assertive as being 'angry' or 'getting in people's faces'. This is, in fact, *far* from accurate. Assertive is all about being authentic, direct, specific and forthright with your feelings while being respectful of others. When we use the term 'confront', that also has some angry connotations but in essence, speaking to someone directly about a specific issue is confronting them but it's not about aggression or being angry necessarily. Even if you are angry, that's fine. Be angry. Be angry when you deliver your message. But watch the words you use.

The first thing you have to do is check your thinking following an incident. What has this other person done specifically? What facts do you have to support your perception? The next thing you have to do is check your feeling. What is it, exactly, that you're feeling? Here's a primary list to get you started:

Fear Anger Guilt Sad Empty Hurt

Now, you have to collect your thoughts. Many people (myself included when I'm especially upset) find it helpful to write out what they want to say beforehand. Be sure that you are really clear about what you want and the message you are about to convey. It's sometimes difficult for the most diplomatic of speakers to deliver a concise and clear message when we're completely cheesed off or deeply hurt.

Try using the **simple assertiveness formula**:

I feel _____ when you _____
(Feeling word) (Describe specific behaviour)

because _____
(Describe the impact their behaviour has had)

A less effective method might be:

I feel that you are a jerk when you piss me off because I get really angry when you do that.

Instead try:

*I felt **hurt** when you **didn't call me to tell me you were going to be late for lunch** because **my perception is that you don't value my time.***

I hope you can see the difference between the two. I've exaggerated a little for effect. Although the first one might *feel* a little more satisfying in *venting* your anger, it will likely only elicit a defensive response from the other and no change will occur. The second one is a more honest ownership of the speaker's feelings and has a less accusatory tone. The latter is more likely to elicit a more understanding response. (Keep in mind that if you've had a long history of speaking to people in a non-assertive way, you may have trained them well and it may take them some time to notice you've changed. Be patient and stick to your guns. You'll be impressed with the results. Even try explaining what you're doing. An honest attempt to change for the better is often well-received).

It's important to stay away from judging and evaluating the other person's behaviour. Stick to *your feelings, your perceptions*, and describing *specific behaviour*. Avoid generalizing with words like *always, never, ever, every time, and forever*. For example:

"You never listen to me! You're so selfish!" doesn't tell the listener how you feel but instead generalizes and evaluates. This is pretty much guaranteed to repel the listener. A more effective statement might be, "I felt diminished when I was talking to you just now and you continued to read the newspaper. My perception is that you weren't listening to me." The listener may deny that they were not listening – remember to stick to your point. Then ask for desired behaviour, "Okay – so I know that you are listening to me,

could you please let me know when a good time to talk might be and then look at me when I'm talking to you?" Remember to acknowledge when they give you the desired response. Tell them you appreciate them listening and that you felt appreciated, acknowledged, or important to them.

"Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak
whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break."

- William Shakespeare

When you are doing this, look the person directly in the eye (not staring or glaring), face your body towards them, stand up straight and at a comfortable distance, and keep your arms uncrossed and open. Be very conscious of your body language and facial expression. If you're mad **do not smile**. Try to consciously furrow your brow and turn the corners of your mouth slightly down. Smiling contradicts your message and says, "I don't really mean this". If you're hurt, don't laugh. It's not funny. Remind yourself that you're feeling a little uncomfortable and that's okay – keep going. Speak in a level tone of voice. Remember to breathe. Speak your sentence and wait. If there's a silence following your statement, that's okay. Give the listener time to digest to what you've said and respond. You've done your work. Get ready to listen.

Listening is key to being assertive. If you want to be respected, you have to treat others the same. Give them an opportunity to respond. It's common for people to defend, defer, or excuse when they are faced with an assertion – that's okay. Don't get sucked in. Stick to your original message. Tell them, "I understand this may be difficult to hear but I want to make sure that you understand my point" – and repeat your statement. Let them know you've heard what they've said. Remember that their reaction does not negate your feelings. Your feelings are your feelings and their feelings are their feelings – the two are separate and unique. Ask questions for

clarification. **Don't change the subject. Don't add another point. Don't bring up another related incident** – no matter how tempting. If you keep throwing more wood on the fire, how do you think it's going to go out?

Also remember that people may or may not always say or do things that we want them to do. That's out of our control. The main objective for you is to state your feelings so that *you* feel better. You are the one in charge of your emotional well-being. To quote Eleanor Roosevelt, "**No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.**"

Did you know that there are **positive assertions**? Yup. This is when someone has done something that you like or appreciate. Remember, positive reinforcement is an excellent way to have desired behaviour repeated (I learned this in management 101). A positive assertion goes something like this: "I feel **loved** when you **bring me a mocha latté without me asking** because **it tells me that you're thinking about me even when we're not together**. Positive assertions are so important in any relationship. It is oh so easy to focus on the negative but keep in mind that if the only things you ever comment on to your partner, friend, lover, etc. are negative – what kind of relationship are you choosing to cultivate?

"Kind words can be short and easy to speak but their
echoes are truly endless."

- Mother Teresa

Not convinced? Set little goals for yourself and begin to practice. Practice with friends. In time you can become quite adept at this. And being assertive leads to improved self-esteem and improved good looks (well, that last part I added but I do think assertiveness is an attractive quality!).

I believe that being genuine with others is a gift.

Upcoming workshops:

* **Non Violent Communication (NVC) – by Cindy Trevitt, RPC-cand.**

Learn an ancient method of communication used by Gandhi and others. Strengthen your ability to inspire and respond compassionately. Express yourself and hear others by focusing on what you observe, feel, need, and request rather than judge. NVC fosters respect, attentiveness and empathy. Excellent for those wishing to improve conflict resolution or improve on identifying and expressing their own needs.

When: Monday, September 25th, 2006
7:00 – 9:00 pm

Cost: \$20

* **Anger Management – by Cindy Trevitt, RPC-cand.**

The goal of anger management is to understand what your triggers are, what your attitudes are about your feelings and to learn how to express yourself in a way that is healthy for both you and the people in your life. You can't get rid of, or avoid, the things or the people that enrage you, nor can you change them, but you can learn to control your reactions. This course is intended to help you understand and manage your anger and express yourself more constructively.

When: Monday, September 18th, 2006
7:00 – 9:00 pm

Cost: \$20

Where: Trout Lake Community Centre
3350 Victoria Drive

How to register:

Register on line, phone-in, or in person:

- o **By Phone:** 604.257.6958 with Visa or Mastercard
- o **In person:** 3350 Victoria Drive with Cash, Interact, Visa or Mastercard
- o **On-line:** www.vancouverparks.ca (Client ID numbers take 24 hours to process and are required for on-line registration)

Things to look forward to:

Also, I'm very excited to announce that I finally (I know, I know) have a web page being built. I'll announce when it is up and running – stay tuned!



Cindy Trevitt is a Registered Professional Counsellor living and working in Vancouver. She can be reached at 604.518.1394 and welcomes all calls.