

Developing assertiveness and skills for direct conversations

When might you use this activity?

We found that many refugee and migrant women have been taught not to communicate assertively, and that stating their needs or position can be confronting because of gender and cultural norms and experiences of oppression. Many women we consulted with identified assertive communication as a skill that would assist them to stand up for themselves and others.

This activity was developed for a group with good literacy skills. You will need to adapt this activity for groups who have less confidence reading and writing.

Introduce activity (1 minute)

Communication is an important skill for advocacy. This afternoon, we will discuss and practise our assertive communication skills.

Activity 1: Role play (10 mins)

Scenario

Naveen, who is 9 years old, tells his mother he is being bullied at school. He says other kids have been calling him names, threatening him and excluding him. His mother decides to talk to the principal about the treatment of her son and the school's response.

The principal is busy with many things and doesn't have time for what he sees as a complaining parent. The principal doesn't believe there is a bullying problem at the school.

1. Introduce the activity by asking for three volunteers to play the parent, using passive, aggressive and assertive communication.
2. Facilitator to play the principal.
3. Ask the volunteers to role play the situation passively, aggressively and then assertively. (2 minutes per role play)

Activity 2: What is assertive communication? (30 mins)

1. Participants to split into four groups and work through the worksheet. (15 mins)
2. Participants to report back to the group (10 mins).
3. Put up definitions of four communication styles (3 minutes)
4. Summarise: Being assertive is a right. Whenever we are involved in a situation in which we could be assertive, we can choose: be assertive, pull back, be aggressive, or be passive-aggressive. Being assertive is seen as the most effective strategy for achieving your goal and it is also the most respectful way to interact with others (2 minutes)

Activity 3: Breaking down assertiveness (20 mins)

1. Effective assertive communication is purposeful, not reactive. You need to think through what you are trying to achieve. This activity will guide you through.
2. Split into groups of 2 participants. Pair with someone who has a similar level of confidence to you in terms of being assertive. Each pair receives a worksheet.
3. In your pairs, think about a situation that was unfair where there was an opportunity to advocate for yourself or others using assertive communication, or where you needed to have a difficult conversation with someone.
4. Read through the assertiveness tips sheet, and then work through the worksheet steps to implement your assertive communication.

Tips for assertive communication

Being assertive is not just about asserting your rights; it is also important to respect the other person's rights. Even though you might be very upset, it is important not to blame the other person because they could react badly and this will interfere with you achieving your goal.

Instead, you can focus on your own feelings or concerns by formulating 'assertive "I" statements'. This will help you structure what you want to say and keep you focused. It also means you can work out what you want to say in advance and deliver it with greater confidence.



Simple Recipe for Making "I" Statements

There are three ingredients used in making "I" statements:

1. The activity
2. How it is affecting you
3. What you would prefer to happen

This can be phrased as:

When I feel..... What I would like is.....

For example:

When you don't let me know where you are

I feel very worried about you

I would like it if in future you could call me and tell me you are going to be late

Sentence formulation

To formulate your sentences in an assertive way, start your sentences using the following:

- "I would prefer..."
- "It's important to me that..."
- "I am concerned about..."
- "I feel that..."
- "I liked it when you did..."
- "When you do...I feel...because..."
- "I have a different opinion. I think that..."
- "I have decided not to..."
- "I understand that you are concerned that.... But I worry about..."

Blaming/Critical Messages vs "I" Statements

<i>Blaming Messages</i>	<i>Assertive "I" Statements</i>
You're so inconsiderate, not showing up for dinner after I've gone to the trouble of cooking for you.	When you don't turn up for dinner I feel hurt. Could you please call me in future?
You're an accident waiting to happen	I feel really concerned about the risks you take when you drive too fast
You're a disgusting slob	It's important to me to have a tidy living space. Can you please put your things away?
You're completely selfish and a bad example to your son	When you yell at me in front of our son, I feel worried that he might think this is normal and use aggression in his life. I would prefer if you would think about the kind of example we should be setting for our children.
You are thoughtless and care more about what the community thinks than about me and our relationship!	I understand that you feel pressure from the community. But I feel that your reputation shouldn't be more important than our family's wellbeing. When you refuse to help me with housework, I feel that you are not valuing me and my efforts.

More tips

- Use “I statements” to focus the conversation on you and not blaming others. For example:
 - “I feel hurt” rather than “You hurt me”
 - “I don’t agree” rather than “You are wrong”
 - “I feel ignored” rather than “You don’t care”
 - “I am treated unfairly” rather than “You are so unfair”
- Say “no” when you mean it. The word “no” can be quite powerful.
- Deliver your message to the person that has control over the situation, rather than talking only to others who can’t influence the situation.
- If you don’t understand the other person, ask for clarification. Don’t assume or interpret what they said. A wrong interpretation can make you upset and you may then react strongly which will lead to escalation.
- Avoid exaggerations such as “You always...”, “You are...”, “You constantly...”, “You never...”, “You are the most...”



Our Community, Our Rights is a project by Women's Health West that engages refugee and migrant women in human rights based advocacy training and project work and promotes participation in Australian society.

Find out more: whwest.org.au/rights

WORKSHEET 2 – STEPS TO EFFECTIVE ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

1. Describe the situation that is making you want to use assertive communication

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2. What feelings and thoughts are you experiencing in relation to this situation?

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3. What are your goals for being assertive in this situation? What do you want to achieve? (There might be a number of goals.) Which is the most important goal?

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Women's Health West acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government





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4. How will you implement your assertiveness strategy to achieve your most important goal? Think about using 'assertive "I" statements' (see the hand-out for tips)

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5. Now role play the situation with your partner, and provide feedback about ways it could be improved. Then swap roles.



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WORKSHEET 1 – WHAT IS ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION?

	<i>Passive</i>	<i>Aggressive</i>	<i>Passive-aggressive</i>	<i>Assertive</i>
Characteristics				
Benefits				
Drawbacks				
How does this type of communication relate to how women are expected to behave in our culture?				

AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

- intimidating, forceful, and does not consider the needs, rights or feelings of others
- can involve yelling or saying rude or abusive things.
- can feel powerful and can seem effective as others may fear you and do what you want
- however, it tends towards bullying that can be harmful to others and ultimately ineffective as it does not engender respect.

PASSIVE COMMUNICATION

- submissive and deferent
- avoids conflict at all costs
- puts your own needs last
- involves giving in to unreasonable demands and holding back your opinion
- tends to avoid negative criticism
- tends to focus on pleasing others at the cost of one's own needs and rights.

PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

- has an overtone of aggression disguised in a benign or pleasant tone of tone
- a way of not complying with the needs and wishes of others but without being upfront about it
- can involve undermining others or “accidentally” taking an action that is harmful to someone else

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

- is clear in its intent
- involves standing up for yourself but doing so in a way that does not infringe on the rights of others
- involves communicating honestly but appropriately
- often correlated with good self esteem and confidence.

Adapted from materials developed by Smart Recovery Australia