ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Assertiveness

The key word is respect – for ourselves and for others. Assertiveness means demonstrating respect for ourselves by standing up for ourselves in a fair way, while respecting others by ensuring we don’t hurt them. Some examples of this are:

- Expressing our own personal opinions and feelings
- Saying “no” without feeling guilty
- Refusing to be used or taken for granted
- Asking for what we want
- Deciding not to voice anything, when we feel it’s more appropriate to keep quiet

There are 3 basic styles of relating to others: passive, aggressive, assertive. What’s the difference between them?

Passive – “Sure, I'll help you with your essay!” (thinking: ‘My deadline’s tomorrow!’)

Aggressive – “You must be joking!”

Assertive – “Well, I’m busy at the moment, but I’ll have a look at it with you for half an hour, after lunch.” Being assertive means recognising yourself as an equal to others, treating yourself with the respect that you deserve, and thereby showing others how you’d like to be treated.

Problems with being passive

Perhaps you react passively because you hope this will make people like you. You probably put yourself down: “I never know what to do.”

You stop yourself from expressing your opinion: “I don’t know”/“I don’t mind”/“You choose.” Then you find that other people take the initiative, and make decisions for you.

Saying yes to requests becomes a default position.
ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

You often feel you’re not being true to yourself.
You feel ‘used’ by other people, and angry. ("Why do they always ask me to do it?!")

The underlying cause of behaving passively is often low self-confidence and self-esteem. Behaving passively actively invites others to believe you have no wishes or needs of your own. The way they will treat you then easily leads to feeling inferior. This negative self-perception is part of a vicious circle you can choose to opt out of.

Problems with being aggressive

We’ve all seen people being overly aggressive – shouting, swearing, pushing, bullying others – and noticed the reactions it evokes. Other more disguised forms of aggression are, for example: rushing someone into making a decision; pressurising them to act in a certain way; telling them rather than asking; ignoring them; manipulating; and many other forms. Sometimes this is passed off as ‘humour’, but still has the same end effect. When someone is aggressive the rights and self-esteem of others are ignored.

I want to behave differently, but……

Many people fear how others will perceive them if they dare to be assertive.

“I feel like I’m being selfish.”
(Stating what you’d like paves the way for the other person to voice their wishes too.)

“I don’t like conflict. The other person might get angry with me.”
(This assumes that everyone is unreasonable.)

“People won’t like me if I voice my opinion.”
(How do you feel towards others who voice theirs? People appreciate knowing where they stand, and if you keep quiet, they can’t get to know you.)
How do I start behaving assertively?

Techniques

Let the other person know how you feel, without attacking them. This means using “I feel (+ an emotion)” statements. e.g.

feeling: “I feel/felt (annoyed/hurt/embarrassed/angry/sad....)
situation: when you (speak to me like that/smoke round me/left without me...)
suggestion: I’d like it if/Let’s/Could you (+ suggested solution)
checking: Is that OK with you?”

Rather than: “You’re so nasty, going out without me!” This way of dealing with the stressful situation is likely to make the other person feel threatened, become stubborn, and get angry at you.

Broken record: Keeping calm about your message, repeat it until the other person really listens and (you hope) takes action. e.g.

A: “You know that DVD I lent you last month? I want to watch it this evening. Can I have it back this afternoon, please?”
B: “I don’t know where it is right now.... somewhere in all this mess.....”
A: “Can I have it back this afternoon, please?”
B: “Oh, I’m doing an assignment and haven’t got time to look for it.”
A: “Can I have it back this afternoon, please?”
B: “OK, hang on,....”

Planning and rehearsing

This stage is important. Think out what you’d like to say, using one of the techniques above. Find a friend who’s willing to listen, and practise saying it to her/him, until you feel you can do it ‘live’. Of course you’ll be nervous, but that’s natural, as you’re trying out new behaviour. Remember....

- Keep it simple.
- Look the other person in the eye – this makes you more convincing.
- Keep your tone of voice consistent and calm.
- Don’t apologise – unless you know you’re in the wrong.
Once you’ve had a go of this new way of relating to someone, congratulate yourself on having tried, and acknowledge your successes to yourself.

Assertiveness means standing up for yourself, being open and honest about your needs and wishes. This communicates to others that you’d like to be respected. Equally, assertiveness means respecting the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of other people.

And it doesn’t always get you what you want! It can enable you to choose relationships you feel good about, recognising that not everyone in the world will be caring towards you. You can have more control over your life, and feel more relaxed and confident.

Useful resources

University of Reading Counselling and Wellbeing Service

www.reading.ac.uk/counselling; tel: 0118 378 4216

“Mind“: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-esteem/