

Coping with College Series

What Is Assertiveness?

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Many people confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness. It is important to distinguish assertiveness from two other forms of behavior: aggressiveness and passivity. Both aggressiveness and passivity are instinctive. This instinct is sometimes described as a "fight or flight" reaction to a threatening situation. People usually have a much easier time being either aggressive or passive (or sometimes both) than being assertive.

Rather than being instinctual, assertiveness is a learned behavior. This learning takes some work, but is worth the effort. Assertiveness can help people who have problems with passivity and/or with aggressiveness. While both aggressiveness and passivity may still be appropriate in some circumstances, learning assertiveness gives a third, more flexible choice.

One definition of assertiveness is offered by Willis and Daisley, in "The Assertive Trainer":

"Assertiveness is a form of behavior which demonstrates your self-respect and respect for others. This means that assertiveness is concerned with dealing with your own feelings about yourself and other people, as much as with the end result."

It is important to remember that assertiveness is based on respect for yourself and respect for others at the same time. Aggressiveness is standing up for yourself at the expense of others. Passivity is respecting others at the expense of yourself.

Willis and Daisley, in "The Assertive Trainer", give five vital ingredients to assertiveness. These are:

- Being a good listener;
- Demonstrating your understanding of what you have heard the other person say;
- Saying what you think and feel without blaming others for your feelings;
- Saying specifically what you want to happen, even if it seems like the other person should know (quite often they don't), and;
- Considering the consequences of joint solutions (rather than compromise).

Where can assertiveness be helpful? College students complain that when they go home for the summer, they often are not seen as independent adults. Assertive behavior, based on respect for both the parent and the student, can assist the student in developing a new kind of relationship. Another place to use these skills could be with roommates, or in the workplace in dealing with bosses and co-workers. It is important to use them appropriately, however. Learning such skills is not a substitute for thinking clearly about relationships and what to do in them.

There are many helpful assertiveness skills that can be learned and practiced. One place to start is with a book: the most highly recommended is "Your Perfect Right: A Guide to Assertive Living" by Alberti and Emmons. Individual counselors often have training in helping you learn assertiveness skills. Various groups and courses are other places to learn assertiveness. Consider coming by the SCS and talking to a member of our staff if you feel that you may need some help and/or assistance in this important, interpersonal skill.