**Do I need to be more assertive?**

To answer this question, ask yourself these questions:

* Are you having difficulty resolving conflicts with important people in your life?
* Do you hold in your anger at others and find that you just can’t “let things go” that bother you?
* Do you regularly express yourself aggressively and counter-productively?

If you answered yes to any of the above, you may benefit from adopting a more *assertive* approach with other people. It will help others understand you, and help you get your needs met by others.

**What is the alternative to assertiveness?**

There are different styles of communication, which frequently emerge when we have a conflict with someone else. Here are some:

* Passive communication involves accepting what others say and do without confronting them, even if you disagree.
* Aggressive communication involves forcible confrontation, often with the intent to take control of a person or situation.
* Passive-aggressive communication involves aggressive or retaliatory action that is disguised as having harmless intentions.
* Assertive communication involves communicating directly, standing up for yourself while respecting the other person.

We may use all of these styles in different situations, and sometimes aggressive or passive communication is appropriate. For example, if you’re defending yourself from a physical attack, you may want to be aggressive, whereas if you are sitting in a lecture class, you may want to be passive. However, if you are using one of the first three styles more often than not, you may benefit from practicing communicating assertively.

**How can I be assertive? Dos and don’ts**

**DO** remember that, although it can be uncomfortable, conflict between people is normal and natural. We all have different needs and will each try to do what we can to get our needs met.

**DO** recognize that you have rights in relationships. These include the right to not take on someone else’s problem, the right to be alone even if others want to be around you, the right to ask for help, the right to say “no,” and the right to not be threatened.

**DO** recognize that others have those same rights. No one is obligated to take responsibility for your problems, and other people are allowed to decline your requests for favors, help, time, or money.

**DO** express yourself, and “speak for yourself.” Express your thoughts, feelings, and needs with “I” statements (e.g., “*I’m* angry,” “*I feel* bad about this”). **DON’T** blame your feelings on others or attribute them to others (e.g., “*you make me* angry” “*your actions cause me to* feel bad”). Others will be more receptive and responsive to your thoughts, feelings, and needs if you rightfully present them as your experience, rather than universal truth.



**DON’T** express others’ thoughts or feelings for them (“*you never want* to do anything,” “*you don’t care* when I’m upset”). Let them “speak for themselves” and tell you what they are thinking and feeling.

**DO** respect differences between yourself and others. Often times someone else’s position makes sense when considering his or her circumstances. If you find that to be the case, let the other person know that you appreciate his or her perspective, even though you are both allowed to disagree. It is likely that you can work together to find a solution that benefits both of you.

**DON’T** “get back” at people by subtle put-downs or by “accidental” retaliation. If you feel offended by someone’s words or actions, address it with that person. Letting them know where you stand with them will give them the best chance to help make things right.

**DO** be clear when setting limits with others. It is OK to sound like a “broken record” and repeat yourself as many times as necessary. You do not have to (and won’t be able to) please everyone!

**When should I seek help?**

* When conflict with another person is interfering with your academic, social, or personal functioning
* If you think that one of your relationships may be abusive or exploitative
* If your expressions of anger or other negative emotion are interfering with your important relationships
* If you are experiencing symptoms of sadness, worry, or fear related to your interactions or relationships with others
* If you are feeling confused about one or more relationships or disagreements with others

Portions of this material have been adapted from McKay, Davis, & Fanning, “Messages: The Communication Skills Book,” 3rd edition, 2009.