

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

YOUR ASSERTIVE RIGHTS

By Steve Barrett, LCSW, BCD

Have you ever experienced frustration when trying to communicate your views and feelings? Do you state your views by verbally attacking the other person; or let the other person ‘have their way’? It could be that your style of communication is causing the frustration. What you may not realize is that the use of assertive communication can help you express yourself clearly and manage the frustration and stress. What exactly is assertiveness, and can it really reduce our stress level? In order to understand assertiveness, it helps to have an understanding of the three basic styles of communication: assertive, aggressive, and passive or non-assertive.

Assertiveness is the ability to express our feelings, and assert our rights, while respecting the feelings and rights of others. When we are assertive, we are able to say “no” without feeling guilty. What are the benefits of being assertive? In general, it means less stress. Assertive folks usually feel good about themselves and about others. Assertive people tend to have fewer conflicts in their dealings with others and, as a result, relationships are more satisfying.

Aggressiveness is frequently confused with assertiveness. People often think that ‘speaking up for themselves’ is assertive. However, if you violate the rights of the other person, and ‘get your own way’ no matter what happens, then you are aggressive. When we are aggressive, we frequently use intimidation to get what we want. We may achieve our goals, but at the cost of affecting the relationship with the other person. The other person often perceives aggressive communication as disrespectful, and, as a result, may lead them to have less respect for the person delivering the message.

The opposite of aggressiveness is non-assertiveness. The non-assertive or passive communicator allows others to violate their rights, since they regard their needs and opinions as less important than the other person. The message is: “I’m not important – you are.” We may think that folks like us if we totally concentrate on their needs, when in fact, it may be that the other person is just pleased that we are not inconveniencing them. When we sabotage our own wants, self-esteem is eroded and we may feel hurt, anxious or angry. These negative feelings can lead to physical problems such as headaches, tension, and stomach problems.

Of the three communication styles, assertiveness is by far the most effective. Assertive communication is based on the concept of assertive rights, which include:

- To be treated with courtesy and respect
- To have independent opinions and express them
- To make mistakes
- To say “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand”

Accepting our assertive rights does not mean to overpower others, but to equalize power. Our assertive rights do not negate other’s assertive rights. For example, we have the right to make mistakes and others have the right to dislike our mistakes. For effective communication, we

must acknowledge and accept our assertive rights. If we don't, we are telling ourselves that we must prove our worth by doing all we can to please others. We don't express what we really think or feel to avoid feeling guilty.

Assertive communication is sometimes categorized by the three levels of assertive response. The first is a basic assertive response, which is a direct statement of what you want to happen. An example would be "no, I do not want to buy that." The second level, empathetic assertion, is a statement of what the other person is feeling, plus a direct statement of what you want to happen. For example "I know that you're feeling anxious about moving, but I have made other plans; therefore, I won't be able to help you." The third is the escalating assertion, which is a more intense assertive response than the previous assertive responses. Escalating assertion is used when the first assertive responses do not get your desired result. An example would be "if you do not leave me alone, I'm going to call the manager."

Assertiveness is a skill that can be learned and it is helpful to practice. One way to practice is to use the LADDER technique. This technique is a step-by-step procedure for being more assertive.

- **L**ook at your needs, rights, and feelings about a situation.
- **A**rrange a meeting that is convenient, where you and the other person can speak comfortably and have enough time to speak. Don't talk to your spouse about an important issue while you both are walking out the door to go to work. Inappropriate context (location and timing) can lower the effectiveness of assertive communication.
- **D**efine the problem clearly to the other person. Be specific.
- **D**escribe your feelings using "I" messages. "I" messages let you take responsibility for your feelings. You are not blaming others for how you feel. For example, "I feel hurt when you did not acknowledge my work," rather than "you hurt me when you ignored me." Also, be aware of the other person's emotional state. If they are angry, depressed or intoxicated, then it would not be a good time to have effective communication with them.
- **E**xpress and explain your remarks in an assertive manner, using clear sentences. Be aware of your eye contact, hand gestures, posture, voice tone, and facial expressions.
- **R**einforce your remarks by noting the positive outcome.

No one is born assertive. It takes practice, practice, and more practice. So give it a try, and see if your professional and personal relationships are enhanced; and your stress is reduced. Euripides once said "joint undertakings stand a better chance when they benefit both sides."