

Module 5: Communication/Assertive Communication & Effective Listening

- Communication Styles
- Components of Effective Communication
- Aspects of Active Listening
- Hidden Agendas in Communication
- Components of Assertive Communication
- Steps of Positive Assertiveness
- Importance of Feedback
- Question/answer/process

Handouts: Components of Assertive Communication (Map)

Refusal Skills Map
Communication Skills
Feelings Word List

COMMUNICATION/ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

Clinician may want to split this module into two or more sessions. Depending on length of process through each aspect of communication, you may want to complete the remainder of the information in other sessions. Remember this is not an educational group format: the goal is to keep didactic information to 15 to 20 minutes and remainder of group as process.

We're going to talk about communicating today. People talk all of the time and many times they say nothing. But, today we want to look at talking in a manner that communicates our needs and desires without feeling as if we've been taken advantage of, or not been heard, or feeling like we've ran over someone else to get our point across. We're going to look at two things – two very entwined subjects – communication and assertiveness.

(Encourage clients to share their understanding of what assertiveness means to them.)

Assertiveness means to communicate your thoughts and feelings honestly and appropriately. Assertive communication can be verbal and/or nonverbal. To express yourself assertively requires self-awareness and knowing what you and need. It means showing yourself the same respect that you demonstrate toward others and vice versa.

If you don't assert yourself, by letting others know what your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs are then they are forced to make assumptions about you in those areas. Assumptions have about a 50% (or less) chance of being correct. That means you only have about half a chance of people understanding you and responding to you in a way that you want.

There are a few identifiable styles of communicating and we're going to look at them and see the basic characteristics involved when they're being employed. Most of us use different ways of communicating, depending on the situation we're in or on the people we're with. Usually, though, one style best describes our overall behavior when communicating. But, keep in mind, that our communication style is something we've learned. So, if we see ourselves using a style we don't like or that's interfering with our relationships, we can take steps to learn a new way.

5 COMMUNICATION STYLES

1. **PASSIVE:** Always giving into what others want. Don't want to make waves. Don't express your thoughts or feelings. Afraid to say no. Discounting your own wants and needs.

When we communicate passively, we try to avoid conflict and confrontation with others at all cost. This means we often put our personal beliefs and rights aside to support the rights of someone else. We don't share our true feelings, wants, and needs, which makes us emotionally dishonest. We may think that our behavior doesn't cause any harm – after all, we're doing everything possible not to upset anyone – but we're mistaken. Our behavior lowers our self-esteem and leaves our needs unmet. Because most people never address our needs, we may feel neglected and build up feelings of resentment. This creates strained relationships, as we expect others to guess what we feel, want, and need.

Optional:

CHARACTERISTICS:

Verbal: speak quietly; don't use much expression or inflection in voice; try not to sound too excited or too upset about anything; soften the content of our message; avoid saying what we really feel or think; difficulty saying no – statements such as “maybe”, “probably”, “I suppose”; qualify message (kind of, sort of); use communication stoppers (I don't care, whatever) to avoid taking stand, making a decision, or disagreeing; over-apologize (to smooth over problems); problems with giving/receiving compliments; difficulty giving direct, honest feedback.

NonVerbal: poor eye contact; discomfort standing or sitting up straight; cross arms and/or legs to “block out” others; minimal gesturing; minimal facial expressions; if display of expression – constant smile, or a blank look; don't express feelings in an appropriate time frame – too late or not at all.

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2. **AGGRESSIVE:** Being demanding, hostile, or rude. Insensitive to the rights of others. Intimidates others into doing what they want. Is disrespectful.

*When we communicate aggressively, we put our own rights first and **disregard** the rights of others. We don't show concern for the feelings, wants, and needs of others, but we **demand** that ours be heard and met. We will do almost anything to get what we want, even if it means controlling and manipulating others. We may actually get what we want, but our aggressive behavior leads to poor self-esteem, unhealthy relationships, and, in many cases, guilt and shame.*

Optional:

CHARACTERISTICS:

Verbal: loud or unfriendly tone; say no easily without consideration of others; use “you” statements to blame, threaten, and coerce others; swear or call others names to get way; bark out judgmental statements – “you should...”, “you’d better...”, “you are...”; focus on other’s faults; resort to racist, sexist, and other prejudiced statements; demand wants when want them; easily accepts compliments, difficulty giving them; poor listeners – interrupt and give feedback in form of criticism/unwanted advice.

NonVerbal: steady direct eye contact – glare or stare; body posture is stiff and rigid; stand close to others to intimidate; act in ways that are threatening, forceful, or abusive; tend to over-gesture – making everything seem all important; show feelings through actions – hit people/things, slam doors, throw objects; harsh facial expressions – dirty looks; express feeling/opinions immediately, even when it’s clearly inappropriate to do so.

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3. **PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE:** You tell people what they want to hear which avoids conflict. However, you really feel angry inside and you don’t follow through on the expectations or requests, which results in the other person feeling frustrated, angry, confused, and resentful.

*When we use a passive-aggressive style of communication, we violate or disregard the rights of others (like the aggressive person) while attempting to look as though we’re placing the rights of others first (like the passive person). We **appear** concerned about others’ feelings, wants, and needs but will only act on them to meet our own feelings, wants, and needs. We don’t tell others what we want or feel; instead we expect others to guess and to give in to us. We act this way to control and to manipulate others (like the aggressive person) and to avoid direct conflict (like the passive person). When we use this style of communication we have poor self-esteem and have difficulty in relationships (like both the passive and aggressive communicators). Our needs and feelings may go unmet and unacknowledged (like those of the passive person), and we may experience feelings of shame and guilt about our behavior (like the aggressive person).*

Optional:

CHARACTERISTICS

Verbal/NonVerbal: the verbal and nonverbal messages of this style don’t match; stare and roll eyes but deny anything is wrong; may sit close then pull away for effect; when confronted about an unhappy facial expression, say that everything is just fine; voice may be soft and calm when making a threat; use sarcasm and aggressive statements but don’t admit to being serious about it, instead suggest the person “takes everything too seriously”; say yes when don’t plan to follow through, or give dishonest feedback to humiliate or “set up” another person.

4. MANIPULATIVE: Attempt to get what you want by making others feel guilty. Tend to play the role of the victim or the martyr in order to get other people to take responsibility for taking care of their needs.

This one is pretty self-explanatory. We've all seen this person – had this person in our lives. It looks a great deal like the passive communicator.

5. ASSERTIVE: Directly, honestly, and appropriately stating what your thoughts, feelings, needs, and wants are. You take responsibility for yourself and are respectful of others. You are an effective listener and problem solver.

This type of communication allows us to affirm our own rights as well as the rights of others. We're able to express our feelings, wants, and needs openly and respectfully as they occur. We act in our own best interest without trying to make others uncomfortable. We're open to hearing others express their feelings and needs and are willing to compromise. We maintain a balance between giving, taking, and asking for help. We try to resolve issues without conflict (although we don't avoid it) and to work through them when they occur. Those who are assertive in their communication tend to have strong self-esteems, self-respect, and self-confidence. We make good leaders and friends. Our relationships last longer and are based on mutual respect. We are honest.

Optional:

CHARACTERISTICS

Verbal: use conversational tone of voice; may use inflection for emphasis; able to say no without guilt and with respect for other person; uses "I" statements to take personal responsibility for feelings and opinions; avoid blaming others and take responsibility for actions; take credit for success and admit mistakes; make decisions; set limits; good listeners who offer direct and honest feedback.

At this juncture, encourage group members to talk/examine their style(s) of communication. See if they can identify their style. Explore how their style of communication has worked for, or against, them personally, professionally, mentally, and spiritually (if applicable). Encourage specific examples of communication styles.

So, we've talked about different ways in which we communicate. Now, let's look at some of the components of effective communication. There are 4 components ("I" Statements, Active Listening, Reflection, Nonverbal Communication) to this that, if we practice, enhances our ability to communicate. The first one is...

"I" Statements.

We've all been guilty of saying things like "you make me mad", "you are wrong", or "you don't care about anyone", etc. When we do this we're not taking ownership or responsibility for our feelings, thoughts, or opinions about the subject at hand. We're not being assertive. We're basically blaming or being manipulative – and that's not an effective way to communicate. We are responsible for how we feel, what we think, how we feel about things and we have a duty to honor and be accountable for our feelings, thoughts, and actions. In the beginning, this may not feel like a real natural way of communicating/talking. In the beginning it may be useful to use the "When you do___, I feel ___" approach to using "I" statements. So let's look at it a little bit and practice using these types of statements.

Let's turn some common statements into "I" statements.

Statement

"I" Statement

*You don't care about anyone.
You make me mad.
You are wrong.
You embarrass me.
It's your fault.
That is bad.*

*I feel sad when I'm left out.
When you do..., I feel angry.
I feel your decision is incorrect.
When you do..., I feel embarrassed.
I feel you're responsible for...
I feel that's not good.*

Encourage group members to use their own statements and have them turn them into assertive statements as opposed to accusatory, blaming, or manipulative statements.

A second component of assertive communication is...

Active Listening

Everyone likes to believe that they're good listeners. But, there really is some skill to this. What we mean when we say we want to be an active listener is that we want to be able to demonstrate that attention is being paid to what is being communicated/said to us. We want to be able to pick up the emotional message and be able to restate it in our own words, without analyzing, criticizing, or giving advice. An example of this would be something like...

#1 says: "My purse was just stolen by a man as I walked to my car when I left the store."

How could you respond to a statement like this in a manner that demonstrated that you had actively listened – that you really heard what was said, that you caught the emotional message in the statement ***without criticism, or advice***? Remember, active listening demonstrates interest with appropriate concern and questions for clarification.

Have group members share responses.

#2 might say: "Are you alright? That must have been frightening."

Might want to go through some more examples to initiate comfort in this process.

There are 3 aspects to Active Listening, one of which is also the third component of assertive communication...

1) Reflection/Paraphrasing

Reflection is a vital part of good communication. In using reflection we assure that we are perceiving correctly what the other person is trying to say to us. When we paraphrase we state in our own words what we think someone just said. There are 5 big dividends to doing this...

1. People deeply appreciate feeling heard.
2. Paraphrasing stops escalating anger and cools down crisis.
3. Paraphrasing stops miscommunication. False assumptions, errors, and misinterpretations are corrected on the spot.
4. Paraphrasing helps you remember what was said.
5. When you paraphrase, you'll find it much harder to compare, judge, rehearse, spar, advise, derail, dream, and so on. In fact, paraphrasing is the antidote to most listening blocks.

2) Clarifying

This often goes along with paraphrasing. It just means asking questions until you get more of the picture. It helps you sharpen your listening focus so that you hear more than vague generalities. You hear events in the context of what someone thought and felt, the relevant history. It also lets the other person know that you're interested in what they're saying.

3) Feedback

Active listening depends on feedback. You've paraphrased and clarified what was said, and hopefully understand it. So, this is the point at which you can talk about your reactions to what you heard. In a nonjudgmental way, you can share what you thought, felt, or sensed.

This is also a good time to check your perceptions. You watched the body language and listened to the tone of voice. You may have noticed things that seemed to betray what the other person felt. You may have also drawn conclusions about the content of the communication. To check perceptions, you transform what you saw and heard into a tentative description:

"I want to understand your feelings---is this (giving a description) the way you feel?"

"Listening to what you said, I wonder if (your description) is what's really happening in the situation."

All of this is done without approval or disapproval, with only a wish to see if your hunch is correct.

Feedback helps the other person understand the effect of his or her communication. There are three rules for giving feedback. It has to be...

- 1) immediate – as soon as you fully understand the communication.
- 2) honest – your real reaction. And
- 3) supportive – you can be gentle, saying what you need to say without causing damage or defensiveness.

This is a good place in which to have group members practice some of the above techniques in an effort to familiarize them with this process. Have them paraphrase, clarify, and give feedback on an issues within the group.

And the last component of assertive communication is...

Nonverbal communication

Our body language. You can't "not communicate" with others. Without saying a word, you reveal your feelings and attitudes. Your smile says, "I'm happy," your frown and crossed arms say, "I'm mad," and your drumming fingers and explosive sighs say, "I'm impatient---get moving." Even when you try to show nothing, your closed-off stance and refusal to speak says, "I don't want to talk about it. Leave me alone."

There are two ways you communicate nonverbally:

1. body movements such as facial expressions, gestures, and posture, and
2. spatial relationships, such as how much distance you put between yourself and the other person.

Understanding body language is very important because over 50% of a message's impact comes from body movements. Some research has shown that the total impact of a message breaks down something like this:

- 7% verbal (words)
- 38% vocal (volume, pitch, rhythm, etc.)
- 55% body movements (mostly facial expressions)

Another reason to pay close attention to body language is that it is often more believable than verbal communication. Example: you ask your mother, "What's wrong?" She shrugs her shoulder, frowns, turns away from you and mutters, "Oh...nothing, I guess."

I'm just fine." You don't believe her words. You believe her dejected body language, and you press on to find out what's bothering her.

This is a good place in which to play around with congruence and body language with group members. Give statements that are not congruent with your body language and have group members state what they are hearing and seeing and what, if anything is "not right" with the process. Have some fun with them. Encourage them to get involved with this exercise by presenting their own incongruent statements/body language.

Ok, we've looked at a lot about communicating more effectively in the last couple of groups, so now we're going to look at hidden agendas. Those messages within the message that tend to confuse our communication process with others. When we're saying one thing, but meaning something else. Hidden agendas are

- 1) excellent defensive maneuvers, if you don't feel very good about yourself.
- 2) They protect you from rejection by creating a desired impression.
- 3) They help you make a case for your essential value as a person.

However, they are death on intimacy because nobody gets to see the real you.

So, let's look at a few of these hidden agendas and see if we recognize any of them.

1. I'm Good

You're the hero of all your stories. Every story highlights the attributes you value most. If you want people to know about your wealth or power, your stories tell them. If you the word out about your strength or generosity, your stories do that for you. A frequently encountered I'm Good agenda is the 'caring and sensitive person.' This role is played as if you were on the stage – you create an undeniably fine character, but not your real self. You have to prove your caring constantly by a gesture, a recollection, a sensitive remark.

Here are some typical I'm Good messages:

I'm honest	I'm successful	I'm hard working	I'm powerful
I'm courageous	I'm strong	I'm loyal	I'm wealthy
I'm generous	I'm self-sacrificing	I'm adventurous	I'm ambitious

Everyone is a little phoney, but the I'm Good agenda is more than that. It's a life's work. It's a way of distorting yourself so that only very selected parts get seen. It means you don't trust anyone with the parts of yourself that are less than wonderful.

Two big disadvantages:

- 1) It's hard to get close to people because they only know you through your I'm Good stories.
- 2) People get bored.

2. I'm Good (But You're Not)

In this agenda, you prove that you're all right by showing how bad everyone else is. "Everyone's stupid, incompetent, selfish, unreasonable, lazy, frightened, or insensitive but me." You're always the one who does it right, who reasons clearly, who really cares.

There are several versions of I'm Good (But You're Not). One is...

- a) Implied Criticism – you point out how hard you've worked or how much you've compromised – with the implication that the other person is lazy or stupid.
- b) Courtroom – this involves spouses who are each trying to prove how awful the other is. The Courtroom judge is usually played by a next door neighbor, a therapist, or one of the children.
- c) If It Weren't for You – a game for spouses who blame each other for restricted, joyless lives.

This agenda can give a boost to your self-esteem, but you pay a price. Your family and friends feel threatened and put down by you, and they soon begin defensive maneuvers of their own.

3. You're Good (But I'm Not)

The simplest version of this agenda is flattery. More complex forms involve a kind of worship of smart, beautiful, or strong people. The worship often means putting yourself down by comparison.

Examples of this agenda:

"You do that so well; I'm all thumbs." "I wish I had your gumption and guts; I'm too afraid of blowing it." "I've never had a head for business; I look at what you've done and think how clever you are."

This one-down position is...

- a) sometimes used to extract favors or strokes
- b) can be a token to buy low-grade relationships

c) a strategy to ward off anger and rejection.

After all, how can you really get angry at someone who's already putting themselves down? This agenda is also useful to...

d) block uncomfortable demands and expectations. Nobody's going to expect much from an incompetent.

This agenda can be the agenda of the depressed person. The basic statement/message is "I'm wrong, bad, damaged, stupid, boring, or unlovable. Take pity on me." The alcoholic, the chronic gambler, the philandering spouse may also emphasize this agenda position as...

e) a way to head off rejection

and also as

f) an excuse not to change.

4. I'm Helpless, I Suffer

This is the agenda of the victim. The stories focus on misfortune, injustice, abuse. They are about someone who is stuck, who tries but can't escape, who endures without hope of remedy. This person is implicitly saying, "Don't ask me to do anything about all this pain; I'm not responsible."

Again, there are several versions of this agenda...

- 1) Ain't It Awful – played by people who want to complain about their spouses. The injustices they suffer always seem beyond solution.
- 2) Why Don't You...Yes But – is ideal for maintaining helplessness. This is a game for 2. The second person makes a series of suggestions that the helpless person shoots down, one after another. The helpless person is vindicated in the end by proving nothing will work, they their suffering is beyond their ability to control.
- 3) Why Does This Always Happen to Me? -- is ideal for avoiding scary new solutions, or for accepting pain that otherwise suggests the need for a major life decision/change.

5. I'm Blameless

The agenda of choice when things go wrong. You've heard this one – the person with a thousand excuses for their failures. You've watched them look around for something or someone to blame. The basic position is, "I didn't do it." Painful marriages often breed this agenda. Each spouse looks for proof that the fault lies elsewhere. "She didn't give enough...He was never home...The kids took all of

our time...If we hadn't moved to wherever...It was different after she quit her job...and on and on."

One of the games played from this agenda position is See What You Made Me Do. You ask for suggestions or advice, you follow the advice, then blame your advisor for everything that went wrong. It's like taking out a kind of psychological insurance that you'll never have to be responsible for anything.

6. I'm Fragile

The basic statement from this agenda is "Don't hurt me." The statement is made by telling stories of how you have been betrayed and wounded in the past. You make it clear that you need protection, that you cannot hear the whole truth. You speak in a soft voice and your vulnerability is often quite attractive.

Examples:

"How did you do at school today? Oh. You know, it really upsets me when I hear about you playing alone without any friends (so please don't tell me)."

"Everything that goes on with you is important to me, dear. But why do you have to tell me things that upset me (after all I am fragile)."

"Please don't cry, I'm getting another one of my headaches."

"My parents always fought about money, let's not get into that."

7. I'm Tough

You muscle your way through life, both psychologically and physically. You're the student who carries 40 units your freshman year and holds down a full time job; you're the superwoman who works 40 hours a week, raises four kids, bakes bread, does all the cleaning and cooking, and heads up the March of Dimes campaign; you're the workaholic with a high pressure job that still insists on spending 12 hours on the weekend replacing all the plumbing yourself; you're the person with a harried listing of things you have done or are in the process of doing. You recite your schedule and overwhelm the other person details of where you've been, your current labors, and a litany of all the places you have to rush off to as soon as the conversation is done.

Your underlying message is that you are stronger and work harder, faster, and longer than anyone else.

The payoff is

1. admiration and assurance that you won't be criticized.
2. People won't ask you for much because you are so busy.

3. You're in control, in charge, and most importantly, above reproach.

With this agenda you don't slow down --- you collapse.

I'm Tough is also the position of the hard, the dangerous, and the sometimes violent. The message is "Don't attack me, I'll hurt you." But, the sole purpose of this agenda is

1. to ward off hurt and protect a very fragile self-esteem

The only thing that is really "hidden" is the vulnerability of those who use it. Inside this wall of defense is...

1. a person very afraid of rejection
2. a person very unsure of their worth.

8. I Know It All

This is the agenda of the endlessly lecturing person that drive us all crazy. The purpose of their communication is not to inform or entertain, but to..

prove how much they know.

This agenda can take the form of moralizing or teaching. This person is the perpetual instructor, comfortable only behind the imaginary lectern. People don't get too close. This agenda works best with younger people, who may be impressed or intimidated. But, peers soon learn that they can't be heard or appreciated, except as an audience.

The real function of this agenda is..

1. to prevent you from reencountering early experiences of shame at not knowing and not being adequate.

These agendas serve two functions:

1. To build up and preserve an existential position, a basic stance in the world. The agenda becomes your individual strategy for coping with core feelings of inadequacy.
2. To promote ulterior motives and needs.

There is no doubt that the agendas are adaptive and serve a purpose, but ultimately these maneuvers isolate you. In the end they wall you off from the relief of being known and accepted for what and who you are.

We've covered a lot around communication – we've looked at styles in which we communicate, how to listen a little better, and how to watch out for ours and others hidden agendas, so let's take a quick look at how to approach communication in a goal directed, assertive manner.

Many times when we enter into communication with others, we're not clear ourselves what we are wanting to accomplish, so the conversation tends to go nowhere or accomplish what we want or need it to do. So, let's look at three questions to ask yourself to help keep the communication honest.

1. What do you want (negotiable)?
2. What do you need (non-negotiable)?
3. What are you thinking and feeling that you are not expressing that prevents you from getting what you want and need?

Remember, it's our own responsibility to put what we need and want out there, it isn't the other party's responsibility to attempt to read our mind and figure it out.

Learning assertive communication and behavior and using it effectively requires we develop all aspects of what it means to be assertive. Effective, assertive communication is like a circle—to be complete all aspects of it must be continuous.

Give Handout

First we have to --- recognize and express our rights.

Then we need to – become aware of our own thoughts, feelings, needs, and wants.

From there we need to --- practice assertive communication and behavior

By --- learning to say “no”

And stop --- avoiding, being passive, manipulative, passive-aggressive, or aggressive.

The entire time being aware of and projecting our – nonverbal assertive behavior (our body language).

There are some relatively simple steps we can follow to be positively assertive with our communication.

1. Prepare for a neutral conversation by first diffusing your emotions and by waiting until the other person is likely to be least reactive and most receptive.
2. Deliver your message as briefly and directly as possible, without being sarcastic, condescending, or judgmental.

3. Be respectful. Allow enough time for the other person to respond without pressure.
4. Reflectively listen. If the person becomes defensive reflect to them what you hear them saying and validate their feelings.
5. Reassert your message. Stay focused on the original issue, don't be derailed or get off track, it only muddies up the water.
6. Reuse this process, using a lot of reflective listening to decrease emotionality, debating, or arguing. It takes two people to escalate things. Don't participate.
7. Focus on the solution, without demanding that the person respond as you would, or as you feel they should. Because you brought it up, you have probably been thinking about it and resolved some aspects of the situation. Therefore, it's important that you help their participation in problem solving the issue so they don't feel like they have been railroaded.

Once we begin to assert ourselves we find that we feel better about ourselves, we have more self-confidence, that we get more of what we want out of life, and that others tend to respect us more.

But....

Be prepared that not everyone will be supportive of your changes in thinking and behavior. Some people that you interact with, such as family members or a significant other, may even demonstrate some negativity toward these changes. This could be because...

1. change is difficult for them to accept,
2. they are comfortable with what is familiar to them,
3. they benefited from your passive, people-pleasing behavior, or they fear losing you through change.

However, you can't give up who you are to please other people, or to keep certain people in your life. Take one day at a time, focus on the positive, and be the best that you can be. That's really all you can do.