

The Role of Your Social Life

Human beings are social by nature. We need social interaction to function at our best. Although we might be physically capable of living solitary lives, psychologically we are not cut out for it.

As a result of our social nature, many of our most stressful situations have to do with other people. We get very distressed by problems in our relationships. Some of the most common interpersonal stressors include misunderstandings between friends, conflicts with romantic partners, pressures from workmates, and social isolation.

On the other hand, *positive* social interactions cushion us against stress. By building up our social support and using social skills and assertiveness to reduce interpersonal friction we can cut down on our total load of stress. The quality of your relationships influences how you feel about yourself, how connected you feel to the world, how much fun you have, and whom you can call upon for different kinds of help.

Facts about Social Life and Mood

- Close social ties with others make people less vulnerable to depression and more able to weather stressful life events.
- Depressed individuals who have strong social support recover more quickly than those who don't.
- Adequate social support maintains and raises self-esteem.

When people become emotionally overwhelmed, their social lives are usually among the first areas to be affected. In depression, for example, social isolation is one of the primary symptoms. Unfortunately, isolation only makes the depression worse.

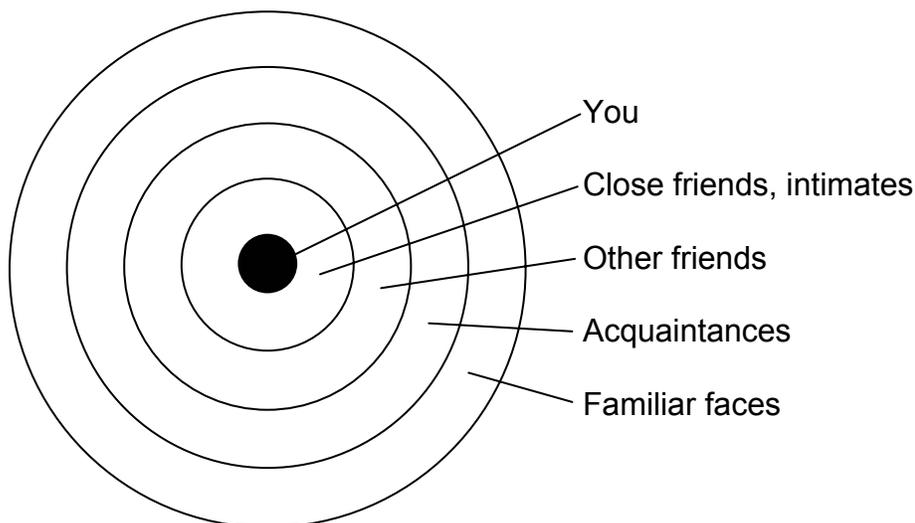
This section on improving your social life is presented in four parts:

- ◆ **Your Social Network:** A way of looking at the kinds of social contacts you have now, and enlarging your social circle.
- ◆ **Creating a Support Team:** Tips on creating a personal support group to help you through difficult times.
- ◆ **Social Balancing:** A discussion of how stress can disrupt the way you relate to others, plus some tips for restoring balance.
- ◆ **Assertiveness:** A review of the differences between passive, aggressive, and assertive behaviour, with some strategies to help you maximize assertiveness.

Your Social Network

Your social network is made up of all of the people you know. It includes family, friends, coworkers, neighbours, physicians and other professionals, and everyone else who has a place in your life. Some you barely know; others you know very well. Some you haven't spoken with in months; others you may see regularly.

One of the most helpful ways to look at your social network is to consider it as a series of concentric circles, like this:



You are in the middle. Each ring represents a different group of people. The closer a ring is to the middle, the deeper is the relationship those people have with you.

- ◆ **Close friends**, or intimates, are the people with whom you can discuss almost anything about your life. You are extremely open with them.
- ◆ **Other friends** are the people with whom you feel comfortable sharing *some* personal things, but perhaps not everything.
- ◆ **Acquaintances** are people with whom you spend some time, but are not especially close to. You don't often discuss your personal life with them. Many neighbours and coworkers may fit into this category.
- ◆ **Familiar faces** are the people you recognize but with whom you seldom speak. They may be in a class you are taking, live in your building, or work at a shop you use.

Now: Imagine that you have *two* of these diagrams to describe your social life:

1. Your *actual* social network. This includes the people who are in each of these groups in your life *right now*.
2. Your *ideal* social network. This represents the number of people you would *like* to have in each group.

The big question: How close is your *actual* social life (the way it is right now) to your *ideal* social life (the way you would like it to be)?

There is no magic number of friends that you must have. People vary in the amount of social contact that suits them. Some people prefer more, others less. Everyone seems to need at least some social contact. The best indication of whether you have a good social network is how closely what you have resembles what you would *like* to have.



Checkpoint: Your Social Census

Take some time to list the people in your social network right now. Include friends, family, partner, coworkers, and professionals (such as your physician). When you are done with each group, count up your list. Then think of how many people you would *like* to have in each group.

Close friends, intimates: List the people you can talk to about your deepest personal issues.

How many are there? _____ How many would you like to have? _____

Other friends: List the people you feel comfortable talking to about *some* personal matters.

How many are there? _____ How many would you like to have? _____

Acquaintances: List the people you spend at least some time with (chatting, going shopping, playing sports, etc.), but without talking about personal issues.

How many are there in all? _____ How many would you like to have? _____

Some observations about the census...

- ⇒ **Social life not ideal?** Welcome to the club. Most people can find fault with their social network. The most common complaint is that there are too few social contacts, especially in the “friends” and “close friends” categories. The goal is to bring your social life *closer* to what you want. It will probably never be perfect, and it doesn’t need to be. The next section offers some ideas for improving your network.
- ⇒ **Don’t want a network?** Your ideal social network should be based on how you feel when things are going reasonably well. Some people find that when they go through a difficult period (especially depression) they don’t want to socialize. Although this is normal, social isolation usually makes things worse. Try using gradual goal-setting to push yourself *gently* into being with other people. As your mood improves, you can expect that your interest and enjoyment in socializing will return.
- ⇒ **Got some recent shrinkage?** You may notice that your social network has shrunk recently, especially if you have been going through mood difficulties or a major life transition. It can also shrink quite a lot if you move, change jobs, leave a relationship, retire, or give up alcohol or drugs. If this has happened to you, this section on building up your social life may be particularly important.
- ⇒ **Shared experience helps.** It can help to have at least one person in your social network who has gone through crises and transitions similar to your own.. You may be able to talk with that person about your experiences in a way that you never could with people who haven’t been there. If you don’t know anyone like this, a support group may be an option.
- ⇒ **Shallowness can be fun.** We hear a lot about the importance of deep friendships. It can be easy to neglect the people with whom we just go swimming or see movies. These kinds of social contacts are important too. They get us out and involved and allow us to “lighten up” now and then without always talking about deep issues.

Need to build your network?

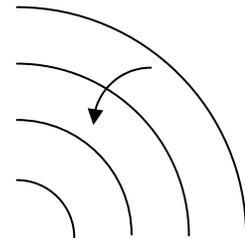
Most of the people in your social census probably fell into your life one way or another without too much planning on your part. Perhaps you met one person at a class, two more through relatives, one at a job you once had, and so on. You didn't plan to meet them. They just showed up somehow.

Having people drift into your life like this works – *but* it takes a lot of time. If your social network is too small, you may have to take a more active role in building it up. We are not used to saying “*Okay, I need to expand my social network. Here’s the strategy.*” But social support is too important to leave to chance.

There are three major ways of increasing or improving your social circle: deepening your current relationships, reviving old friendships, and starting new friendships.

Deepening Current Relationships

Want to improve your social life? Start by looking at your *existing* social circle. Of the people you already know, whom would you like to know better? Then you can see if the person is open to a deeper level of friendship. In the terms of the social circles diagram, you can invite the person to step inward into the next circle.



How do you deepen a relationship? Well, you've done this already with a lot of people in your life. You probably know the things that have helped bring you closer to people in the past. Listed below are some ideas that may be familiar to you. You may wish to put a checkmark by those you think you need to work on some more.

Make relationships a priority. If your relationships are important to you, give them higher priority than you do to daily tasks like washing dishes, or to solitary activities like reading or watching television. If spending time with people always comes at the bottom of the list it won't get done. It is important to your well-being, so move it up!

Regularity helps. And absence can make the heart forget. Strive for reasonably regular contact with the people who mean the most to you. Some people set up regular meetings, like a weekly squash game or a monthly lunch.

Open up. When talking about topics like movies, work, or local events, get a bit more personal about yourself. Briefly share your own feelings, opinions, or experiences. “*When I saw that it reminded me of how I felt when....*” Then give the other person a chance to open up a bit in turn. If they do, show interest and open up some more. If they don't, give it some time and do it again. Gradually you may find that the relationship gets stronger.

___ **Allow closeness without pushing it.** Friendships are voluntary. But friends are so valuable that it can be tempting to grab hold of them. This usually has the effect of driving them off. Getting together, talking about personal matters, and having fun all work better if they come from an open invitation rather than a sense of obligation.

___ **Intimacy equals vulnerability.** Being open with someone takes trust and a sense of safety. Express your acceptance of friends as they are. Acknowledge differences without pushing them to change to suit you. Allow them to be themselves, and let go of the temptation to try to make them think or act the way you do.

___ **No bumping.** It can be easy to forget about friends when you develop a new relationship or go through a stressful time. Although you may want to scale back some social commitments occasionally, maintain reasonably regular contact with your friends.

___ **Combine activities.** In a busy life it can be hard to find time for friends. One way to manage this is to socialize and get something else done at the same time. If you have to go shopping for clothes, invite a friend to go with you. Exercise together. Carpool. Form a reading group. Some friends get together to buy groceries, work on home improvement projects, watch television, or do baking.

___ **Keep a wide focus.** One good friend can be a big help in your life, but one is seldom enough. Try to maintain your friendships with a number of people rather than spending all of your time with one person.



Checkpoint: Deepening Your Relationships

Go back to the Social Census for a moment. Circle the names of the people with whom you wish you had a closer relationship. This probably won't be everyone.

Complete the following form for at least two of the people you'd like to know better. Use extra paper if you'd like to try this with more people. Identify *who* the person is, approximately *how often* you see them, and *what* you usually do when you are together. Then try to come up with some ideas about how you could *improve* your relationship with them. This might involve seeing them more often, doing different activities (specify what they are), relating in a different way, or talking about certain issues. Be as specific as you can.

Who? _____ **How Often?** _____

What do you do now? _____

How to improve? _____

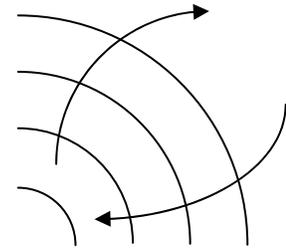
Who? _____ How Often? _____

What do you do now? _____

How to improve? _____

Reviving Old Friendships

A second way of increasing your social circle is to rebuild friendships from the past. Do you have any friendships that have lapsed? List here any old friends you haven't seen for a while.



These are people who used to be in your social network but have become less central recently. Perhaps you could bring them back in.

Why bother? If you were to interview 100 strangers, you probably wouldn't find too many that you would like to have as close friends. But you already know that you are compatible with your old friends. These people are hard to find!

Here are some reasons not to let them go:

- ◆ **Compatibility.** Your personal styles mesh to at least some degree (probably not perfectly, but we're hoping to give up on perfection, right?).
- ◆ **Intimacy.** It takes a while to get to know new people. The intimacy with old friends is already there.
- ◆ **History.** You have a shared past with old friends that gives you a basis for conversation and understanding.
- ◆ **Common interests.** You probably shared interests in certain activities before – perhaps you can pursue them together again.

Barriers to reconnecting with old friends

You may find that something holds you back from reconnecting with people who have drifted out of your life. Many of these barriers can be overcome. Consider the following (place a checkmark beside any that apply):

_____ **Distance.** Perhaps you or your friend have moved. Letters, phone calls, and email can still be rewarding ways of interacting with them.

_____ **Disagreements.** Some relationships end due to arguments. If this is true for you, think about what the friendship meant to you when it was going well. Then compare this with how important the issue was. You may discover that the disagreement wasn't worth losing the relationship over. Old disagreements, even major ones, can lose their heat over time.

_____ **Insecurity.** Reconnecting with old friends can raise a lot of doubts about yourself. Do they like you? Did they ever like you? Did they drift away because they weren't interested? Will you be imposing on them? These doubts are often misplaced. The only way you will really know the answer is by contacting them to see.

_____ **Abandonment.** Some friends drift away when you go through a difficult time in your life. It can be tempting to assume that they are just inconsiderate, or don't care. But often this drifting happens because the person having problems stopped accepting invitations or returning phone calls. The friend can mistakenly assume that *you* don't care about *them*, and give up on the friendship. There's only one way to know whether this has happened: talk to them and see. Many people are surprised to find out why the other person *really* stopped calling.

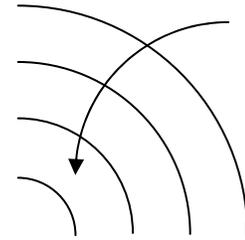
_____ **Insensitivity.** It can be tempting to let go of people who show insensitivity toward a major crisis in your life (such as depression). Unfortunately, this may account for almost everyone you know! It can help to try a bit of education with them using books and pamphlets. Eventually, though, it is usually worthwhile to keep them in your life and accept that they will never completely understand the issue. How well would *you* have understood the problem if you hadn't been through it?

It takes courage to call up an old friend but it is usually worth the effort. Consider how pleased you might be if they called you up out of the blue.

Take a glance back at your list of friends you haven't seen in a while. Are there one or two people you would like to contact? Who?

Starting New Friendships

Making new friends can be challenging but necessary – especially if your social network is too small for your liking. But how do you meet new people? You could just walk down the street and start talking to people, but that probably wouldn't work. Instead:



 **To meet new people, pursue another interest that will place you in contact with others.**

Which interest? Look back over your list of friends and acquaintances and try to remember how you met each one. Then think of the activities that you have enjoyed in the past or would like to try in the future. Is there any overlap between the two? Perhaps you met many of your best friends while hiking, and you would like to take up hiking again. Joining a hiking club will get you out and put you into contact with other people who share your interest.

Even if your favourite activities are solitary you can often make them social. If you like reading you could join a reading group. If you like photography you could take a class. Take a look at the box for some more suggestions.

How could you pursue one of your interests and meet people at the same time?

Where to meet people: Some ideas

Community centre activities
 Sporting clubs
 Night school courses
 Social clubs at work
 Volunteer work
 Religious attendance
 Internet interest groups
 Health clubs, gyms
 Political groups
 Social action groups
 Parties/events held by friends

Another way of meeting people is to look around at the faces that are already familiar to you. If there are people in your neighbourhood, at work, or elsewhere who are pleasant to you, who smile when they see you and seem willing to talk, they may be open to developing a friendship.

Are there any people in your life who seem open to you? Who?

What if you want a partner or a best friend?

Partners and best friends are very hard to find; acquaintances are easier. If your social life is too narrow, it is generally best to **look for acquaintances first**. Once you get to know them, some will become friends. And some of those may become close friends. You may also meet a lot of people through your acquaintances. This will increase your chances of finding a best friend or a partner.

Here are some more tips on meeting new people. Place a checkmark beside any that you think may be useful for you.

Take an active role. Don't wait for others to introduce themselves or break the ice. Mingle at parties and events. Have a few things in mind that you could talk about.

Consider your safety. Women on their own may need to take special care. Is this a setting that is safe for you to talk to strangers? Are there other people nearby?

Be yourself. You don't have to hide your true nature or be unusually clever or charming. Remind yourself that people respond better to warmth and genuineness than to attempts to impress.

Limit your expectations. Your goal should be to talk with a new person, not to find a soul-mate. Most of the people you meet will not become close friends, so avoid hoping for too much.

Build your confidence. Remind yourself that you are in control of the situation. If you don't like what is happening, you can always end the conversation.

Ask questions. People who ask about the other person are often felt to be the best conversationalists. It's also much easier than carrying the conversation all on your own.

Permit awkwardness. Meeting new people is often difficult. Accept this and try not to put yourself down if you stumble. Everyone looks awkward occasionally.

Reward yourself. Once you have spoken to someone new, remind yourself that you have just accomplished something that is difficult for most people. Be nice to yourself.



Additional Reading on Social Life

Antony, Martin M., & Swinson, Richard P. (2000). The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook: Proven Techniques for Overcoming Your Fears. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications. A book on overcoming social anxiety and becoming more comfortable around others.

McKay, Matthew, Davis, Martha, & Fanning, Patrick (1995). Messages: The Communication Skills Book, 2nd Ed. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications. An excellent guide to communicating effectively in relationships.

Creating A Support Team

Depression. Panic. Chronic illness. Bereavement. Caring for a seriously ill partner or relative. Sometimes having a good social life does not provide enough support for people with difficulties like these. A formal support network may be the answer. This is a group of people who know exactly what you are going through and who agree to help out in specific ways.

There are no rules for setting up a support network, but these suggestions may help:

- **Join an existing organization.** Formal support groups already exist for a variety of difficulties. Most crisis centres, health units, and mental health facilities have a local directory of such groups.
- **Build your own network.** Identify close friends and relatives that you would like to have as formal supporters. Decide exactly how you would like them to help. Some examples: regular baby-sitting to give you time to yourself, availability for emergency pet-sitting, weekly get-togethers to buy groceries and prepare food together, or long Sunday morning walks. Set limits on the size of your request, then ask.
- **Make it an exchange.** Some supporters are one-way, but more often the agreement is mutual. Say whether you are willing to be a supporter in return. Decide what you are willing and able to provide.
- **Have challenges in common.** It's a great idea to have at least one person in your support network who is going (or has gone) through the same thing as you. You will be able to share things with them that others might not understand.
- **Avoid relying on only one person for support.** You may need more than any one person can give, especially when things go particularly badly for you. It helps to have a larger network and to keep some limits on your demands of each person.
- **Keep up your own efforts.** Remind yourself that your support network can provide help, but they cannot take on the problem for you. You will have to do what you can to help yourself as well (exercising, eating, setting goals for yourself, and so on). Supports will drift away if they sense that they are working harder on your difficulty than you are.

Would you like to set up a support network for yourself? If so, which people in your life or which organization would you like to approach first?

What would you like from them? Be as specific as you can. _____

Social Balancing

Most social relationships have a balance between one person and the other; between giving and receiving. You give by listening to others, helping them out, and showing an interest in their lives. You receive by having them listen, asking for help and advice, and including others in the events of your life.



When you go through a difficult period in your life, this balance can be upset. Sometimes you may want to ignore the pain you are in, so instead you focus entirely on the other person. You say nothing about yourself. If the other person asks, you just say “*I’m fine*” and quickly move the conversation back to them.

At other times the pain you experience may be too great to ignore. As a result, you find it difficult to focus on the other person. Your conversation shifts toward yourself and what you are experiencing. You may find it hard to talk about anything other than your own problems.

Neither of these patterns is shameful or wrong. Both are normal responses to emotional pain. Unfortunately, they can have a negative effect on friendships. When you constantly shift the focus onto the other person they can feel shut out of your life. If you focus only on yourself they can feel that their own lives don’t matter to you.

How do you think your own social balance has been over the last while? Mark the line.



If your social interaction has been away from the middle for the last while, this may be understandable. You may wish, however, to get a bit more balance into your relationships. It is this sense of balance, or give and take, that many people value in their social lives – much more than how witty or fascinating their friends may be. The table below gives some suggestions. Place a checkmark beside any that you would like to work on in your relationships.

More about me

- Describe how you have been feeling
- Ask for feedback
- Describe positive things in your life
- Admit to difficulties
- Ask for help with something
- Host the person at your home
- Relate events to your past experiences

More about them

- Listen with interest
- Offer information to help reach a goal
- Invite them to an enjoyable activity
- Offer transportation, childcare, etc.
- Teach a person how to do something
- Provide companionship
- Help the person complete a task
- Express your interest or affection

Assertive Communication

"I was raised to be 'nice.' Which is fine, I guess, except that 'nice' meant never saying what you wanted, never saying 'no,' and never having an opinion different from anyone else. I thought the only way to be assertive was to yell and get red in the face. It took a while to learn that I could be honest, be myself, and still be considered 'nice.'"

Assertive communication means more than just being able to voice your complaints. It allows you to express respect and care for yourself and others. It means being able to say what you want to say when it is time to say it, and feeling fine doing so. Whether you want to express affection or annoyance, assertiveness skills are useful.

What does it mean to be assertive? The table below compares the assertive, passive, and aggressive communication styles. For each row, place a checkmark in the box that describes you best. When you are done, see which column has the most checkmarks.

	Passive	Aggressive	Assertive
Actions	Keep quiet. Don't say what you feel, need, or want. Put yourself down frequently. Apologize when you express yourself. Deny that you disagree with others or feel differently.	Express your feelings and wants as though any other view is unreasonable or stupid. Dismiss, ignore, or insult the needs, wants, and opinions of others.	Express your needs, wants, and feelings directly and honestly. Don't assume you are correct or that everyone will feel the same way. Allow others to hold other views without dismissing them.
Posture	Make yourself small. Look down, hunch your shoulders, avoid eye contact.	Make yourself large and threatening. Eye contact is fixed and penetrating.	Body is relaxed, movements are casual. Eye contact is frequent but not glaring.
Attitude	Others' needs are more important than yours. They have rights, you don't. Their contributions are valuable. Yours are worthless.	Your needs are more important and more justified than theirs. You have rights, they don't. Your contributions are valuable. Theirs are silly, wrong, or worthless.	Your needs and theirs are equally important. You have equal rights to express yourselves. You both have something valuable to contribute.
Feelings	Fear of being rejected. Helpless, frustrated, and angry. Resentful toward others who 'use' you. Your self-respect may suffer.	Angry or powerful at the time and victorious when you win. Afterwards: remorse, guilt, or self-hatred for hurting others.	You feel positive about yourself and the way you treat others. Self-esteem rises.
Goal	Avoid conflict. Please others at any expense to yourself. Give others control over you.	Win at any expense to others. Get control over them.	Both you and others keep your self-respect. Express yourself without having to 'win' all the time. No one controls anyone else.

Key Points About Assertiveness

- ◆ **Assertiveness is a skill, not a personality type.** Some people feel that they can't be assertive because it's not their style. But assertiveness is a *skill*, not a personality trait. Like any new skill it feels awkward for the first while. Gradually it becomes more comfortable as you get better at it. Just as it takes time to learn to ride a bicycle, it takes time to become more assertive.
- ◆ **Assertiveness is about controlling your own behaviour, not that of others.** Many people believe that assertiveness is all about controlling others. But more often it is about letting others behave as they like and controlling ourselves instead. For example, rather than trying to make your teenaged son put gas in the car when he borrows it, which puts you in a helpless position, you can say that you will be happy to hand him the keys (this is your behaviour, so you are in a stronger position), provided he fills it up once a week. He is free to use the car and not fill it up, but then you will choose not to loan him the keys. You make it clear what you will do, and then let the other person do as they please once they have that information.
- ◆ **Start easy.** Perhaps there is one person in your life who is especially difficult to be assertive with. If so, don't start practicing assertiveness with them. Start with people who are a bit less threatening. As you get better at assertiveness, you can take on more and more difficult situations. Save the hardest person for last.
- ◆ **It's not necessary to be assertive all the time.** Some situations call for more assertiveness than others. When you are at a kindly relative's home you might accept a poured cup of tea even after you have said you don't wish one. And when you are alone with someone you know to be violent it may not be safe for you to be assertive. But when you are safe and when the issue is important to you, assertiveness generally leads to better results than the alternatives.
- ◆ **Ask for time.** Some people think of the right thing to say after the discussion is over. They get talked into things and then kick themselves later. You have the right to delay your answers. If you realize during a discussion that you would like to be more assertive but can't think of what to say, ask for time. Use phrases like "*I can't answer that right now,*" or "*I'll let you know next Tuesday.*" This will give you the time you need to think the situation through. As assertiveness becomes a habit, you will get faster at coming up with the responses you want.
- ◆ **Assertiveness equals openness.** Assertiveness is not just for conflict situations. Being assertive means being more open and genuine, and being willing and able to share and express your inner feelings and ideas. The more you feel free to be yourself, the less tension there will be in your ongoing relationships. Being assertive in close or intimate relationships opens communication channels.

Assertiveness Skills in Practice

Here are some of the most important things to remember when you are in a situation that calls for assertive communication. Rate the difficulty that you experience with each strategy in the space beside it.

- E = Easy for me to do.
- M = Moderately difficult for me.
- D = Difficult or impossible for me.

- _____ **Use body language effectively.** Your message depends on *how* you say it as much as what you say. Make eye contact. Relax your hands and face. Use a firm, warm voice and speak up clearly.

- _____ **Find out what's really going on.** Many disagreements are based on misunderstandings: You are guessing what they are thinking, and they are guessing what you are thinking, and both of you are getting it wrong. In order to get to a resolution, you have to be talking about the same thing. Describe the situation as you see it, and ask others to describe it as they see it.

- _____ **Be honest about your opinion.** Use the word "*I*" to make sure people understand this is your opinion. State it clearly without making it sound like any other position is stupid or worthless. "*I think....*"

- _____ **Express how you feel.** Your feelings are an important consideration in many decisions. Be clear about your feelings and take responsibility for them. "*When I don't get consulted before travel plans are made, I feel frustrated and ignored.*" Avoid assigning blame ("*You make me feel...*").

- _____ **Be clear about what you want.** What you want may seem perfectly clear and reasonable to you, but it may be very unclear to others. State your preferences as precisely as you can. Where possible, focus on observable behaviour rather than attitudes. For example, "*I'd like you to respect me*" is unclear and likely to get you into an argument that will go nowhere. "*When I say I don't want to do something, I'd like you to stop asking*" is clearer and more specific.

- _____ **Find out what others want from you.** Just as they won't know what you want until you tell them, you often won't know exactly what they want. Actively seek this information. Don't assume anything. Maybe it's not as much as you think.

- _____ **Don't try to win.** Winning every battle is not the goal of assertiveness. Don't try to crush your opponent with your logic or gloat over their failings. You may win the battle, but lose the relationship! Remember that you have the right to decide what you will and will not do. They have the right to decide what they will and will not do. Try to work together to come up with a solution that both of you can live with.



The Assertiveness Pitfall

After reading about assertive communication, you may decide that you would like to use the assertive style more often and the passive or aggressive styles less often. This is an appropriate goal for most people. But keep this in mind:



When you start being assertive with someone, things usually get worse before they get better.

Consider an example. Imagine that you have a coworker who constantly gives you some of his own work to do. One day you tell him that from now on you will be unwilling to do his work. What happens? He will probably try to push his work onto you even harder than he did before. Giving in under this pressure is a bad idea. You would be saying, *“Look, if I ever tell you what I will or won’t do, get really pushy and I’ll give in.”* Bad message. Instead, if you stick to your new rule, he will eventually give up and stop pushing.

Another example: Your daughter insists on staying up watching television after her bedtime. You become assertive and tell her *“If you are not in bed by your bedtime, I will turn the television off and you will not be able to watch TV the next night.”* At first your daughter may not believe you, and may respond with outrage if you follow through. If you are able to keep to this new plan, however, she will likely adapt to the new rule and abide by it.

So: Some guidelines...

- ◆ **Only set barriers that you are willing and able to defend.** If you make threats that you can’t keep (I’ll quit this job, leave you, ground you for a year, never speak to you again, etc.), people will not take your attempts to be assertive seriously.
- ◆ **Don’t start getting assertive when you are strained to the limit.** Remember that the relationship will get even tougher for a while. Pick a time when you have the strength to handle the pressure.
- ◆ **Don’t back down.** When you set the barrier and the other person begins pushing against it, be prepared to keep to the rule. Otherwise they will push harder the next time.
- ◆ **Don’t get assertive with everyone in your life at once.** You probably won’t be able to stand having all of your relationships becoming more difficult at once. Pick one person at a time.



Checkpoint: Assertiveness in action

Think back over your dealings with others this past week. Complete the following exercise for two of the interactions that you found difficult. Briefly describe the situation, then your reaction. Consult the descriptions of passive, aggressive, and assertive behaviour to see which best describes your response. For each passive or aggressive response, write down an assertive response that might have been better.

Situation: _____

What did you do? _____

Was this passive, aggressive, or assertive? _____

Alternative assertive response? _____

Situation: _____

What did you do? _____

Was this passive, aggressive, or assertive? _____

Alternative assertive response? _____

Are there any situations coming up this week that will require your assertiveness skills? In the space below describe the situation, the people involved, the outcome you would like, and the assertive strategy that you would like to use.



Further Reading on Assertiveness

Alberti, Robert, and Emmons, Michael (2001). Your Perfect Right: A guide to assertive living, 8th Ed. San Luis Obispo: Impact Publishers. An excellent treatment of the subject.

Paterson, Randy J. (2000). The Assertiveness Workbook: How to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships. Oakland CA: New Harbinger Publications. A workbook-style format, based on the Changeways Clinic assertiveness skills program.