

Honest Communication

How many times have you said, “It doesn’t matter”, when it does? How many times have you said “I’m fine”, when there is really so much you wanted to say? We don’t want to offend, so we end up not being completely honest.

Being assertive means honestly communicating your thoughts, feelings and needs to others in appropriate ways and acknowledges both the way you say something as well as when you say it. It does not mean being aggressive: that is what happens when a problem situation has been allowed to persist and build up.

There are three ways of responding to situations: being passive, being aggressive and being assertive.

Example

After queuing for 20 minutes in the bank, a person joins the queue ahead of you. There are three options:

- Passive: Say nothing - just get more and more annoyed.
- Aggressive: “What makes you think you’re so important you can shove your way ahead of us? Get to the back of the queue where you belong!”
- Assertive: “Excuse me, we have all been in this line for over 15 minutes, I am also in a hurry. The end of the queue is back there and I am next in line.”

The DESC approach

1. **DESCRIBE** THE BEHAVIOUR THAT IS CONCERNING YOU OBJECTIVELY
2. **EXPRESS** HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT IT
3. **SPECIFY** THE BEHAVIOUR YOU WANT
4. **STATE** THE **CONSEQUENCES**



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Helpful hints

- Timing is important – say what you want to say when it is an issue, but consider whether the other person is best able to receive the information
- Always start with a positive comment if you can. Most people immediately go on the defensive (and stop listening) if you start on a negative or critical note
- Be mindful of what you are saying*
- Describe behaviour in neutral terms – avoid emotionally loaded words like “appalling, disgraceful”
- Feelings should be expressed as ‘I’, not ‘you’. Keep it simple
- Specify what changes you want rather than negatives or criticisms (avoid statements like “I wish you’d be more considerate”)
- Consequences can be negative or positive, be positive wherever possible. Negative consequences are often threats
- Avoid statements that are impossible or unenforceable

*The following Patient Handouts may be helpful: Mindfulness in Everyday Life, Dealing with Anger and Irritability

Example

Anne finds that her boss often asks her to complete tasks without giving her sufficient instructions, then gets angry that she hasn’t done the task correctly.

1. DESCRIBE THE BEHAVIOUR THAT IS CONCERNING YOU OBJECTIVELY

Phil, I enjoy working with you but I want to raise a specific issue. Three times over the last month, you have given me jobs to do when there have been pressing deadlines and insufficient information about the requirements for the task. You have later complained about the end result.

2. EXPRESS HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT IT

When you do that, I feel frustrated that I can’t produce my best work and angry that there is insufficient time to discuss what is required. By the end of those days, I’m exhausted.

3. SPECIFY THE BEHAVIOUR YOU WANT

I would like to put some time aside to work out a better system. I need to understand what the problems are when jobs arrive suddenly. We also need to work out a mechanism for communicating when we’re both stressed so that we understand each other.

4. STATE THE CONSEQUENCES

This will make us more efficient as well as improving the situation for both of us.

