|  |
| --- |
| **WHAT IS ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR?** |
| |  | | --- | | Between people as among nations, respect of  each other's right insures the peace.  **- *Benito Juarez*** |   Have you ever wondered how some people manage to be in perfect control of their lives? Their feelings, relationship, in fact their whole personality seems to be in perfect concord. They lead a full, interesting, free life, make their own decision, command the respect of others, and reflect an inner glow of contentment and self-worth. This is not to say that they are the models of perfection, or that they do not undergo any stress whatsoever, but invariably these individuals will have evolved some assertive ways of coping with people and situations without getting unduly anxious. They manage to do this, because they respect themselves, and value their personal judgements, opinions, wishes and needs and more important they recognise these rights in others as well.  **Definition** Behaviour which enables a person to act in his or her own best interest, to stand up for herself or himself, without undue anxiety, to express honest feeling comfortably, or to exercise personal rights without denying the rights of others, we call Assertive Behaviour.  Let us examine the element of that complex sentence in greater detail.  ***To act in one's own best interest*** *:* refers to the capacity to make life decisions (career, relationship, life style, time activities), to take initiative (start conversations, organize activities), to trust one's own judgment, to set goals and work to achieve them, to ask for help from others, to comfortably participate socially. ***To stand up for oneself:* i**ncludes such behaviours as saying `No', setting limits on one's time and energy, responding to criticism, or putdowns or anger, expressing or supporting or defending one's opinions. ***To express honest feelings comfortably*** *: means the ability to disagree, show anger, to show affection or friendship, to admit fear or anxiety, to express agreement, or support, to be spontaneous, all without painful anxiety.* ***To exercise personal rights:*** *relates to one's competency (as a citizen, or consumer, as a member of an organisation or school or work group, as a participant in public events) to express opinions, to work for change, to respond to violation of one's own rights, or those of others.* ***To not deny the rights of other:*** *is to accomplish the above personal expressions, without unfair criticism of others, without hurtful behaviour towards others, without name-calling,, without intimidation, without manipulation, without controlling others.*  *Thus, assertive behaviour is a positive self affirmation, which also values the other persons in your life.*  ***Barriers to Assertiveness*** What are some of the barriers to asserting oneself? Alberti and Emmons say, " . . . We have found while helping thousands of people to learn to express themselves more effectively, that there are three significant barriers to self assertiveness:   1. Many people do not believe that they have right to be assertive. 2. Many people are highly anxious/fearful about being assertive. 3. Many people lack the social skills for effective self expression.   However, research had shown that learning to make assertive responses will inhabit or weaken the anxiety previously experienced in specific interpersonal relations.  **Bill of Assertive Rights** Every one is born with unique potential and Free Will - to decide for themselves, to judge for themselves, make mistakes and learn from them, refuse requests, and say `I don't understand' or change one's mind. As children we had no doubt about these things. Most children are assertive - they know what their rights are and do not hesitate to express them - sometimes from child to adult, we rob ourselves and allow others (due to childhood training and false notions) to rob us of our rights. As a first step towards becoming assertive, we should become aware of our rights as an individual. The following table, Table, Table 3, gives the Bill of Assertive Rights. For those who believe that they do not have the right to lead a free, independent life, and still enjoy lasting and good interpersonal relationships, they would be advised to consider the following bill. Most individuals become very disillusioned about people and life in general, or their inability to have close and meaningful relationships and at the same time, retain their identity. The following table will help you to reaffirm your SELF as being of the greatest value!  **Table 3 : The Bill of Assertive Rights**   1. You have the right to be treated with respect and dignity. 2. You have the right to have and express your own feelings and opinions. 3. You have the right to be listened to and taken seriously. 4. You have the right to judge your own behaviour, thoughts and emotions, and to undertake the responsibility for their initiation, and consequences upon yourself. 5. You have the right to make mistakes and be responsible for them. 6. You have the right to say : "I don't know". 7. You have the right to say : " I don't understand." 8. You have the right to ask for information (including from professionals). 9. You have the right to change your mind. 10. You have the right to be independent to the goodwill of others before coping with them. 11. You have the right to get what you pay for. 12. You have the right to choose your profession. 13. You have the right to practise your own religion. 14. You have the right to ask for what you want (realising that the other person has the right to say `no'). 15. You have the right to acquire knowledge. 16. You have the right to say `No' without feeling guilty. You have the right to do anything so long as it does not violate the rights of others. You can add to this list too!   **Importance of Non Verbal Behaviour in Assertiveness** Another misconception among people is that in order to be assertive, you need to have a very good command of your language. Alberti and Emmons say: . . . Many people view assertiveness as a verbal behaviour, believing that they must have just the right words to handle a situation effectively. It is our experience that the manner in which you express an assertive message is a good deal more important than the exact words you use. Although popular with many assertiveness trainers, it has never been our style to offer scripts of "what to say when . . . " We are primarily concerned with encouraging honesty and directness, and much of that message is communicated **non-verbally.** People in our groups and workshops have enjoyed watching us role play a scene which makes this point clear : Bob is a dissatisfied customer who wishes to return a defective copy of "Everything you always wanted to know about Assertiveness, but were too timid to ask" to the bookstore. Mike is the clerk. Using essentially the same words, "I bought this book here last week, and discovered that 20 pages are missing. I'd like a good copy or my money back", Bob approaches Mike in three different ways :   1. Bob walks slowly and hesitatingly to the counter. His eyes are downcast at the floor, he speaks just above a whisper, his face looks as though it belongs on the cover of the book. He has a tight grip on the book. He has tight grip on the book, and a " tail-between-the-legs" posture; 2. Bob swaggers toward the counter, glares at Mike, addresses him in a voice heard all over store, Bob's posture and almost fistlike gesture are an obvious attempt to intimidate the clerk; 3. Bob walks up to the counter facing Mike. He stands relaxed and erect, smiles and looks directly at Mike with a friendly expression. In a conversational volume and tone of voice, he states the message, gesturing to point the flaw.   The three styles are over exaggerated, of course, but the point is clear. The non assertive, self defeating style says to Mike that this customer is a pushover, and the slightest resistance will cause him to give up and go away. The second approach may achieve the goal, of refund or exchange, but the aggressive Bob will leave with Mike's hostility directed at his back! With the assertive approach, Bob gets what he came for and Mike feels good about having helped solve a problem for an appreciative customer.  **Component of Assertive Behaviour** Very often, besides knowing the right words to say, **how we act**, and **how we say something** has an even greater impact.  ***You Body* :** Developing an assertive body image. Your body does communicate. Your style of emotional expression, posture, facial expressions and voice quality are all tremendously important to you in becoming assertive. How does one develop on assertive body image to make your body as well as your words communicate assertively?  *Your Inventory of Body image Components*. Methodically check yourself from head to toe, measuring yourself on a scale of Assertiveness.   1. ***Eye Contact* :** While addressing another person, where do you look? If you look directly at the person as you speak, it helps to communicate you sincerity and to increase the directness of your message. But if you look down or away much of the time, you present a lack of confidence. Women often have a problem of making eye contact with another person, because many of us have been taught that it is more feminine to look away or look down. In some cultures, like in India, it is considered disrespectful for women to make direct eye contact with men or authority figures. However, making relaxed eye contact is essential when you want to appear assertive and interested and shows respect for the other person. This does not mean staring continuously till the other person becomes uncomfortable. Look at their eyes, then perhaps look away for a few seconds, or drop your gaze slightly so that you are focussing on their mouth, as they speak to you. Practise making good eye contact and be aware of any differences in the quality of your communication. Are you listening better? Are you conveying more interest and receiving more interest in what you are saying? 2. ***Facial Expressions :*** Ever see someone trying to express anger while smiling or laughing ? It just doesn't come across. Effective assertion requires an expression that agrees with the message. Let your face say the same thing your words are saying. With a greater awareness of the feeling in your face, you can begin to more consciously control your facial expression to become more natural. 3. ***Body Posture :*** A significant increase in personalising the conversation, occurs from a slight turn of the torso, say 30 to 45 degrees towards the other person. Relative `power' may be noticed in an encounter. An obvious example of this is seen in the relationship between a tall adult and a small child; the adult who is thoughtful enough to bend to the child's height will find a considerable difference in the quality of communication. In a situation where you are called upon to stand up for yourself, it is useful to do just that - stand up! An active and erect posture lends additional assertiveness to your message, whereas a slumped, passive stance gives the other person an immediate advantage as does any tendency on your part to lean back or move away. 4. ***Gestures :*** A relaxed use of gestures can add depth or power to your message, and can suggest openness, self confidence and spontaneity on the part of the speaker. However, gesturing must not be erratic or nervous. 5. ***Voice, Tone, Inflection and Volume :*** The way we use our voices is a vital element in our communication. Consider at least three dimensions of your voice: 6. Tone : is it raspy, whiny, soft, angry? 7. inflection : do you speak in a monotone, or with sing-song effect, or emphasize certain syllables? 8. Volume : do you try to gain attention with a whisper, or overpower others with loudness, or is it very difficult for you to shout, even when you want to ? 9. ***Contents :*** What you say is of course important, but honesty and spontaneity of expression is much more important. This means saying, for example, "I am very angry with you" rather than " You are an S.O.B." or calling names or abusing people. People who hesitate because they don't know what to say, should make a  practice of saying *something*, to express their honest feelings at the time. It makes a great difference and adds to your assertiveness. Many authors speak of many other components such as fluency, timing, listening, distance/physical contact, even weight and physical appearance, as factors in developing assertiveness. Table 4 gives the non verbal and verbal behaviour associated with the three coping styles. See under which style you come.   **Reducing Anxiety and Promoting Relaxation** While facing threatening situations, many people (especially non assertive people) become anxious. Their anxiety immobilizes them and controls them. What happens to your body when you become anxious? Headaches, a "nervous stomach", asthma, and "dizzy spells" are common bodily indicators of anxiety. In more extreme forms, anxiety can be severe enough to cause ulcers, migraine headaches, and heart attack. In addition to physical discomfort, anxiety can also cause emotional discomfort, e.g. "cold feet", "clamming up." Learning to relax can combat anxiety. It can help you to feel more in control of your body. Relaxation can be achieved through Yoga, meditation, a walk, on deep muscle relaxation, a technique first developed by Jacobsen in 1938.  **Training yourself in deep muscle relaxation :** You can use this guide to train yourself in deep muscle relaxation. Choose a quiet, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed for half an hour. Go through relaxation while lying on the floor, a bed, or a reclining chair. Concentrate on the muscle groups given below in Table 5, one at a time in the order presented. Create tension in the muscles by tightening them for five seconds and then relaxing them. For each muscle group a method is described for creating tension and achieving relaxation. The first time you try it, go through the procedure for each muscle group twice. It is awkward to read the instructions while attempting to relax and it may be inconvenient to have someone read the instruction to you. We suggest that an ideal method is to use a commercial tape recording of relaxation instructions.  **Table 5 : Deep Muscle Relaxation**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Muscle** | **Tensing Method** | | Forehead | Wrinkle forehead. Try to make your eyebrows touch your hairline for 5 seconds. Relax. | | Eyes and nose | Close your eyes as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax. | | Lips, cheek, jaw | Draw corners of your mouth back and grimace for five seconds. Relax. Feel the calmness and warmth in your face. | | Hands | Extend arms in front of you, clench fists tightly for five seconds. Relax and feel the warmth and calmness in your hands. | | Forearms | Extend arms out against an invisible wall and push forward with hands for 5 seconds. Relax. | | Upper arms | Bends elbows. Tense biceps for five seconds. Relax, land feel the tension leave your arms. | | Shoulders | Shrug shoulders up to your ears for five seconds. Relax. | | Back | Arch your back off the floor or bed for five seconds. Relax. Feel the anxiety and tension disappearing. | | Stomach | Tighten your stomach muscles for five seconds. Relax. | | Hips, buttocks | Tighten buttocks for five seconds. Relax. | | Thighs | Tighten thigh muscles by pressing legs together as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax. | | Feet | Bend ankles toward your body as far as you can, for five seconds. Relax. | | Toes | Curl toes under as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax. |   **Techniques of Assertiveness**   |  | | --- | | God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change those I can, and wisdom to know the difference.  **- Anon.** |  1. ***Broken Record :*** or Persistence. One of the most important aspects of being verbally assertive is to be persistent and keep saying what you want over and over again without getting angry, irritated or loud. By practising to speak as if we were a broken record, we learn to be persistent and stick to the point of the discussion, to keep saying what we want to say, and to ignore all side issues brought up by the person we assert ourselves to. In using broken record, you are not deterred by anything the other person may say but keep saying in a calm, repetitive voice what you want to say until the other person accedes to your request or agrees to a compromise. 2. ***Free Information :*** In order to become an assertive communicator, in social setting, you must master two skills. First you have to practice listening to the clues other people give you about themselves. This free information give you something to talk about besides the weather, and avoids those awkward silences, when you ask yourself, "What do I say now?". In addition, it makes it easier for people to talk about themselves, when you show an interest in things important to them. The second skill is *self disclosure.* It involves disclosing information about yourself - how you think, feel and react to other person's free information. It allows the social communication to flow both ways. Eye contact is of great value here. 3. ***Fogging :*** This is a skill that teaches acceptance of manipulative criticism by calmly acknowledging to your critic the probability that there may be some truth in what he says, yet allow you to remain your own judge of what you do. It is a very effective skill for desensitising you to criticism and actually reducing the frequency of criticism from others. It rapidly sets up a psychological distance, boundary lines between you and the person you fog. But fogging should be used with *negative inquiry.* In negative inquiry, you do not respond to your critic's statements with denial, defensiveness, or countermanipulative criticism of your own. Instead, you break the manipulative cycle by actively prompting more information form the critical person in a low key, unemotional manner. 4. ***Negative Assertion :*** A skill that teaches acceptance of your errors, and faults without having to apologise by agreeing with hostile or constructive criticism of your negative qualities. It allows you to look more comfortably at negatives in your own behaviour or personality without feeling defensive and anxious or resorting to denial of real error, while at the same time reducing your critic's anger or hostility. 5. ***Workable Compromise :*** In using your verbal assertive skills, it is sometimes practical (when you feel that self-respect is not in question) to offer a workable compromise to the other person, or to cooperate when offered one.   **Evaluating Your Assertiveness**   |  | | --- | | **Arise, Awake, Know thyself !**  **- *Swami Vivekananda*** | |