

Effective communication

Communicating well is a skill that requires practise. Firstly, we need to gain clarity on our thoughts, feelings and desires and then we need to communicate this in a direct, open and honest way. This helps us manage our own emotions and behaviours and maintains good relationships with others. This is not always easy. How many times have you said “It doesn’t matter”, when really it does? How many times have you said “I’m fine”, when there was a lot you wanted to say?

THERE ARE FOUR STYLES OF COMMUNICATION:

1. Assertive communication involves standing up for your personal rights and expressing your thoughts, feelings and needs in a direct, honest and appropriate way that does not violate the rights of others.
2. Aggressive communication is when you express your rights in a direct but inappropriate manner that is at the expense of others and violates their rights.
3. Passive communication is behaviour that violates your own rights by not expressing honest thoughts and feelings or by doing so in such a manner that others disregard them.
4. Passive-aggressive communication is when you express your needs in an unclear and confusing manner and can often leave the other person feeling manipulated or frustrated.

Being assertive is one way to improve communication; reduce unpleasant feelings like stress, anxiety or resentment; improve self esteem; and increase your chances of getting what you want out of life. Assertive communication demonstrates that you value your own point of view and rights, while also respecting the opinions of others. Being assertive can be frightening and sometimes even painful. It doesn’t mean that you will get what you want; sometimes you will, sometimes you won’t, and other times you will come to a mutually agreeable compromise.

Decide what it is you want or feel, and keep your statements simple and brief. Here’s a basic formula many people have found helpful:

I feel...

When you...

Because...

I want/need...

It can be good to begin practicing this in situations where your emotions are not running too high. It is important to remember the non-verbal as well as the verbal messages you are conveying. Keep your voice calm, the volume normal, pace even, and maintain good eye contact. Also try to keep your physical tension low.

HELPFUL HINTS:

- Try to be mindful of what you are saying and how it might be perceived.
- Start with something positive. People often get quite defensive and can stop listening if you start on a negative or critical note.
- Describe behaviour in neutral terms – try to avoid using emotionally loaded words like “appalling” or “disgraceful”.
- When expressing your feelings, use “I” statements and try to keep it simple! Like “I disagree” instead of “You’re wrong”.
- Try to be clear about the changes you want and try not to be negative or critical. Avoid statements like “I wish you’d be more considerate”.
- When expressing consequences, be positive wherever possible. Negative consequences are often perceived as threats.
- Avoid statements that are impossible or unenforceable.
- Most importantly, say what you want to say when it is an issue. Leaving things after a problem has come up can lead to feelings building up and persisting for longer periods of time and can result in more aggressive responses.

The Project Air Strategy acknowledges the major support of NSW Health. The Project works with mental health clinicians, consumers and carers to deliver effective treatments, implements research strategies supporting scientific discoveries, and offers high quality training and education. Contact us at info-projectair@uow.edu.au or visit www.projectairstrategy.org