

**DEALING
WITH
DIFFICULT
SITUATIONS?**

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Everyone comes up against difficult people, demanding situations and disappointing circumstances in every area of life - including studying, work, house or flat sharing and friendships, the most common sites of conflict for students.

WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU FIND YOURSELF IN ONE OF THESE DIFFICULT SITUATIONS?

Doing nothing in the hope that the problem will just go away is worth a try, but this usually only postpones the problem. Also, the downside of this option is that resentment and anger can build up in you, you explode, and then you are perceived as the difficult person.

Talk to someone you can trust, either someone who is part of the situation or someone outside, like a counsellor. Friends and family back home can also be helpful. The very helpful thing about talking to someone else is that you can get a reality check - is this person really being difficult or is there something about them or the situation that is pushing one or more of your buttons? That is, you are responding as if to previous conflicts in a way that is not appropriate for now? That bossy house mate is not your mother, sister, father, brother, your old teacher or your ex.

If you are away from home for the first time, you may also be living for the first time with people who are different in every way from the people you grew up with, and it can be very uncomfortable to have basic assumptions about everyday living challenged. Can it really be that others do... or never?

You've looked at the situation thoughtfully and decided there is really something that needs addressing. This means someone needs addressing, and the best way to start is by talking to them on their own. And not when you've just had a confrontation!

Decide what you want to get across during the conversation and what action you want to come out of this talk, but make absolutely sure that you give the other person the chance to get their point of view across too.*

Understand that you may not get everything you want, but know what is the minimum that is acceptable to you (for example, politeness or consideration for your feelings). If this doesn't work, arrange another meeting, with a 'referee' that you both trust, who can keep you both on track and cool things down if necessary. You might prefer to write a letter to the person concerned.

If things turn more serious, and enter the realm of harassment, bullying or victimisation, then you have to turn more serious too. Keep records detailing witnesses, times, dates and a full description of events and ask for help from the **Students' Union**.

KEEPING CALM UNDER PRESSURE

TOP
TIPS

1 Walk away

You do not have to stay and explode. You can talk later when you have calmed down and thought about what you have to say.

2 Walk away in your head

If you cannot walk away physically visualise a real or imaginary place that is safe and peaceful for you. Do this for 10 seconds or more.

3 Breathe deeply

Slowly and steadily. This will calm you down.

4 Count under your breath

Before speaking. This gives you time to calm down and think about what you want to say before you react. The higher the number the more time you get.

5 Act calmly

Speak quietly, relax your body and suggest that you talk about it later.

6 Talk yourself down

Tell yourself - stay cool, calm down, easy does it. Remind yourself that you can stay in control and that getting angry doesn't resolve anything.

7 Adjust your thinking

Remind yourself that the other person may not be trying to make you angry or obstruct you, and may not mean you any harm. They simply have different needs and feelings from you in the situation.

8 Be assertive

Tell the other person clearly, calmly and in a way that is not aggressive how you are feeling and what you want in the situation. By doing this you are taking control of yourself and your anger and are less likely to explode or get violent.

When you feel you are about to blow your top, remember - It is okay to feel angry, but you do NOT have to act on it.

HOW TO BE ASSERTIVE

Most people find it difficult to be assertive at one time or another but some of us find it very hard to assert ourselves even when we really want to.

In this leaflet we will look at some of the underlying assumptions about self-assertion and also think about some techniques which can be practised and which will help you to be more assertive in your daily dealings with other people.

A COMMON FALSE ASSUMPTION

Many people wrongly believe that being assertive is the same as being aggressive. Nothing could be further from the truth. If we look at the assumptions underlying the two kinds of behaviour it will help us understand a great deal about the difference between self-assertion and aggression.

AGGRESSION

The underlying feeling when we are being aggressive is one of insecurity ('I am not ok') - this feeling of insecurity is covered over with aggression. The person who is being aggressive is feeling pretty insecure but pretends he or she is not ('I am not ok but I pretend I am ok'). He/she sets out to intimidate. The other person is made to feel inferior and because of this the aggressive person may achieve what they want, but they will do so at the expense of the other person and will thus create bad-feeling. This is not good either in personal relationships or in any kind of professional relationship.

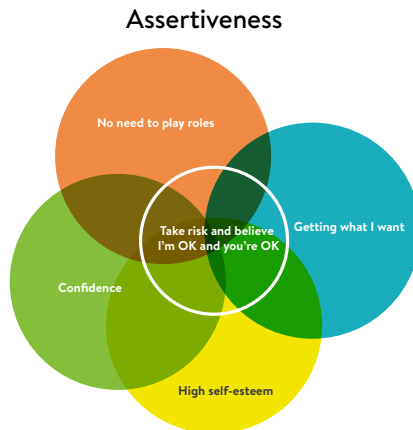
Here is a diagram of the underlying feelings in aggressive behaviour



ASSERTION

The underlying assumption here is that the other person is a reasonable person and that I, too, am a reasonable person and that if I state my case clearly and in a reasonable and respectful manner then the other person will respond in a similarly reasonable manner. With this attitude I will probably get what I want and the other person will be pleased to have been treated in a respectful way. The trick here, if you are feeling frightened of being assertive, is to take the risk, say to yourself, 'I have a right to make this statement and I expect the other person will respect my right.' (Take a risk and believe 'I am ok' and say to yourself 'and you are ok too').

Here is a diagram of the underlying feelings in assertive behaviour

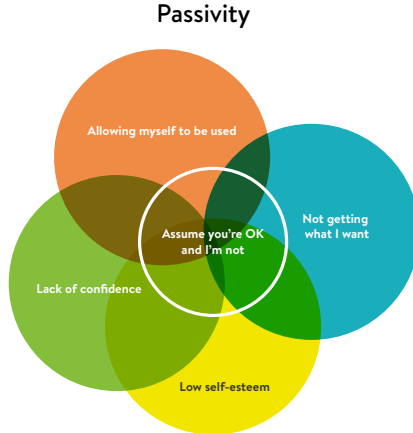


A COMMON MISTAKE

A common mistake in people who fear being assertive is to allow themselves to be used - to be passive. To allow the other person always to get what they want. The underlying assumption here is that the other person 'is ok' and has a right to whatever it is they want, but that I am nobody - I am not someone with any rights - 'I am not ok'. With this way of thinking, the other person gets what they want, but they do not respect you because you have not respected yourself. Mutual respect comes from each person respecting themselves, understanding that they have a right to assert

what they want, (if it is not at the other person's expense) and that the other person has an equal right to discuss the issue and to assert their point of view. This is where negotiation comes in. We will come to that after learning some self-assertion techniques.

Here is a diagram of the underlying assumptions in passive behaviour



TECHNIQUES IN LEARNING TO BE ASSERTIVE

First of all learn and practise experiencing the difference between Passivity, Aggression and Assertion. Here is an exercise which will help you feel the difference between passive behaviour, aggressive behaviour and assertive behaviour.

With a friend, think of an example of a difficult or compromising human situation and then practise responding firstly in a passive way, then in an aggressive way, and finally in an assertive way. Here is an example:

You are standing in a long queue at the cinema. When you are near the front an acquaintance from college approaches you and asks you to buy tickets for her.

Your reply:

Passive

Aggressive

Assertive





Here are some other examples of difficult situations. Practise responding first in a passive way, then in an aggressive way and finally in an assertive way.

You have a brand new expensive bike. Someone you don't know very well asks you if they can borrow it. What would you reply?

Passive

Aggressive.....

Assertive

You are in a seminar with someone who addresses the men by their names but who calls the women 'dear' when calling upon them to make a response. How would you respond to this situation?

Passive

Aggressive.....

Assertive

You have been working jointly on a project with another student. That person suddenly says they have to go and do something else and asks you to finish the project on your own. What is your response?

Passive

Aggressive.....

Assertive

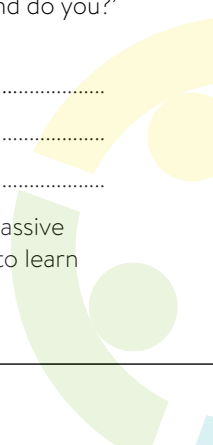
The person next to you is chain-smoking which you find annoying. That person is about to light up another cigarette and turns to you and says 'You don't mind do you?' What do your reply?

Passive

Aggressive.....

Assertive

Once you have yourself experienced practising the difference between a passive response, an aggressive response and an assertive response you are ready to learn some useful techniques which will help you make an assertive response.



TECHNIQUE 1

THE THREE STAGE MESSAGE

Use this technique when you want to negotiate a specific change in somebody's behaviour - particularly if you find them uncooperative or intimidating.

- 1 Begin by owning your own thoughts and find words to express them.

Make an 'I'... statement, rather than a 'you' statement. A 'you' statement provokes defensiveness and aggression. For example: 'I feel tired and I want to spend some time on my own' is more assertive than: 'you are invading my privacy'.

- 2 Identify the behaviour you find unacceptable. Be very specific. 'When you get angry with me', or 'when you start throwing your weight about' is too vague and sounds insulting. Think what it is that really gets you - the shouting, a gesture? Think this out in advance and state the effect the behaviour has on you. The more specific you can be, the less likely it is the other person will take offence: e.g. 'When you wag your finger at me ...'

Ask for the change you want.

Examples:

- 'I feel like a child when you wag your finger at me. I would like you to keep your hands still.'
- 'I couldn't sleep last night because of your music. Please could you not play music after 11pm?'

Even if the person is not prepared to fit in, you may well find that you're having drawn attention to it very specifically will reduce it.

Think of an example in which you would like a change in someone's behaviour and practise the Three Stage Message.

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TECHNIQUE 2

THE RECORDED ANNOUNCEMENT TECHNIQUE IN ACTION

This is a very useful technique. It enables you not to get distracted - to keep your focus. It helps you not to get caught on:

- Manipulative bait
- Irrelevant logic
- Argument

Here is an example of how the Recorded Announcement technique might work: You might try role playing this dialogue with a friend and take turns playing the two parts.

Ann comes up to the cheese counter in a shop and says:

Ann: I bought this cheese today. When I opened it I found it was mouldy. I want my money back please.

Shopkeeper: (using irrelevant logic) Nothing to do with me I wasn't serving.

Ann: I bought it at this counter, it is inedible and I want my money back please.

Shopkeeper: (argument) That sort of cheese is meant to be mouldy.

Ann: I know what kind of cheese I buy. This is bad and I want my money back please.

Shopkeeper: (using manipulative bait) Look there's a queue of people waiting behind you. It is not fair that they have to wait.

Ann: I can see there is a queue, but I bought this cheese today. It is inedible and I want my money back please.

Shopkeeper: (Seeing she has been cornered) Oh, all right! How much was it then?

Practise the Recorded Announcement Technique with an example of your own.

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TECHNIQUE 3

NEGOTIATION

When you negotiate you make use of both the above techniques i.e. The Three Stage Message - (taking ownership of your own thoughts and feelings, identifying what you want clearly and then asking for the change you want) - and The Recorded Announcement Technique - repeating the desired outcome.

When you are negotiating:

- 1 State your case in as few words as possible. (The Three Stage Message).
- 2 Listen to the other person and acknowledge what they say. Try to understand what it feels like to be in their shoes.
- 3 In the face of aggression or strong opposition, keep calm and repeat your statement in the same words. (The Recorded Announcement Technique).
- 4 If there is a sense that you are both behaving assertively, negotiation should come easily. Assertive statements and responsive listening lead to this.

Here is an example. Sally has decided to drop out of a Choir tour because she and her boyfriend have split up and she prefers not to go on tour. She goes to speak to the Director of Music about her decision.

Sally: Thanks for meeting with me. I suppose you've heard I've broken up with John. I hope you'll understand that I have changed my mind about going on the choir tour.

Director of Music: I heard you two had broken up but surely you can still come on the tour. You are both such valuable members.

Sally: I can see that you are really disappointed about my decision not to come and I am really sorry to let you and the choir down. But I feel that I really cannot commit to the tour.

Director of Music: I was depending on you, you know, Sally.

Sally: I can see that you are really annoyed and angry about this. But I have thought it through carefully. I am really sorry but I cannot commit to the tour. But of course I will be there on Sundays and weekday practices.





Director of Music: And the Festival concert?

Sally: Yes, I'll commit to that.

Director of Music: OK. I guess I've got some keen reserves who would like to do the tour. Thanks for being straight with me.

Think of a situation in which you have had to present someone with a decision you have made and in which you might have used negotiation skills such as those demonstrated above. Or think of a fictional example where you need to negotiate with another person.

Set up a dialogue in which you role-play the situation bearing in mind the four points made above.

**If the other person raises a distracting side issue, acknowledge it, without being deflected from your purpose. Say something like: 'We can talk about that as soon as we settle this.'*

If the other person does not seem to be hearing or understanding, ask them to repeat back what you have said. Say something like: 'What do you think I am asking you to do?'

**Even if compromise cannot be reached, at the very least state your feeling about the situation. You may both feel justifiable anger. In such cases don't forget to congratulate yourself on your courageous effort, because it can easily be overshadowed by the disappointment of not getting what you want.*

Role play with a friend an example of negotiation

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ASSERTIVENESS MEANS

- 1 Respecting myself, that is who I am and what I do.
- 2 Taking responsibility for myself, that is for how I feel and what I think and do. For example, “I feel angry when you put me down” is more assertive than “You make me feel angry when you put me down”.
- 3 Recognising my own needs and wants independently of others, that is separate from what is expected of me in particular roles, such as ‘wife’, ‘husband’, ‘lover’, ‘daughter’, ‘son’.
- 4 Making clear the “I” statement about how I feel and what I think. For example, “I feel very uncomfortable about this decision”. “I think that it is a good idea to draw up a plan of action”.
- 5 Allowing myself to make mistakes, that is recognising that sometimes I will make a mistake and that it is OK to make mistakes.
- 6 Allowing myself to enjoy my successes, that is validating myself and what I have done and sharing it with others.
- 7 Changing my mind, if and when I choose to.
- 8 Asking for “Thinking it over” time. For example when people ask me to do something and I need time to consider whether or not to do it, “I would like to think it over and I will let you know my decision by, say, the end of the week”.
- 9 Asking for what I want rather than hoping someone will notice what I want and moaning later that I didn’t get what I wanted.
- 10 Setting clear boundaries. For example, “I know that you would like me to visit you, and thank you for inviting me. I am, however, unable to come this weekend and would like to visit you later in the year”.
- 11 Recognising that I have a responsibility towards others, rather than being responsible for others. As adults we have responsibility for and towards our children which is different from having responsibility towards each other as adults.
- 12 Respecting other people and their right to be assertive.





OTHER SOURCES OF HELP

Birch, C., Asserting Yourself

Lindenfield, G., Assert Yourself

Rosenberg, M. B., Nonviolent Communication

Berne, E., Games People Play




RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are central to our lives. If you think about it for a moment we are all in a relationship of some kind with other people from the moment we are born. It follows that relationships of all kinds are of great importance, and indeed help to shape and develop our own personalities. Problems with relationships arise for most people at some time in their lives and this is one of the most common areas of life that people come to counselling about.

Just getting on with your house mates or the people you work with can be difficult or stressful at times. However, probably the most important of our relationships are with our family or the intimate relationship with a partner or valued friend. These can be a great source of love, pleasure, support and excitement. However, they can be a source of grief and anguish if they go wrong.

The issue is made more relevant for students by the fact that most people in a university are in a period of personal change, which can make them feel less sure of what they want or how they can expect others to react. There is, of course, no exact fail-safe recipe for getting it right, but there are some areas common to most relationships that it is helpful to consider.

- **Acceptance of difference** Generally speaking, people in successful relationships do not try to force the other to be exactly like them; they work to accept difference even when it is profound. Cultural and religious beliefs, especially if strongly held, are two areas which can cause tension, and this can extend to the families of the individuals concerned.
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- **Capacity for boundaries** It is easy enough to see that people are separate individuals physically, or in their area of study for instance. Sometimes though, we can forget that it is unrealistic to expect others to think as we do, be able to solve all our problems or meet all our needs. We are not “joined at the hip” as the phrase has it.
- **Operating mainly in the present** Once relationships focus on repeatedly picking over past events, or else are based only on the hope that things will be better in the future (ignoring how unsatisfactory things are now), they tend to go off the rails.
- **Respect for individual choice** Try and accept that each person has the right to decide their own direction in life; the relationship then adapts to follow this.
- **Skill in negotiating** Where interests diverge, good listening to the other, and clarity about what is important to you will help you to work out a way to settle differences in opinion or fulfil different goals.
- **Sharing Positive feelings** An important point! Don't only communicate when you have a grouse. Let your family members, friends and partner know they are important to you. Nobody likes being taken for granted.

If we have become overanxious about our relationships this may be because we have lost our own self-respect and sense of our personal worth; it may be because we have had unfortunate experiences in past relationships and so have temporarily lost our ability to trust. It could help to think things through with a sympathetic and unconnected person who will not tell you what to do but help you to clarify your situation and find your own way through.



OTHER SOURCES OF HELP

Books

- W. Dryden & J Gordon, How to Cope with Difficult Parents
- R. Skinner & J. Cleese, Families and How to Survive Them
- J. Trollope, Other People's Children
- H. Lerner, The Dance of Intimacy
- H. Lerner, The Dance of Anger
- M Beattie, Codependent No More
- Dickson, The Mirror Within
- A Dickson, A Woman in Your Own Right
- R. Norwood, Women who Love too Much

CONTACT US

To contact the **Students' Union Advice Service:**

Email london.advice@angliastudent.com

Visit angliastudent.com/london/advice

To contact the **ARU London Wellbeing Department:**

Email studentwellbeing@london.aru.ac.uk

Visit london.aru.ac.uk/student-life/student-support/student-wellbeing

