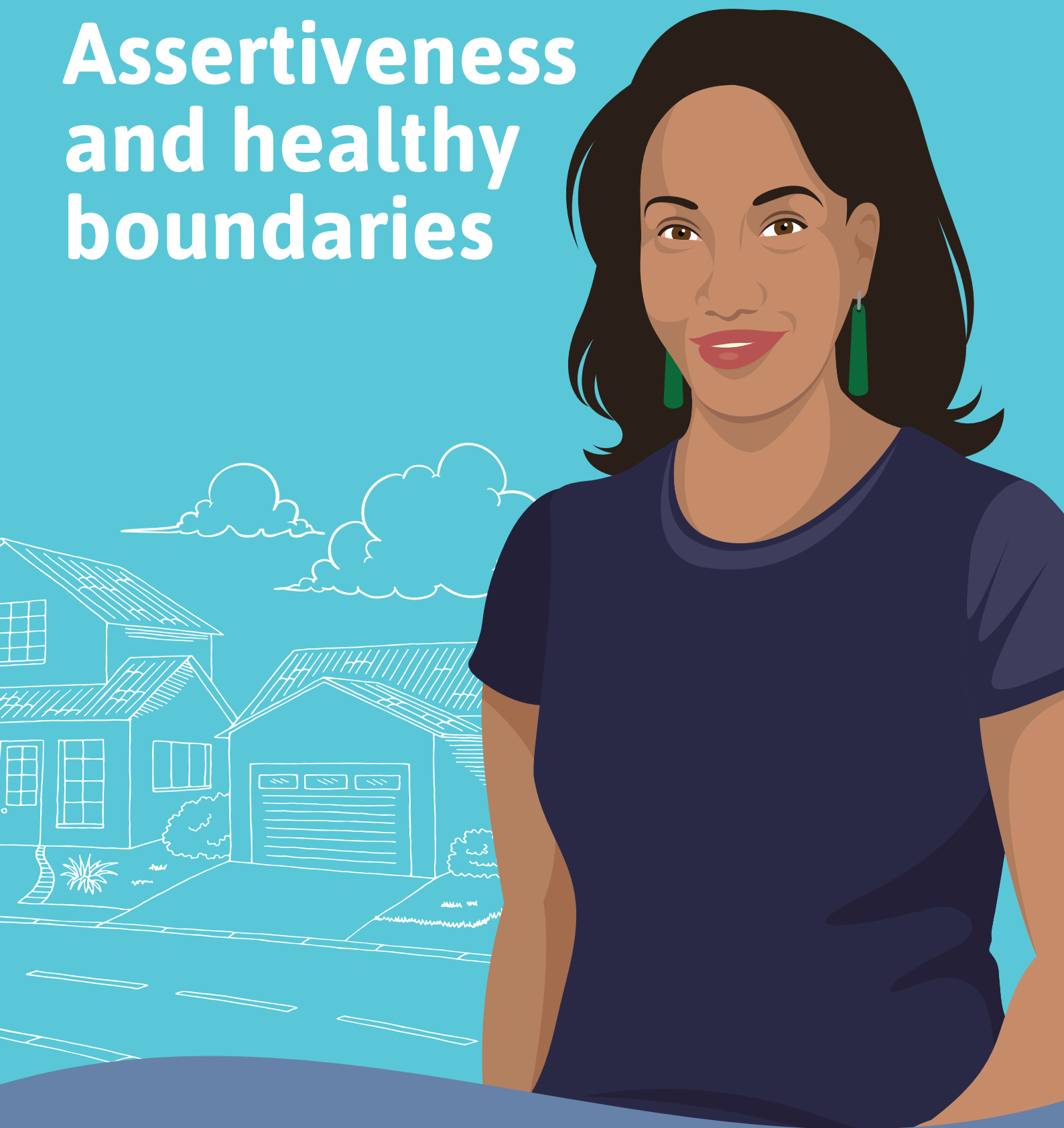


Assertiveness and healthy boundaries



Introduction

Kia ora! This resource introduces you to assertive communication skills. This is a form of communicating with others that respects their needs and rights, as well as your own. Assertiveness is an important communication skill that helps us be more independent, and more responsible for ourselves and our emotions. Everyone benefits from learning about assertive communication, but this can be really important for people who are experiencing low moods and high anxiety.

Relationships and communication can be major sources of stress. Assertive communication helps you better express your needs and opinions, which can then help you have less frustration and conflict in your relationships.

1. Styles of communication

There are three main styles of communicating with others:

- passive communication
- aggressive communication
- assertive communication

It can help to see these styles on a continuum. At one end is aggressive communication, where you get your needs met while ignoring the needs of others. This puts your relationships at risk.

At the other end is passive communication, where you ignore your own needs in order to meet the needs of others. This can lead you to feel resentful of others and angry at yourself.

In the middle is assertive communication, where you are able to get your needs met, while respecting the needs of others. This often enhances relationships.

Another style of communication is passive-aggressive. This is when you are essentially being aggressive but in an indirect way - for example, sulking or slamming a door.



Learning a more assertive style of communication can help you to manage more effectively manage difficulties in relationships. This doesn't mean that you choose to be assertive in every situation. There will be times when being passive- such as walking away from a physical fight, or being aggressive - such as yelling when you are in danger, is a better response to the situation.

Let's review the typical beliefs, behaviours, and outcomes associated with the three main styles of communication:

Style	Beliefs	Behaviour	Outcome
Passive	<p>I don't count.</p> <p>My feelings aren't as important as yours.</p> <p>My opinion isn't valid.</p>	<p>Doesn't express opinions.</p> <p>Relies on others' choices.</p> <p>Apologises unnecessarily.</p> <p>Ignores own feelings.</p>	<p>Doesn't have needs met.</p> <p>Feels hurt, frustrated and resentful.</p> <p>Damages self esteem</p>
Aggressive	<p>You don't count.</p> <p>Your feelings aren't as important as mine.</p> <p>My opinion is always right.</p>	<p>Expresses opinions forcefully & rudely.</p> <p>Makes choices for others.</p> <p>Ignores others' feelings.</p>	<p>Has needs met.</p> <p>Hurts others.</p> <p>Pushes others away.</p>
Assertive	<p>We both count.</p> <p>Our feelings are both important.</p> <p>Our opinions should both be listened to.</p>	<p>Expresses opinions respectfully.</p> <p>Makes own choices.</p> <p>Allows others to make their choices.</p> <p>Considers self & others</p>	<p>Usually has needs met.</p> <p>Feels empowered.</p> <p>Gets along with others.</p> <p>Improves self esteem.</p>

Example

Imagine that you've been working late at work all week and tonight you have a friend's birthday dinner to attend. Your boss demands that you stay late to work on the project, while she leaves early to play tennis. What would you say to your boss?

Response A: *"Umm... sure, OK." (Passive)*

Response B: *"What am I? Your slave? You should really think about paying me more before you think I'm going to give up my social life! I've got better things to do than to stick around here while you play tennis." (Aggressive)*

Response C: *"I understand that we have a tight deadline. Unfortunately, I can't stay tonight because I already have a commitment that I can't change. I will get on to it first thing tomorrow morning. Would that be ok?" (Assertive)*

Which response is most helpful?

Remember, if you make no response or do something when you don't want to it is a passive response (no matter how you justify it).

Obviously Response A was passive, Response B was aggressive, and Response C was assertive. You may find the idea of being assertive a little daunting at first, but this guide will provide you with the skills needed to communicate effectively while respecting yourself and others.

Why is being assertive helpful?

If we never express our thoughts and desires, we can end up feeling tense and resentful because our needs aren't being met. We can end up feeling 'walked all over'. At the same time, if we are frequently aggressive, we can damage our relationships with others. Therefore, an assertive approach is usually best, and evidence suggests that people who are more assertive have better mental health

2. Bill of Assertive Rights

Just like everyone else, you have the right to behave assertively. Rate how much you believe you have the rights below.

	Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	Very much so
I have the right to be the judge of what I do and what I think.	0	1	2	3
I have the right to offer no reasons and excuses for my behaviour.	0	1	2	3
I have the right not to be responsible for finding solutions to other people's problems.	0	1	2	3
I have the right to change my mind.	0	1	2	3
I have the right to make mistakes.	0	1	2	3
I have the right to say, 'I don't know'.	0	1	2	3
I have the right to make my own decisions.	0	1	2	3
I have the right to say, 'I don't understand'.	0	1	2	3
I have the right to say, 'I don't care'.	0	1	2	3
I have the right to say 'no', without feeling guilty.	0	1	2	3

Remember, you don't have to exercise your rights but you always have the right to exercise them if you choose to. You can choose to communicate directly, honestly and respectfully – it is up to you to consider the situation and decide if this is what you want to do. Consider the following points:

- Other people cannot read your mind and should not be expected to. If you want other people to consider your point of view, you must let them know what your point of view is, openly and honestly.
- You cannot read others' minds and should not be expected to. It is not up to you to anticipate other people's feelings and reactions. If someone else is unhappy with your behaviour, it is up to them to tell you.
- Other people's feelings are not your responsibility. People's feelings are based on their own thoughts and interpretations, which are not something that you can control. It is your responsibility to be polite and respectful, but this will not guarantee that others will never feel hurt or angry.
- You cannot control how other people will respond to you. Even if you are assertive, it does not mean that others will respect your feelings or do what you would like. You will need to respect their feelings as well as your own, and perhaps make another attempt to resolve the issue when you both feel calm. At the very least, by communicating assertively, you will know that you have made a reasonable attempt to solve the difficulty.
- Sometimes when people start to be assertive for the first time, their family members, friends, and colleagues do not respond positively. They may interpret your behaviour as aggressive simply because it's different from your behaviour in the past. If this happens to you, remember that they have probably been taken by surprise, and will adjust to it in time.

3. How to communicate assertively

Follow these steps. There are five main steps to follow when communicating assertively.

Step 1 – Acknowledge the other party

Doing this lets the other person know that you are considering their needs and rights. It also helps make them be more responsive to you. For example, if you want your partner to turn the lights off in the kitchen when they leave, you might start with, "I know how easy it is to walk out of rooms and forget to turn the lights off, especially when things are so busy..."

Step 2 – Describe the problem using "I" statements

It's important to describe the problem in a way that makes it clear to the other person. A good way to do this is to use "I" statements (sentences that begin with "I ...") to express your needs, opinions and feelings. Be clear about what the problem is and its impact on you. Try to avoid using "you" statements, which can sound like you're

blaming the other person.

For example, you might say “I’m trying to save money at the moment, but when lights get left on, that increases the electricity bill.”

Other examples of this step might be:

- *“I feel frustrated when I get home and the kitchen is full of dirty dishes that need to be washed, because I’m tired at the end of the day.”*
- *“I’m not able to relax when there is loud music playing.”*
- *“I feel annoyed and invalidated when decisions are made without my opinion being considered.”*

Step 3 – Describe your proposed solution

It’s very important to describe this solution that has a clear behaviour change. It’s ok to use “you” language in this step.

Avoid unclear directions that are hard to follow, like “Stop being so selfish”, “You have to calm down”, “Don’t act like a child”, “Be careful.” These aren’t useful because it’s not clear to the other person how they can change their behaviour, or what your specific request is.

Here are some examples of the correct way to propose a clear, behaviour-related solution:

- *I’d really appreciate it if you could turn the lights off when you leave rooms in the house.*
- *It would be great if you could listen to your music through your headphones.*
- *I’d like for you to acknowledge my opinion, even if you disagree with it.*

Step 4 – Point out the positives

In this step, you point out the positive aspects for the person to whom you are making the request. This is useful for encouraging the person to comply with your request. Examples of this (relating to each bullet point in Step 3 above), might be:

- *“That way, the electricity bill will be less and we will both save money.”*
- *“That way, you can still listen to your music whenever you want to.”*
- *“I think that will make communication clearer between us and there will be fewer arguments.”*

Step 5 – Check in

In this step, you check with the other person about your possible solution. Part of assertive communication is taking feedback from others in a way that respects their rights and needs. There may be real reasons that make your possible solution difficult - such as time constraints, physical ability, difference of opinion or finances. You might need to work together to find an alternative solution.

You can check in with the other person by saying things like, “How does that sound?”, “Could we give that a try?”, “let me know what you think.”

Your Worksheet



Now you have a go... Plan out an assertive way of expressing an opinion of your own here

Problem:

Step 1 – Acknowledge the other person

Let them know you understand their situation (“I know what it’s like when...” or “I realise how easy it is to...”)

Step 2 – Describe the problem using “I” statements

“ I feel... (describe how you feel)... when ...(describe other person’s behaviour). “

Step 3 – Describe your proposed solution

I would like (describe what you would like the other person to do or say in clear behavioural terms)

Step 4 – Point out the positives

Step 5 – Check in

Tips for assertive communication

- Often people find it useful to practise writing out the steps of their assertive request, say it out loud or even role-play this with a trusted friend. If assertive communication is difficult for you, it can be helpful to first practise with people who are likely to be more responsive. Once you feel more comfortable using assertive communication, you could then practise using it in more challenging situations or with more challenging people. You could even build your own exposure stepladder around becoming more assertive. (See Lesson 5 for a reminder on building exposure stepladders.)
- Be aware of body language and tone of voice – when using assertive communication, it's important to keep your voice at normal speaking volume, speak calmly and be courteous in your manner. Avoid verbal or physical attacks, threats and judging the person you're speaking to.

4. Refusing a request – How to say no

Many people have difficulty saying “no”. Taking on too many tasks can make you feel stressed, so it can be very valuable to learn to say “no” sometimes. Saying “yes” all the time is on the passive end and may not be helpful to you. But it’s also not very helpful to say “no” in an aggressive manner. As with all assertive communication, try to be aware of balance.

Here’s some tips from the Centre for Clinical Interventions in Australia.

Often people find it difficult to say “no” because they think it’s bad in some way. Think about these unhelpful beliefs about saying “No”.

For example, consider these Unhelpful Beliefs about Saying “No”.

- Saying “no” is rude and aggressive
- Saying “no” is unkind, uncaring and selfish
- Saying “no” will hurt and upset others and make them feel rejected
- Others’ needs are more important than mine
- I should always try to please others and be helpful or they might not like me
- Saying “no” over little things makes me small-minded and petty

Are there more helpful ways to think about saying “no”?

Remember your bill of assertive rights. Ask yourself, what is the evidence for your unhelpful beliefs about saying no? Do other people have the right to say no? If yes, why shouldn’t I have the same right? How do I cope when people say no to me? What would the world look like if good people said yes all the time?

Perhaps there are other ways to think about saying no, for example...

- Other people have the right to ask and I have the right to refuse.
- When you say “no” you are refusing a request, not rejecting a person.
- When we say “yes” to one thing, we are actually saying “no” to something else.
- We always have a choice and we are constantly making choices.
- People who have difficulty saying no usually overestimate the difficulty that the other person will have in accepting the refusal.
- We are not trusting that they can cope with hearing “no”.
- By expressing our feelings openly and honestly, it may actually liberate the other person to express their feelings.

- By saying “no” to somebody it allows them to say “no” to your requests while still being able to ask for further requests.

Changing your behaviour: How to say “no”

Here are some basic principles you can apply when you want to say “no”:

1. Be straightforward and honest, but not rude – this helps you make the point effectively.
2. As a rule, keep it brief.
3. Tell the person if you are finding it difficult.
4. Be polite – say something like “thank you for asking...”
5. Speak slowly with warmth, otherwise “no” may sound abrupt.
6. Don’t apologise or give long reasons for saying “no”. You have the right to say no if you don’t want to do things.
7. Remember that it is better in the long run to be truthful than end up feeling resentful.
8. When saying “no” take responsibility for it. Don’t blame or make excuses. Change “I can’t” to “I don’t want to” or “I would prefer not to”.

Ways of saying “no”

There are various ways you can say “no”. Some of these are more appropriate in particular situations. Trevor Powell (Clinical Psychologist and author of The Mental Health Handbook) describes 6 ways of saying “no”. These are:

1. **The direct “no”**
When someone asks you to do something you don’t want to do, just say “no”. The aim is to say no without apologising. The other person has the problem but you do not have to allow him or her to pass it on to you. This technique can be quite forceful and can be effective with salespeople.
2. **The reflecting “no”**
This technique involves acknowledging the content and feeling of the request, then adding your assertive refusal at the end. For example, “I know you want to talk to me about organising the annual department review, but I can’t do lunch today” or “I know you’re looking forward to a walk this afternoon but unfortunately I can’t come”.
3. **The reasoned “no”**
In this technique you give a very brief and genuine reason for why you are saying “no”. For example “I can’t have lunch with you because I have a report that needs to be finished by tomorrow”.

4. The raincheck “no”

This is not a definite “no”. It is a way of saying “no” to the request at the present moment but leaves room for saying “yes” in the future. Only use it if you genuinely want to meet the request. For example “I can’t have lunch with you today, but I could make it sometime next week”.

5. The enquiring “no”

As with the raincheck “no” this is not a definite “no”. It is a way of opening up other options. For example “Is there any other time you’d like to go?”

6. The broken record “no”

This can be used in a wide range of situations. You just repeat the simple statement of refusal over and over again. No explanation, just repeat it. It is particularly good for persistent requests. For example:

Dave: *“No, I can’t have lunch with you.”*

Kate: *“Oh please, it won’t take long.”*

Dave: *“No, I can’t have lunch with you.”*

Kate: *“Oh, go on, I’ll pay.”*

Dave: *“No, I can’t have lunch with you.”*

Information sourced from Assert Yourself Module, from the Centre for Clinical Interventions, Western Australia.

5. Tips for practising assertive communication

Things to try:

- stick to the facts of the matter
- stay with the present issue
- ask the other person for their thoughts and feelings
- listen attentively to what the other person has to say
- summarise what the other person has said (e.g. let me check if i have understood what you said... you feel that...")
- encourage the other person to come up with solutions to the problem
- be polite and respectful
- postpone your discussion to another time if you or the other person are too upset

Things to avoid

- assuming you know what the other person thinks, feels, wants, or is trying to do; and voicing your assumptions
- bringing up past difficulties or future worries
- criticising, blaming, or belittling the other person
- being apologetic when you haven't done anything wrong
- ignoring the other person or purposely "not hearing" what they have to say
- discussing difficult topics when you are feeling angry, upset, tired, unwell, or under the influence of substances
- agreeing to do something that you feel is not in line with your values (what's important to you)

Summary

Assertiveness skills can be very helpful to create and maintain healthy boundaries in relationships. Learning to communicate clearly and respectfully can reduce stress and increase your confidence.

As with any skills, assertiveness skills require practice. It may take some time before you feel comfortable using them. Also be aware that other people in your life may take some time to get used to your assertive communication. Like the exposure stepladder, it is often best to make changes gradually.

If you would like to learn more about assertive communication, you can do this excellent course for [free](#).

Ngā manaakitanga

Take care,

The Just a Thought Team
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