Assertive Communication

Using assertive communication is an important part of recovery from drugs and alcohol. Being assertive can help you express your opinions and feelings, make requests of others and respond to requests of others in a respectful manner. Assertiveness leads you to feel more in control of your life and increases the chances your goals will be met. This lesson will give you background on different styles of communication and give you some ideas about how to express yourself in a way that is helpful, instead of harmful to your relationships.

You probably already know there are many ways people communicate, and not all of these ways are assertive. A person does not always communicate using the same style, but often there will be patterns. The following are descriptions of interpersonal communication styles. As you go through these descriptions, think about which one is similar to your style and consider the following diagram of the continuum of communication styles:

Passive communication can feel like a finely honed skill and can be effective; however, people who are communicating passively often give up their rights, especially if what they want is in conflict with what someone else wants. They often hide their thoughts and feelings and as a result may feel depressed, anxious or angry. They often don’t say anything, even when they disagree or are angry at someone. Passive people often do not get their needs met and may cause damage to relationships with others because of their lack of communication. Some passive people may attempt to get their needs met through actions or inactions. When we use our actions or inactions to communicate it typically takes longer to get what we want and increases frustration on all parties involved. Consider the following example of passive communication:

Sally stopped drinking a few weeks ago. She is trying really hard to stay sober. Whenever she gets together with her family for dinner, her brother drinks a few beers in front of her. It really bothers Sally, but her brother doesn’t think it is a big deal, especially since Sally wasn’t a beer drinker. Sally is angry and frustrated that her brother doesn’t understand how hard this is for her, but she does not want to confront the situation and possibly cause an argument so she doesn’t say anything. Sally starts to dread being around her family.
Assertive Communication

In the following boxes, complete what the benefits and drawbacks are of using passive communication in Sally’s situation.

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<th>Benefits of Passive Communication</th>
<th>Drawbacks of Passive Communication</th>
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Could Sally’s passive communication lead to alcohol or other drug use? Why or why not? How has passive communication led to alcohol or other drug use in your life?

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Can you think of a situation where you or someone you know used a passive communication style? What did it look like? What was the result?

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Aggressive communication can also feel like a finely honed skill and may also be effective; however, there may be some significant drawbacks to aggression including increased fighting, increased stress, increased anger, and increased relationship dissatisfaction. People who are communicating aggressively are putting their interests up front, but often at the expense of others rights or feelings. They may get their needs met in the short-term, but over the long term, relationships may suffer or even be destroyed because of their behavior. Others may feel they are not being heard or respected and sometimes are made to feel worthless. Consider the following example of aggressive communication:

Sally’s brother sits down to dinner with a beer. He figures this won’t bother Sally since she used to drink hard liquor and he is not going to get drunk. Sally sees the beer and starts to yell at him, telling him how evil he is for drinking and that he is purposely trying to taunt her. She tells her parents that she is not coming over again because everyone is so disrespectful of her feelings. Sally’s brother and parents are confused since they did not realize there was a problem. Sally is even more angry and upset after the confrontation. Sally’s family wonders if they should invite her over since she has behaved so hostile.

In the following boxes, complete what the benefits and drawbacks are of using aggressive communication in Sally’s situation.
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Could Sally’s aggressive communication lead to alcohol or other drug use? Why or why not? How has aggressive communication led to alcohol or other drug use in your life?

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Can you think of a situation where you or someone you know used an aggressive communication style? What did it look like? What was the result?

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You may have heard of the term **Passive Aggressive Communication**. People who are indirect about what they want may be communicating in a passive aggressive style. They don’t state directly what they feel or think and may hint at what they want, and expect others to figure it out. They sometimes act out what they want to say, such as slamming doors, giving someone the “silent treatment”, being late, or doing a sloppy job. They try to get what they want without having to directly deal with others. Again, short term goals may be met, but long term, damage to relationships can occur and the person may become angry or depressed when others don’t read their cues correctly. Consider the following example of passive aggressive communication:

*Sally can’t believe her brother is drinking in front of her and at her parent’s house! She thinks her family must not be supportive of her. Instead of directly telling them how this bothers her, she makes sarcastic and mean remarks to her brother throughout dinner. She doesn’t bother to help her parents clean up like she usually does and leaves without saying goodbye to her brother. She leaves angry and feeling sad that her family doesn’t care about her. Her family members feel mistreated and confused about her behavior.*

In the following boxes, complete what the benefits and drawbacks are of using passive aggressive communication in Sally’s situation.

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Assertive Communication

Could Sally’s passive aggressive communication lead to alcohol or other drug use? Why or why not? How has passive aggressive communication led to alcohol or other drug use in your life?

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Can you think of a situation where you or someone you know used a passive aggressive communication style? What did it look like? What was the result?

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**Assertive Communication** involves knowledge about your basic rights as a human being, self-awareness of feelings and wanted outcomes in a situation, and being mindful and respectful of others when stating your feelings, wants, and needs. *Assertiveness is simply asking for or stating what you want (or do not want) in a direct way that does not attack, manipulate, or disrespect anyone else.* You stand up for yourself and your rights in the situation while also taking responsibility to be cooperative, nonjudgmental, and caring for your own needs in such a way that protects the dignity of others. When using an assertive communication style, others view you as honest and as knowing what is important to your needs. This communication approach allows you to cope with the problems associated with alcohol or drug use as best as you can without letting others steamroll you or without isolating yourself. You will be in a better spot and more able to manage your cravings using assertiveness rather than passivity or aggression. Consider the following example of assertive communication:

*Sally sees her brother sit down at the table with a beer. Being around any kind of alcohol triggers her to want to drink. She decides that she will tell her family how she feels and ask if they could not drink when she is around.*

“I am really working hard to stay sober and seeing you drink that beer is really causing me to crave a drink. I really need you to not drink when you are around me. I think I will do much better in my recovery with support from you.”

In the following boxes, complete what the benefits and drawbacks are of using assertive communication in Sally’s situation.

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Assertive Communication

Could Sally’s assertive communication lead to alcohol or other drug use? Why or why not? How could assertive communication help you meet your goals of sobriety?

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Can you think of a situation where you or someone you know used an assertive communication style? What did it look like? What was the result?

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Notice in the previous example, Sally clearly stated what the problem was, told her family how they could help and told them something positive that would happen as a result.

In the above situation Sally used a communication technique called SAS.

**SAS**

- **State** the problem and its consequences.
- **Ask** for what you need.
- **Spell** out the advantages of cooperation.

In Sally’s example, this is how she used the SAS skills:

**State the Problem:** "Seeing you drink is causing me to crave a drink."

**Ask for What You Need:** "I need you to not drink around me."

**Spell out the Advantages of Cooperation:** "I will do better in my recovery with support from you".

Sally stated her needs and desires directly. She also was respectful and did not put other people down or make them feel badly. She pointed out a positive consequence ("I will do better in my recovery") rather than a negative consequence or blaming statement. ("If you keep drinking around me I will relapse and it will be your fault")

Think of a situation where you would like to communicate assertively. Try writing out what you will say using the SAS technique.

**State the Problem:**

**Ask for What You Need:**

**Spell out the Advantages of Cooperation:**
 Assertive Communication

Assertive communication goes beyond verbal expression. Nonverbal communication, or “body language,” plays a large part in the messages we send to other people. In contrast to verbal/spoken communication, which consists of actual words used in speaking with someone, nonverbal communication refers to the way in which those words are projected. For example, during a job interview, one person might look down at the floor or off in the distance, whereas a different person might look directly at the interviewer. What different messages would these two applicants convey?

Nonverbal behaviors can help you communicate more assertively. Here are some examples. Fill in others that you think would be helpful.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maintain eye contact</th>
<th>Position your body squarely towards others</th>
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<tr>
<td>Speak firmly, positively, &amp; loud enough to be heard easily</td>
<td>Use clear, concise speech</td>
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<td>Keep your “body language” consistent with your statements</td>
<td>Listen to what others are saying</td>
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<td>Maintain a posture and attitude of equality</td>
<td>Take the initiative</td>
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Assertive Communication

Using an assertive communication style doesn’t come naturally for everyone. It is often a big change from what they are used to and a change from how they are used to being treated. It can be uncomfortable at first, and may require some practice. Start out by practicing with small requests, rather than trying to tackle big situations. Some people find it helpful to practice in front of a mirror or with a peer or counselor too.

Remember, using assertive communication can help you feel more relaxed, less depressed, and more powerful. Learning how to be assertive will enable you to act in your own best interest, to stand up for yourself and express your thoughts and feeling honestly and comfortably, and to exercise your personal rights without denying the rights of others.

What would be the benefits of communicating in a more assertively?
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What do you think the outcome would be if you used a passive communication style?
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What do you think the outcome would be if you used an aggressive communication style?
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What do you think the outcome would be if you used a passive-aggressive communication style?
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Directions: Three times over the next week, find someone with whom to practice the “SAS” communication technique. In the space provided, write the situation, the **stated problem** and its consequences, **ask for** what you want, and **spell out** the benefits of cooperation.

*Practice SAS in a low risk, non-emotionally charged situation at first!*

“SAS” Communication Technique:

- **State** the problem and its consequences.
- **Ask** for what you want.
- **Spell** out the benefits of cooperation.

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