

Make Every Session Count: A Coping Skills Manual

Getting Along with Others



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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Make Every Session Count* by John Preston, Nikki Varzos, and Doug Liebert

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Getting Along with Others

BROKEN PROMISES, unfair treatment, insensitivity, attempts to control, manipulate or dominate, unwillingness or inability to compromise, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, harassment, dishonesty, guilt trips...

Relationships! "Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em." Whether it's relatives, friends, lovers, or colleagues, the one thing you can count on is that relationships are not only a vital part of your existence, but one of life's biggest challenges.

And the differences! Values, style, needs, opinion, history, life circumstances, dispositions, temperament... people are definitely not all the same! Under the best of circumstances our differences add excitement and stimulation, but they inevitably also contribute to frustration and upset. Problems must be seen as an inevitable part of living.

Bells, Whistles, and Other Alarms

If you have experienced conflicts with others, you may recall some of your unpleasant feelings about your experience. Those feelings and your reactions to them have become a part of your own unique "early warning system" or alarm, alerting you to possible danger: "Something is wrong here."

One thing that's true about alarm systems is that they are most useful when you learn to work with them. You don't want to suffer too many false alarms, but when the alarm does go off it's time to take action to prevent a difficult situation from becoming worse. The greater you understand and practice with the alarm the more helpful it can potentially be.

Psychologists have come to understand a number of fairly common alarms—reactions that are important cues for us to pay attention to so we know it's time to work at resolving conflict in our relationship. Here are a few examples:

- *Pent-up feelings.* Have a hard time being as direct and forthright as you would like? For a variety of reasons you may grit your teeth and keep your feelings to yourself. This "emotional constipation"

can become quite limiting and uncomfortable, not only for you, but for others in your life.

- *Avoiding.* "If I don't confront it, if I put it off, maybe it will go away." Kind of like the ostrich who buries its head in the sand to avoid the stampede. Pretending "it's not there" may offer psychological respite in the moment—like the ostrich, you might luck out and not get run over—but in the middle of a stampede the odds aren't good. While fantasy and magical thinking can be fun and may provide the opportunity to practice in your mind's eye, they are rarely helpful in the long run.
- *Excuses, apologies, or justification.* There may be a time to provide a short, simple, direct explanation of why you decided to do or not do something. However, if this occurs more often than not, or if you often feel guilty and overly apologetic, it may be time for a change.
- *Putting yourself last.* Unless you're in the league of Buddha, Gandhi, or Jesus, putting yourself last works only occasionally. Every healthy relationship you find yourself in requires some degree of mutual give-and-take. It's not healthy to always put your own needs last or constantly give in to others at your own expense. We're not suggesting that you adopt the opposite extreme, always putting yourself first, but we want you to recognize that the "middle ground," involving mutual support and acceptance, will generally result in stronger, more vital relationships.
- *Putting yourself down.* Do you ever hear yourself or someone you know say something like, "This may sound stupid but....," or "I'm sorry to disagree, but..."? When you think, feel or express negative beliefs about yourself, you not only put yourself down, you increase the likelihood of staying stuck, and minimize your options and possibilities for change. If you believe only the worst about yourself, it's time to develop a more reasonable, balanced perspective.
- *Aggressive or hostile behavior.* Do you find yourself exploding inside or outwardly toward others? Would people describe you as hostile and aggressive? It's normal and natural to feel angry and upset at various points in life, but to feel it all of the time or to take it out on yourself or others can be destructive.

Aggression is a style of expressing feelings that rarely takes others' feelings into

consideration. Some folks learned this style while growing up, and may believe it is the only way they can feel powerful or in control of a situation or relationship. While there are many circumstances that need to be dealt with directly—including expressing such negative feelings as anger or upset—it is rarely, if ever, more effective to express feelings aggressively rather than assertively.

If you tend to be aggressive, your intimate relationships, if you're lucky enough to still have any, suffer. While you may attempt to deny it, this can result in a vicious circle of isolation and upset in which your aggressive feelings drive others away, resulting in you feeling even more angry and potentially aggressive.

- *Passive self-denial.* This style of dealing with others is also described as "timid" or "passive." While it is not normal to have strong feelings about *everything* in your life, it is not normal to pretend you don't have strong feelings about *anything*. This "whatever ...shrug-the-shoulders style is typical of those who are afraid to be honest with themselves or others about how they feel. If this is true of you, it may be your secret hope that if you avoid being assertive you can minimize the discomfort you associate with conflict. You may have learned to live with more unhappiness in your life than necessary. The long-term cost of self-denial is enormously high, including increased vulnerability to possibly aggressive and abusive relationships.

Now that we've examined some unhealthy ways to deal with others, let's move on to a more reasonable, adaptive way of getting along, by expressing your feelings in a direct, appropriately assertive way.

Healthy Assertive Coping

If you find your relationships less than satisfying, disappointing, or painful, it may be that you've been following one or more of the unhealthy paths we've just discussed. If you want to be happier and feel more in control of your life, most therapists will recommend that you learn to become more assertive. That may sound a little scary at first, but please read on. We think you'll want to try it. *Assertiveness* is a word most of us have heard but may not really understand. Common usage often gives the mistaken idea that being assertive is the same as being aggressive. Both styles do involve expressing important feelings without holding back, but assertiveness tempers

honesty with genuine concern, sensitivity, and respect for the other person's feelings. Assertiveness is a style of expression that is equally comfortable with both negative and positive feelings.

Being assertive means being able to choose how you will act in any given relationship situation.

You've seen people who appear totally comfortable in social situations, but the fact is that nobody's *born*

assertive. Assertion is a learned style that involves developing healthy attitudes, overcoming some obstacles (such as anxiety), and learning a few effective behavioral skills. Being assertive means being able to choose how you will act in any given relationship situation.

It takes lots of practice to feel comfortable and natural when being assertive. Even if you're shy, even if you're not as confident as you would like, it's possible to learn to be assertive. Those who have developed the skill generally report more satisfying relationships and increased self-confidence.

Getting Started

The most important thing to remember about assertiveness is that it's a matter of choice. You don't need to try to be assertive all the time. The first step is to look at a particular problem and honestly ask yourself, "Is this important enough to justify action?" There are lots of times when it's honestly no big deal—a passive stance may be fine. However, we want to caution you about something: Everyone encounters situations that in fact are very important, but some folks tell themselves, "It's no big deal," even when it really matters. So it's essential that you look at situations honestly and realistically, and prepare yourself to take assertive action when it counts.

Goals of Assertive Conflict Resolution

One goal of acting assertively, of course, is to bring about a *change in a situation or in another person's behavior*. For example, if somebody is taking advantage of you, your goal might be, "I want him to stop doing this."

A second important goal is to *increase your own self-respect*. We want to strongly emphasize that the second goal—increasing your own self-respect—really is the major goal in being assertive. Before you go talk with somebody about an important issue, it's helpful to remind yourself of these two goals and to tell yourself "Obviously I want to make a change in the situation; I'm going in there to request a change. Regardless of what

happens, I'm going to take this opportunity to express how I feel and what my opinions are. Even if I don't get what I want, I'm going to state my feelings and opinions firmly, and then I'm going to be able to walk out of there with my head held high."

Consider the Risks

"What are the risks of being assertive?" Consider that question very consciously. If you are like a lot of people, you may imagine all sorts of dangerous or upsetting consequences of acting assertively. These assumptions about "what's going to happen" actually may govern whether or not you act assertively. Sometimes unpleasant things do happen. What these risks may be need to be examined closely, honestly, and realistically.

Let's take a look at a few:

- *"The other person might become upset, or angry, or hurt, or rejected."* Many people put off dealing with and confronting problem situations in relationships because they are afraid the other person is going to become extremely upset. The reality is that by avoiding the situation, you may perpetuate serious interpersonal problems for months or even for years, which could take a tremendous emotional toll on both of you. People tend to greatly overestimate the amount of emotional upset that actually may result when they confront another person. By and large, if you approach the other person, treating her with respect, showing some sensitivity to her feelings, and just being honest with her—without belittling her or putting her down—any upset that does occur will be very short-term. Deciding to confront the issue and deal with a temporary upset may be the first step toward permanent resolution.
- *"The other person may find a way to get back at me or to get even."* We want to caution you that being assertive is no guarantee that the other person is going to respond in a positive way. It would be great if every time you were assertive, the other person said, "Oh, that's fine. I understand." Sometimes that happens. Sometimes people are somewhat irate or upset, but these feelings pass, they're temporary. And in some situations being assertive with certain kinds of people can lead to some very serious problems. This is often the case if you are dealing with an emotionally unstable or immature person. A good example of this might be confronting a

supervisor or boss who tends to be emotionally immature and who may, in fact, not like having an employee who is simply honest, direct, and mature. Some insecure people enjoy and gain satisfaction from dominating and controlling other people; their focus is making sure that people under them are submissive and not assertive. With a person like this, you run the risk of getting seriously hurt, in physical and nonphysical ways, that can be very damaging. (Losing your job comes to mind.) You have to use your head about this possibility by asking yourself, "What do I know about this person? Based on my experience, do I feel that this person is mature enough to endure and to handle an honest confrontation?" Sometimes the answer is "No, he's not." In that case, it may pay to choose to be non-assertive.

- "*The assertion may fail.*" You may stick your neck out, you may ask for something, you may confront someone, and she may say, "Forget it! No way!" Many people are very afraid to look foolish, or to feel helpless, or not to know what to do should the assertion fail. One response you may wish to consider in such a situation is to respond quickly, "I'm sorry you feel that way. This issue is very important to me, and I hope you'll give some thought to what I've said."

(Shortly, we will be giving you additional "backup plans" for these situations. When you have decided to approach a problem situation in which there's even a slight chance that the assertion might fail, having a pre-arranged backup plan is important: "What am I going to do if the assertion doesn't work?")

Risk versus Reward: Short Run and Long Run

It's a natural tendency for people to focus on the immediate emotional issues that might come up when they confront others and talk to them assertively. We think it's important for you to ask yourself, "Okay, I need to consider this other person might feel sad or might feel irritated or might get angry with me at the moment. But let me think about the long-term consequences of these responses. What do I think really will happen in the long run? Is she going to continue to be *very* sad or *very* upset for a prolonged time if I confront her?" Consciously appreciating the view that negative responses may be short-term, can make the decision to be assertive easier.

Considering the long-term positive consequences is also helpful. What may be going on inside your head

when you think about being assertive are the short-term negative consequences. But we think it's very important as you're preparing to assert yourself to ask, "Once I get through with this, even though there may be some upset, I wonder what the *positive results* could be?" These positive outcomes might be seen in terms of both the situation and yourself. You might ask yourself, "I wonder if in the long run this decision to be assertive will solve the problem? Maybe this problem is something we won't have to deal with over and over and over again. Maybe I'm not going to be walking around with this pent-up anger and resentment all the time. It might make it easier for us to get in and work on our relationship, to truly feel better about things." Another positive consequence would be, "These people are going to know where I stand. Maybe they'll think twice before they try to take advantage of me again. I'm not a person who is willing to be pushed around; I'm going to stand up for myself."

Here's another positive result: "Even though this might be tough in some ways, just maybe after I've been assertive, I can walk out of here and tell myself, 'By gosh, you know what? I did that! I'm proud of myself!'"

Planning for Action

Systematically going over each of the steps mentioned above, in your own mind, can be helpful. It is a way to prepare yourself emotionally and to get to a place of feeling okay about your decision to speak out. In addition, especially if the situation is important to you or very emotional, it also may be helpful to write out exactly what you're going to say to the person ahead of time, practicing out loud several times, until you are expressing your thoughts in a way that feels right. If you have a trustworthy friend, you may wish to practice with him or her; let your friend pretend to be the other person as you rehearse what you are going to say, until you feel comfortable.

Practicing an assertive response, even two or three times, can make a big difference in feeling solid about how you're coming across. If no one is available to help you, practicing in front of a mirror can be helpful too, because it gives you an opportunity to watch and hear yourself and then to make some improvements. Then, when you are actually getting ready for the meeting, you already know how you're going to come across. (If you have the luxury of a video camera, that's an even better tool to help you practice and improve.)

Key Ingredients of Assertive Behavior

When Shawna decided to tell Tim about how she felt, she made a point to have his full attention. She started by stating, "This is very important to me, and I'd like you to listen to what I have to say." She also consciously

made herself look directly into his eyes and began to talk in a firm, but non-hostile voice. "I think I have said the same words to him a hundred times, but this time he heard me. It wasn't what I said as much as how I said it. He got the message that I meant business."

As we consider what being assertive "looks like," and what the different aspects of assertion are, it's helpful to break assertive behavior down into three component parts:

- *Verbal content.* This refers to the particular words that you choose to speak, what you decide to say.

There are two guidelines that you can use to make sure your verbal content is assertive; one is KISS, which stands for "Keep It Short and Simple." Many times when people are trying to be assertive, they get sidetracked, get off onto some long explanations, excuses, justification, apologies, and so forth. Getting to the point as quickly as possible will really pay off.

The second point about content is something called "I Language." When you're expressing what you feel, it's an effective strategy to say, "This is how I feel." Lots of times people inadvertently will say, "You make me feel sad," "You make me feel unhappy," "You make me feel angry," and so forth. This approach can present some problems; when you say "You make me feel...", in a sense, you're casting yourself in the role of a helpless person. And this role can increase feelings of anxiety and insecurity. There's something about saying "I feel sad" or "I feel angry" that helps the message come across as more powerful. What's more, you're maintaining more self-control. Saying, "Look, I feel this way," actually increases and enhances your self-esteem and self-respect. Also, if you say to another person, "You make me feel" a certain way, that tends to greatly increase defensiveness. If you want to talk with others and negotiate for change or confront them about their behavior, statements that increase defensiveness decrease the chances of success. People simply tend to be more responsive and open to hearing someone say, "I feel sad," "I feel angry," and so forth. Take responsibility for your own feelings by using I language.

- *Vocal tone.* An assertive vocal tone is firm and direct. You're not coming across in an overly loud voice, which might scare people or make them feel you're aggressive, or, by contrast, in a silent, meek, whiny kind of voice. A firm, solid, well-modulated tone of voice conveys "I mean what I'm saying."

- *Gestures, body language, and eye contact.* Probably the most important non-verbal element of communication is eye contact. When people are afraid, anxious, or non-assertive, it's tough to make eye contact. Just watch the next time someone's talking to you and feeling anxious. There's something powerful and convincing about looking someone in the eye and saying, "Hey, this is how I feel; this is my opinion." It's a non-verbal message that lets people know, "I mean what I'm saying."

Backup Plans

In the real world, there are times when your assertions don't work the way you hoped.

"I know this is hard to hear...but this issue is important...We're going to work together and resolve this."

The other person may respond in ways designed to get you to back off. Let's say that you're confronting

someone about an emotionally charged situation in which a lot of your feelings are being revealed. Some people will respond by saying, "You're just too emotional about this!" or "It's just like a woman to be so emotional!" One way to respond to this is to say, "You know what? *I do* have strong feelings about this issue, and I am going to make my point again."

Then jump right back in and reassert yourself. Reasserting your point in spite of the other person's response is an effective way of stopping the other person from using this type of manipulation. You have not agreed that you are *too* emotional. You have simply affirmed your strong feelings.

The other person may respond to your assertion with tears and a lot of guilt messages. One way to deal with this is to say, "I know this is hard to hear, I know this is causing you pain, but this issue is important, and I want to repeat myself because we're going to work together and resolve this." Again, what you've done is to stop the other person's attempt to use guilt to get you to back off from your assertive response.

Some people may quibble with you about the legitimacy of what you feel. You have the right to state feelings and opinions without justifying them. One way to react to this response is to say, "Regardless of the reasons, this is my opinion," or "Well, let's face it, we may not agree on this, but all the same, this is how I feel." Again, reasserting yourself and not bowing to the demand for justifications.

When dealing with an extremely angry or aggressive person, it can be helpful to say, "I can see that you're very angry and upset, but it's important that we resolve this issue, and we are going to talk about this. If we can't talk about it now, that's okay. But I'm going to come back, and we're going to talk about it later."

Is It Time for Action in Your Real World?

We hope you'll find this discussion about assertion helpful. Deciding to confront truly difficult interpersonal problems and act in an assertive way is often hard to do and may be accompanied by a good deal of uneasiness, and sometimes actual risks. Many people have found it helpful to seek out an assertiveness training group—a type of group therapy that helps people learn how to act in an assertive way, provides opportunities for practice and role playing, and offers support. Many have benefited by reading the excellent selfhelp books on assertion that we have listed in the References section of this book. And working directly with your therapist can be valuable—particularly if you are prepared to resolve significant problems in important relationships. The therapist can provide guidance and support.

As you might guess, becoming assertive takes hard work and lots of practice. Many of us have to unlearn behavior we have practiced for years and learn new, healthier behavior and attitudes. Fortunately, assertiveness training has flourished and it's likely that you'll find workshops covered by your insurance benefit or sponsored by a number of organizations in your community.

Dealing with significant conflict with others can be incredibly difficult. That's a reality that has to be acknowledged. At the same time, the approaches advocated in this chapter have been in wide use during the past twenty-five years and have a solid track record. Being assertive is not a cure-all for resolving the emotionally charged conflicts in your life, but it certainly is an approach that has a good chance of success.

You have a right to say *no* to emotional abuse, to express your own feelings, and to ask for changes in another's behavior. We encourage you to learn to be assertive.