

STRATEGIES for MINDFUL LIVING

Courtesy of UAB Employee Assistance & Counseling Center

Building Assertiveness Skills

Assertiveness is the ability to state positively and constructively your rights or needs without violating the rights of others. When you use direct, open and honest communication in relationships to meet your personal needs, you feel more confident, gain respect from others, and live a happier, fulfilled life.

Acting assertive helps maintain honesty in relationships, allows you to feel more in control of your world, and improves your ability to make decisions.

ROADBLOCKS TO ASSERTIVENESS

Fear that you will harm others, or that you will experience rejection and feel shame, may prevent you from acting assertive. This is based on the belief other people's needs, opinions and judgments are more important than your own. Believing assertiveness hurts another person can keep you from meeting your legitimate physical and emotional needs. As a result, you may feel hurt, anxious and angry about life.

Lessons learned from parents or caregivers often contribute to your beliefs about the legitimacy of your personal rights — for instance, the right to

decide how to lead your life, the right to pursue goals and dreams, the right to a valid opinion, the right to say how you want to be treated, the right to say "no," the right to change your mind, the right to privacy, the right to ask for help, and many more. Acting to assert any of these rights leads many people to think they are acting selfish.

IS ASSERTIVENESS SELFISH?

Selfishness is being concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself. This is not assertiveness. Being assertive does not dismiss or ignore the needs of others. Assertiveness focuses on legitimate or important needs.

IS ASSERTIVENESS AGGRESSIVE?

Assertiveness is not aggression. Being aggressive means you express your rights at the expense of others or forcibly deny the rights of others.

If you struggle with being assertive, you may have



misabeled assertive behavior by others as aggressive. This may seem to justify not being assertive. However, believing assertiveness is aggressive can prevent you from taking steps to improve your assertiveness skills.

TIPS FOR ASSERTIVENESS

- **Practice Makes Better:** Recognizing what causes your lack of assertiveness is helpful, but committing to change is more important. Practicing assertiveness skills helps you confront old ways of thinking, helps you become more naturally assertive, and is self-reinforcing. Be patient. In the beginning, you won't be assertive at every opportunity. And you might be assertive in some situations where it isn't necessary. It's all part of the process of growing to be more assertive. Keep track of your progress, notice the general trend of your success, and give yourself a pat on the back as things change.
- **Simple Assertiveness Formula:** Each time an opportunity occurs to be assertive make notes in a small notebook. Consider keeping it in your pocket or purse. Record: (1) the specific event that called for an assertiveness response; (2) what personal right was involved



(i.e., the right to say "no"); (3) how you responded or what you said; (4) what you did well in this situation; and, (5) reminders to yourself about what you will do next time to be assertive if this situation is repeated.

- **Assertive Statements:** Assertiveness frequently means using "I" statements combined with a word describing what you want. For instance, "I want," "I need," "I would prefer," "I do not like," "I am upset about," etc. Be careful not to minimize such statements by couching them with questions that subordinate your needs. Example: "I don't want to go to the store with you. Do you mind?" or "I'm tired, can you do the dishes. Is that okay with you?"

HOW THE EACC CAN HELP

Being assertive isn't easy for everybody. You may have a personal history or childhood experiences that serve as strong roadblocks to the changes you want to make. The UAB Employee Assistance & Counseling Center can find resources, especially professional counseling assistance, to help you make faster progress in being assertive. Visit the EACC online at uab.edu/eacc or call 205-934-2281 or 1-877-872-2327 (toll free in Alabama).

This information is not intended to replace the medical advice of your doctor or healthcare provider. Please consult your health care provider or EAP for advice about a personal concern or medical condition.