

# GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH OTHERS: Use effective communication

Years ago when cave men and cave women roamed the earth, stress typically came from animals that wanted to eat them.

Today, we rarely have threats from wild animals and the threats we do face typically are not immediately life-threatening.

**Most of today's threats are interpersonal in nature.** For example conflicts with:

the boss	spouse	banks
the kids	neighbors	police officers
insurance people	salespeople	road-ragers
subordinates	friends	tele-marketers

**etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc.**

Thus...in order to handle the most common form of modern stress, we need to learn how to handle other human beings. The key to effectively handling other human beings is through effective communication.

## PROBLEM

- \* Interpersonal conflicts
- \* Feeling undervalued
- \* Feeling overworked
- \* Feeling resentful, angry
- \* Trouble maintaining relationships
- \* Feeling afraid of losing someone
- \* Feeling unable to trust yourself in arguments because you fear you might "explode"

## SOLUTION

**Effective  
Communication**

## **What is Effective Communication?**

Communication is an **interaction** between two people.

Each must:

- (1) Listen to the other person
- (2) Interpret what is being said
- (3) Respond in an understandable way

**The above list may seem obvious, but each point is violated daily when people attempt to communicate.**

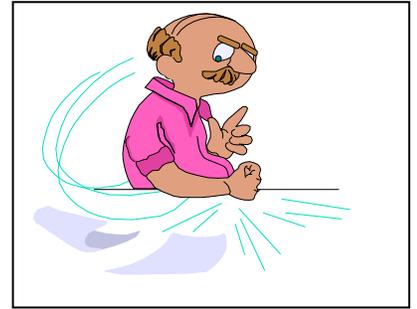
- (1) People frequently fail to listen to what the other person is saying. You have certainly witnessed two people speaking at the same time so that neither is heard.
- (2) Frequently, the "listener" is not listening at all. Instead, the "listener" is planning what he/she is going to say. Thus, the speaker is not heard.
- (3) Obviously if two people are communicating in different foreign languages, the content will not be understood. But speaking in a foreign language is not the only means of blocking communication. If one person is making right wing political speeches and the other left wing political speeches, there may NOT be a true desire to find common ground upon which to communicate with one another.

**In order to communicate effectively you must do the following:**

- (1) Identify your communication style
- (2) Identify problematic situations
- (3) Given you have some areas that could be improved...  
Practice changing your communication skills

## What are the Different Communication Styles?

**The Aggressive Style.** Fighting, accusing, and threatening characterize this style. Through aggression, these people stand up for their personal rights at the expense of others. The goal of aggression is domination, winning, and forcing others to lose. The advantage of this style is that others can't and don't hassle you. The disadvantage is social isolation.

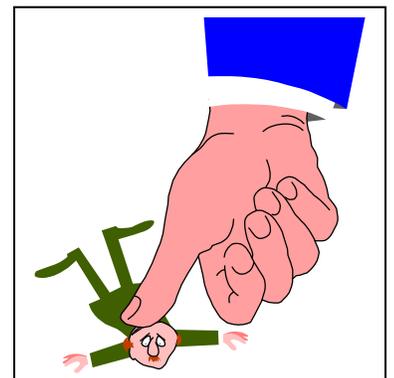


Let's take a look at an interaction that involves two aggressive individuals.\*

- Aggressive Andy:** Alice, I'm tired of doing all the work around here while you sit around complaining about your illness.
- Aggressive Alice:** You creep, I'd love for you to feel as badly as I do for just one day. Can't you see I hurt?
- Aggressive Andy:** No, as a matter of fact I can't see that anything is wrong with you.
- Aggressive Alice:** What do I have to do, have bandages all over my body to convince you that I feel bad? Well, you're not worth convincing. In fact, why don't you just leave and find yourself a new home with a new spouse who will wait on you and clean your house? I'd rest better without your complaining.

\*To illustrate the example, we have exaggerated this style.

**The Passive Style.** Acceptance, unconditional obedience with others' demands, and being "walked on" by others characterize this style. Through passivity the individual fails to express honest feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Communication is done in an apologetic, timid manner that leads to being disregarded by others. The advantage of this style is that you rarely experience direct conflict with others since you are fulfilling their demands. The disadvantage is that you are taken advantage of, devalued, and you experience anger and resentment towards yourself and others.



Let's take a look at the same interaction but between Aggressive Andy and Passive Paula.\*

Aggressive Andy: Paula, I'm tired of doing all the work around here while you sit around complaining about your illness.

Passive Paula: I'm sorry I talk so much about my illness. I'll get right to work.

Aggressive Andy: That's more like it. See, you're not as fatigued as you thought you were.

Passive Paula: I'm glad I'm doing things to please you now. I don't know how I'd ever survive if I didn't have you to encourage me.

\* To illustrate the example, we have exaggerated these styles.

**The Passive Aggressive Style.** On the surface these individuals appear to be following the passive style. Hidden beneath the surface, however, these people act in an aggressive way. For example, they believe that they have a right to their own beliefs but fail to express this openly. Instead, they resort to masked communication (e.g. talking behind backs, causing conflicts indirectly, "getting even" in an indirect manner). This style is ultimately stress producing and expands conflict, instead of resolving it.



Let's take a look at the same interaction but between Aggressive Andy and Passive-Aggressive Pam.\*

Aggressive Andy: Pam, I'm tired of doing all the work around here while you sit around complaining about your illness.

P-A Pam: I'm sorry I talk so much about my illness. I'll get right to work.

Aggressive Andy: That's more like it. See, you're not as fatigued as you thought you were.

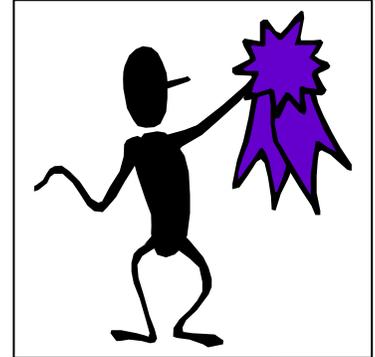
P-A Pam:

(Overt Response): I'm glad I'm doing things to please you now. I don't know how I'd ever survive if I didn't have you to encourage me.

(Covert Response): Every time I clean his bathroom, I'll use his toothbrush to get his toilet really clean.

\* To illustrate the example, we have exaggerated these styles.

**The Assertive Style.** This style is characterized by balance. Balance in the expression of feelings, self-pride, and self-regard, while at the same time being considerate of others. Through direct communication, you demonstrate respect for your rights and the rights of others. The advantage of assertiveness is that you can compromise so that you can get what you need and want.



Let's look at this same example with Sue using an assertive style.

**Aggressive Andy:** Sue, I'm tired of doing all the work around here while you sit around complaining about your illness.

**Assertive Sue:** It must be hard for you to be picking up more of the load around here since my illness started.

**Aggressive Andy:** You've got that right.

**Assertive Sue:** You know, I do need to be more active but only very gradually. I'd appreciate it if you acknowledge my work rather than taking it for granted. I would like it if we both made more of an effort to acknowledge the others' contributions to keeping things running smoothly.

## Which Style do you Express Most Often?

Communication styles are not set in stone. However, we all tend to use one style more commonly than others. Here are some potentially difficult situations. Place a check mark in the column that best describes the style you would probably end up using in each situation. Add up the number of check marks in each column to identify your most commonly used style.

Situation	A	P	P/A	Assert
Making an appointment				
Asking for help				
Protesting when over-charged				
Proposing an idea that is not mainstream				
Making a request of your boss				
Responding to undeserved criticism				
Saying "No" to a family member				
Saying "No" to a friend				
Responding to an attempt to make you feel guilty				
Asking someone to stop annoying you				

## Same Situations - Different Styles....

Oops, I'm Aggressive. How do I change my style?



Aggressive communicators need to consider the following:

- Attacks (like name-calling or accusation) typically shut down all further productive communication rather than encourage it.
- When tempted to attack, consider whether you truly wish to lose the chance for a good relationship with this person.
- Deep breathing when you are tempted to aggressively communicate can help you gain calmness. Calmness often changes the tone of the communication to make it less offensive.
- Practice compromise. You will probably be surprised at how much more satisfying it can be.

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**Oops, I'm passive. How do I change my style?**

**Passive communicators need to consider the following:**

- **On the surface, the aggressor "wins" and the passive person loses. However, in the long run, both will lose closeness in the relationship and respect for one another.**
- **Although passive communicators may deny feeling anger, they usually do. This often leads to becoming a silent, angry martyr over time.**
- **Practicing (role-playing) more assertive responses can help reduce passivity.**
- **Aggressive communicators are not going to respond well at first to assertiveness coming from a previously passive individual. Assertive communication means the aggressor must compromise—not win.**

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**Oops, I'm passive-aggressive. How do I change my style?**

**Passive-Aggressive communicators need to consider the following:**

- **Aggressors "win," passive communicators "lose." Passive-aggressive individuals then get even and the aggressor loses. In the end, no one wins.**
- **Passive-aggressive communicators usually feel angry under the surface, but cannot communicate this directly.**
- **Long patterns of passive-aggressive actions can deteriorate any relationship.**
- **Practicing (role-playing) more direct communication responses can help reduce passivity, anger and aggressive "payback."**

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**Ye!!, I'm an assertive communicator.**

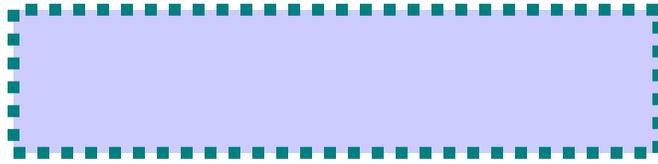
**Assertive communicators are aware of the following:**

- **Avoiding the temptation to counter-attack an aggressor's attack.**
- **Validating an aggressive person's feelings (that is, noting them in a non-judgmental way) opens the door for a statement that is likely to be heard. (Take a look at Assertive Sue's first statement for a good example of this.)**

- Once the other person is listening, compromise can take place.
- With assertive communication, both parties can get what they want (in the previous example, Andy gets Sue's increased attention to the house; Sue gets a gradual return to activity with positive reinforcement for her efforts and fewer angry jabs from Andy.).

**Now let's learn the steps to improving communication...**





**Purpose:** To increase effective communication

**Goal:** To help you focus on the issue at hand and begin a process of compromise

**Step 1: Identify the behavior(s) you find problematic.** Try to be specific and always concentrate on observable behaviors. For example, a statement might start off with "when you raise your voice while we're discussing the kids' school problems...." It's important to avoid labels, emotionally-loaded words, or other blaming statements that would make the person become defensive and closed to communication.

**Step 2: Communicate emotions.** Carefully examine the emotions you are feeling in reaction to the behavior and let the other person know how you are feeling. This step takes a lot of courage. Be sure to name specific emotions, instead of making broad statements like "I feel terrible." For example, you might add to the statement "when you raise your voice while we're discussing the kids' school problems, I feel anxious and angry."

Taking responsibility for your own emotions (by saying "I feel..." instead of "you MADE me feel...") helps avoid the other person becoming defensive and shutting down communication.

**Step 3: What you want in the future.** In the last step, tell the other person what you would like him/her to do in the future, in a similar situation. This takes some thought ahead of time. Be specific and realistic in your request. An advantage of this step is that you are indicating to the other person that you're taking some responsibility in the problem and initiating a potential solution.

- 1) When you \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) I feel \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3) In the future, I would like it if \_\_\_\_\_.

## Here's an example of how the formula works:

You're home waiting for your friend to pick you up. She said she would pick you up at 8 to go out to dinner together, but it's now 8:30 and you haven't seen or heard from her. You've been working up steam since 8, because she's been late like this several times before. By the time she arrives at 8:45, you've had plenty of time to plan what you will say to her, and to calm yourself with deep breathing.

You tell her:

- "When you're more than a few minutes late and don't call to tell me why,
- I feel anxious because I worry something might have happened to you. Then I get angry because I have rushed to get ready on time and I wonder if you just haven't bothered to tell me you're running late.
- Next time we go out together, I would really appreciate it if you would try to be no more than 5 or 10 minutes late. If you are running late, please call and tell me when you expect to be here."

## How do you start?

If you like the sound of this, but wonder if you can carry it off, follow these steps to help you practice this important skill.

## GO DO IT!

- **G**oals need to be clearly defined in your own mind regarding exactly what you want out of a particular conversation. Know in advance what your fall back position will be when you attempt to compromise.
- **O**rganize a specific meeting time and place to communicate. Do not rely on a chance meeting. It will never happen, or if it does, it might be rushed and you will not come off as well as you had hoped.
- **D**ecrease the complexity of the problem. Even if there are multiple gripes that you would love to dredge up once you finally address this person, keep the problem simple and the issues as clear as possible.
- **O**wn your part of the problem. Conflict usually takes two people. Take responsibility for your part of the problem, if appropriate. Rather than

blaming the other person, simply state how the other person's actions make you feel. For example, "When you drive over the speed limit on this narrow road, I feel nervous. Would you please drive the speed limit when I'm riding with you?" Or "I feel confused, could you explain what you just said again so I know exactly what you mean?" Note that none of these statements suggested one person was right and the other one wrong. The only thing stated was how the event lead to an unpleasant feeling.

- **I**ncrease direct communication. Don't beat around the bush. Get to the point and don't make the other person guess, assume, or otherwise wonder what it is you are driving at. Use the effective communication skill to be direct in your request. Also be aware of what your body is communicating. Effective body language includes direct eye contact, erect body posture, and matching your body language (especially your gestures and facial expressions) with the words you are saying. For example, it is confusing if you are smiling when you are telling someone you are really upset.
  
- **T**ell the other person how much you appreciate him/her working with you to arrive at compromise. Reinforcing compromise helps to insure that this person will work with you again in the future.

## SKILL: Effective Communication

**Record your use of effective communication over the course of the week.**

**Step 1:** Regarding a situation in which you would like to communicate effectively, complete the formula "When you \_\_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_\_. In the future, I would like it if \_\_\_\_\_."

**Step 2:** Use the GO DO IT checklist to help you carry out effective communication. Your goal is to complete each step of effective communication for 2 situations over the next week (print out multiple copies of the homework sheet). Write out what you plan to do or say for each step. **Your goal:** 2 complete use/week

List situation in which you plan to use effective communication: 1) talk to my brother about money he owes me  
(Sample)

When you <u>don't pay me back</u> I feel <u>angry and taken advantage of</u> . In the future, I would like it if <u>you pay what you owe me (at a time we both agree on)</u> .		What you plan to say or do for each step:
<b>Goals</b>	Define in advance what you want from the interaction and know your fall back position	I want him to give me a specific date when he plans to pay me back. If he can't do this, I want to set up a gradual payment plan.
<b>Organize</b>	Plan a specific meeting with the person to talk about the topic that is on your mind	I will call him Saturday morning, when I know he'll be home and when I have plenty of time to talk.
<b>Decrease Complexity</b>	Select only the most important issues that you plan to cover	I will only talk about the borrowed money. I'll have to work to keep us on topic, since he's good at changing the subject.
<b>Own</b>	Plan how you will take responsibility for part of the problem. It takes 2 to compromise	I will mention that I never said I wanted him to pay me back by a certain time, so the situation is not totally his fault. He can't know that I need the money now unless I tell him.
<b>Increase Direct Communication</b>	<b>Use the statement in the top row.</b> Make your point as clear as possible. Don't make the other person guess about your intention or purpose.	When you <u>don't pay me back</u> I feel <u>angry and taken advantage of</u> . In the future, I would like it if <u>you pay what you owe me (at a time we both agree on)</u> .
<b>Tell</b>	Let the other person know that you appreciate	I'll make sure I tell him that I know he doesn't like talking about

	their working with you to arrive at a compromise.	money, but that this is important to me and I appreciate his working it out with me.
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## Watch out for the 4 most common roadblocks to using the Effective Communication Skill!

1  
THOUGHTS like: "Saying no means I'm a bad person."

How to overcome this roadblock: remind yourself of alternative ways of viewing the situation, such as "I know lots of good people who say no."

2  
UNREASONABLE GOALS, such as: "I should be able to be assertive in most situations now."

How to overcome this roadblock: remind yourself that it can be especially challenging to try new habits when discussing very emotional topics. Remember that this is a skill and it takes practice.

3  
OLD HABITS such as saying yes without considering the consequences.

How to overcome this roadblock: remind yourself that although saying yes avoids conflict and pleases those who make requests of you, the disadvantage is that you continue to overstress yourself.

4  
STRESSORS such as being afraid that family or friends will punish you somehow if you are assertive

How to overcome this roadblock: if you do feel threatened, point it out ("It sounds like you're threatening me instead of discussing how to solve this problem.") or use an assertive question to uncover the source of the threat ("It sounds like something about my request bothers you. What bothers you about it?").

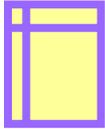
## Here are some other common roadblocks to using effective communication:

Even though you have some great new skills, it doesn't mean they will work perfectly in the real world! If you're not prepared, the people with whom you are communicating can respond to you in ways that can easily throw you off your assertive behavior. **Here are some ways to help you prepare for them:**

- ◆ **Denial**: when you try to state your case and the other person denies his/her part ("I don't raise my voice."), the best response is to assert your experience of the situation and stick to the facts ("You have raised your voice several times when we've discussed this problem, and I do feel anxious and angry").
- ◆ **Blaming you**: when the other person turns the tables and insists that you are to blame for the situation ("If you weren't so stubborn, I wouldn't have to raise my voice"), stick to describing your experience, own up to your part (if you agree) and get back to the issue at hand ("Yes, I do tend to be stubborn, but the fact is that I still don't like you raising your voice.").
- ◆ **Splitting hairs**: this is when the other person denies the accuracy of small details and tries to get the discussion moved to a debate about these details ("I haven't raised my voice *several* times. It's only been once or twice."). To deal with this diversion, point out what happens to the discussion when the other person splits hairs ("We're arguing over small details now. Let's get back to the main point I brought up about your raising your voice.").
- ◆ **Stalling**: when you try to discuss the problem and the other person tries to delay the discussion ("Not right now, I'm not feeling up to it." Or "Can't that wait?"), keep insisting that this is important to you, and get the other person to commit to an appointed time to discuss the issue again.

## Let's Summarize...

- ❖ Most of our stress today comes from interpersonal difficulties.
- ❖ Many of these stresses involve failure to communicate effectively.
- ❖ Communication styles that can lead to problems are: the aggressive style, the passive style, and the passive-aggressive style.
- ❖ Assertiveness is the only style that allows both parties to compromise in order to get something each wants.
- ❖ Assertiveness involves regarding your own rights as well as the rights of others, seeking compromise, and clearly communicating your feelings and desires.
- ❖ The steps in the *GO DO IT* formula facilitate assertive communication.



## SKILL: Effective Communication

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List situation in which you plan to use effective communication: \_\_\_\_\_

When you _____ I feel _____. In the future, I would like it if _____.		What you plan to say or do for each step:
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<b>O</b> rganize	Plan a specific meeting with the person to talk about the topic that is on your mind	
<b>D</b> ecrease Complexity	Select only the most important issues that you plan to cover	
<b>O</b> wn	Plan how you will take responsibility for part of the problem. It takes 2 to compromise	
<b>I</b> ncrease Direct Communication	<b>Use the statement in the top row.</b> Make your point as clear as possible. Don't make the other person guess about your intention or purpose.	
<b>T</b> ell	Let the other person know that you appreciate their working with you to arrive at a compromise.	