



Conflict Management Styles: Assertiveness

The current three newsletter articles cover different ways to approach conflict or disagreement. As always, the purpose of these materials is to build awareness and skills that help reduce the stress of difficult situations. Third in this series is the Assertiveness Script.

Assertiveness means standing up for something important without hurting or trying to hurt someone else, or avoiding the topic. Being assertive avoids the pitfalls of the aversive or passive styles. The trigger for using the skill is when something has happened that needs to be addressed, or when not addressing it will contribute to poorer outcomes in the future. There is a script to follow that you can “rehearse” when you need to stand up for something important. The more you practice, the more natural it can become, and you can get away from the script as you build the skill. Depending on the situation, you might not need all 4 steps, but it’s good to be prepared with them.

Script Steps. Try to do them in order when you’re learning.

1. Describe the situation in objective terms without judging or criticizing.
2. Describe the impact(s) of the situation.
3. Say what you would prefer to have happening.
4. Describe what you will do now or in the future to protect the “important something” if necessary.

“(1) When I told you I had a rough day you said “uh-huh” and kept looking at your phone. (2) I felt like you weren’t really interested in what was important to me. (3) Could you turn off your phone for a few minutes? (4) I can wait until you’re not busy so you can pay attention.”

“(1) You and I disagree about this, and I don’t believe we are going to change each other’s minds. (2) Arguing about it feels unpleasant. (3) Can we talk about something else? (4) Or I can move on and talk to someone else.”

Homework: This month, challenge yourself to practice the assertiveness script to stand up for important things, rather than using less effective techniques. Notice its impact on problem solving, interpersonal relationships, and your stress level. People who try this are often surprised at the difference it makes!

Adapted from Marsha Linehan, PhD, author of “DBT Skills Training Manual.”