

Anger Management

Module 7 & 8 – Assertiveness Training and Conflict Resolution

Assertiveness training starts on page 35 of the workbook. In previous lessons, we focused a good amount of attention on aggression. Remember that when we respond to a situation with aggression, we are in effect stating to the other person that our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are what counts – that their feelings, beliefs, and thoughts are unimportant. Hostility and aggressive behavior represent one extreme on the continuum. The opposite extreme would be passive behavior, which is unhealthy in its own way. A blending of these, another unhealthy and self-defeating response, would be passive-aggressive behavior. Assertiveness represents a healthy response to conflict and relational issues. We have covered many of the potential consequences of aggressive behavior. Now let's look at the negative results of passive or passive-aggressive behavior.

When we are too passive, we allow our rights to be violated. We may resent the people who treated us poorly, and we will likely resent or be angry with ourselves for not standing up for our rights. When we are passive, we convey the message that our needs, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are of no importance. In some cases, habitual passive behavior leads to passive-aggressive behavior. Because we have subordinated our needs for so long, we begin to see any requests or demands on us as being unreasonable. Through a passive-aggressive response, I ignore these demands, or intentionally sabotage the outcome. If you are interacting with someone, and feel uneasy but can't put your finger on it, sometimes it is because the other person is being passive-aggressive. One way to describe it is to imagine a big old St. Bernard with his paws on your shoulder, licking your face. He is friendly and lovable, but soon you realize while he is licking your face, he is also peeing down your leg. People who act passive-aggressively are fearful of being aggressive (either because they feel powerless or because they are afraid of their own anger), and have not learned to be assertive (likely due to not getting their needs attended to most of their lives and getting the message their needs don't matter).

What is most important to remember here is that all of the possible responses – aggressive, passive-aggressive, and passive – are *learned*. Anything you have learned, you can *unlearn* with practice.

Assertiveness

Acting assertively means that you are standing up for your rights, but in a way that is respectful of other people. By doing so, you convey to the other person

that the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of each of you are important. Expressing what you want or need does not have to come at the expense of the other person.

When you are experiencing conflict, the “Fair Fighting Rules” can be helpful (found at the end of this document). It is also helpful to practice assertive communication. Use the “Assertive Communication” handout, also found at the end of this document.

Review the Conflict Resolution Model on page 36. Study the five steps that are outlined there. The first three involve an introspective analysis of the situation – identify the problem, feelings, and the impact / outcome of the problem. Once a clear picture is derived from this, then a choice needs to be made: does this need to be resolved, or should I let it go? If it needs to be resolved, then do so using the tools that have been discussed thus far (fair fighting, assertiveness, and de-escalation tools if necessary).

Be sure to complete your weekly monitoring and journals if applicable.

FAIR FIGHTING RULES

Before you begin, ask yourself why you feel upset.

Are you angry because your partner left the mustard on the counter? Or are you angry because you feel like you're doing an uneven share of the housework, and this is just one more piece of evidence? Take time to think about your own feelings before starting an argument.

Discuss one topic at a time.

Don't let "You left dishes in the sink" turn into "You watch too much TV." Discussions that get off-topic are more likely to get heated, and less likely to solve the original problem. Choose one topic and stick to it.

No degrading language.

Discuss the issue, not the person. No put-downs, swearing, or name-calling. Degrading language is an attempt to express negative feelings while making sure your partner feels just as bad. Doing so leads to more character attacks while the original issue is forgotten.

Express your feelings with words.

"I feel hurt when you ignore my phone calls." "I feel scared when you yell." Structure your sentences as "I" statements ("I feel *emotion* when *event*") to express how you feel while taking responsibility for your emotions. However, starting with "I" does not give a license to ignore the other fair fighting rules.

Take turns speaking.

Give your full attention while your partner speaks. Avoid making corrections or thinking about what you want to say. Your only job is to understand their point of view, even if you disagree. If you find it difficult to not interrupt, try setting a timer allowing 1-2 minutes for each person to speak without interruption.

No stonewalling.

Sometimes, the easiest way to respond to an argument is to retreat into your shell and refuse to speak. This is called stonewalling. You might feel better temporarily, but the original issue will remain unresolved and your partner will feel more upset. If you absolutely cannot go on, tell your partner you need to take a time-out. Agree to resume the discussion later.

No yelling.

Yelling does not help anyone see your point of view. Instead, it sends the message that only your words matter. Even if yelling intimidates your partner into giving up, the underlying problem only grows worse.

Take a time-out if things get too heated.

In a perfect world, we would all follow these rules 100% of the time... but it just doesn't work like that. If an argument starts to become personal or heated, take a time-out. Agree on a time to come back and discuss the problem after everyone has cooled down.

Attempt to come to a compromise or an understanding.

There isn't always a perfect answer to an argument. Life is too messy for that. Do your best to come to a compromise (this means some give and take from both sides). If you can't come to a compromise, simply taking the time to understand your partner's perspective can help soothe negative feelings.



Assertive Communication: A communication style in which a person stands up for their own needs and wants, while also taking into consideration the needs and wants of others, without behaving passively or aggressively.

Traits of Assertive Communicators

- Clearly state needs and wants
- Eye contact
- Listens to others without interruption
- Appropriate speaking volume
- Steady tone of voice
- Confident body language

Assertiveness Tips

Respect yourself. Your needs, wants, and rights are as important as anyone else's. It's fine to express what you want, so long as you are respectful toward the rights of others.

Express your thoughts and feelings calmly. Giving the silent treatment, yelling, threatening, and shaming are all great examples of what not to do. Take responsibility for your emotions, and express them in a calm and factual manner. Try starting sentences with "I feel...".

Plan what you're going to say. Know your wants and needs, and how you can express them, before entering a conversation. Come up with specific sentences and words you can use.

Say "no" when you need to. You can't make everyone happy all the time. When you need to say "no", do so clearly, without lying about the reasons. Offer to help find another solution.

Examples of Assertive Communication

"I've been feeling frustrated about doing most of the chores around the house. I understand that you're busy, but I need help. How can we make this work?"

The speaker takes responsibility for their feelings without blaming, and clearly describes their needs.

"I won't be able to take you to the airport on Friday. I've had a long week, and I want to rest."

The speaker respects their own needs and wants by clearly saying "no".

"I'm having a hard time sleeping when your music is on. What if you use headphones, or I can help you move the speakers to another room."

The speaker describes their needs, while also considering the needs and wants of the other person.

Anger Management

Module 9&10: The Family

For many of us, the interactions we had with our parents have strongly influenced our behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes as adults. With regard to anger and its expression, these feelings and behaviors were usually modeled for us by our parents or parental figures. The following series of questions concerns the interactions you had with your parents and the families that you grew up in. Discussing family issues can sometimes bring up uncomfortable feelings.

Think about your family while you were growing up. Did you live with both parents? What about siblings? Where did you grow up? While it is not a part of this course, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) play a role in the development of our belief systems and how we respond to the world in general. There are common sense things you may easily see - like witnessing violence between your parents, or having one of your parents incarcerated. Less extreme, but still on the list, is parental divorce. Things that are not as obvious - the neighborhood and community you grew up in. Systemic racism, extreme poverty, violence in the community - all contribute to how you develop and view the world.

Perhaps most pertinent to this course - how did your family express and deal with anger? Think about how each of your parents expressed anger. Were you ever threatened with violence? How were you disciplined? These questions will help you develop a better understanding of how family dynamics contribute to your underlying beliefs, and at least in part how you have learned to respond to the world, especially in relationships.

Family Roles

In every system, there are roles that each person plays. In an unhealthy family system, certain family roles become defined and become more pronounced. Each role, in a sense, evolves to serve a purpose in supporting the family system. In this section, we will briefly describe some of these family roles.

The Hero

The Hero is often the firstborn child in a family. The Hero becomes a perfectionist, excels at many things - perhaps is the captain of the cheerleader team, or of the football team. The Hero may become the class president, gets straight-A's, and brings pride to the family. Indeed, it is the job of the Hero to prove that the family is "normal". The community is led to deduce that the parents must be doing something right to have produced such a child.

The Scapegoat

The Scapegoat is at the opposite end of the spectrum as the Hero. The Scapegoat is the child who gets into trouble at an early age, may have problems in school and with the law, acts out the very problems that the family is trying to keep hidden in the home - substance abuse, violence, etc. It is the job of the Scapegoat to take all the heat for the family - to be the "identified problem" in the family. In reality, the Scapegoat is probably the most honest role, as they refuse to play the game of hiding the family secrets. The neighbors pity the parents who seem like such nice people, to have to deal with such an out of control child.

The Mascot

The Mascot is essentially the "class clown". This child learns how to break up the tension with the use of humor. They seek attention, and distract from the trauma that is happening all around them. If the family is getting dangerously close to a blow up, the Mascot comes into the room with their clothes on backwards, or has an exaggerated slap-stick fall. Everyone laughs, and the temperature comes down a bit. Many Mascots grow up to perform comedy - they have played that role their entire lives and have become very good at it.

The Lost Child

This is the family member who never makes any waves. They are neither perfect, nor do they get in trouble. The parents never worry about the Lost Child. This individual makes friends with pets and inanimate stuffed animals, and plays by themselves (and prefers it this way). Their job is to bring a sense of normalcy to the family, and they avoid attention at all costs.

We have described these basic roles in order to highlight how our childhood experiences can influence how we view the world and respond to it. It is also important to understand that changing the way we interact with the people in our lives will take practice, and a dedicated effort.

Complete the workbook questions on pages 41-43. You can write your responses on a separate sheet of paper and keep the notes handy for later review. Remember to also complete your Anger Meter for the week.