

# Assertive Communication

*by Sophia Tutorial*



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how assertiveness can promote good communication in relationships. In particular, we'll focus on:

1. Assertive vs. Aggressive Communication
2. Components of Assertive Statements
3. Techniques for Using Assertive Statements
  - a. Defusing
  - b. Fogging
  - c. Content to Process Shift
  - d. Broken Record

## 1. Assertive vs. Aggressive Communication

Healthy relationships depend on good communication, and the way we state our own needs when we're communicating with another person is very important to the overall quality of that communication.

Assertive communication has a positive impact on relationships; however, it's important to make the distinction between assertive communication and aggressive communication.

When a person communicates in an aggressive way, that person is stating his or her own needs as the only important factor. This style of communication is typically disrespectful to the other person, and it can be off-putting because it comes across as abrupt and arrogant.

➦ **EXAMPLE** When someone is speaking aggressively, they might say something like, "I want to go to the early movie. Let's go now. We don't need to eat." Maybe this person doesn't want to eat, but they are not asking the other members of the group what they want.

Assertive communication, on the other hand, is a way of stating your own needs while still being open to others' needs that may differ from yours. You are being respectful of the way you state your needs, but you're also not sacrificing what you want just to accommodate the others.

It's important for us to be assertive because when we're not, it means we're not taking care of our own needs. When we don't take care of our own needs, we can become resentful, and we might end up becoming tense around somebody, or acting out in other ways, simply because we don't feel satisfied.

However, it's not only important to us personally to be assertive about what we want, but it's also important to others. Other people appreciate it when we speak up in a respectful way to tell them what we're really thinking and feeling; people are open to that kind of communication.

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## 2. Components of Assertive Statements

There are three elements to an assertive statement:

- **Empathy/validation:** Portion of a statement that shows that the speaker is aware of the listener's perspective and attitude and is taking that into consideration.
- **Statement of the problem:** What is at issue for you as the speaker
- **Statement of what you need:** Desired outcome of the conversation.

You want an assertive statement to combine all three of these aspects.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You might use an assertive statement at work if you're leading a project: "I understand everybody here has been working really hard. I appreciate the effort you've been putting in, but we still have people who are out sick. We don't have enough people on the team, so I'm going to need you to put in a few more hours for the rest of this week in order to meet the deadline."

First, you established appreciation for the fact that your team is working hard. That would be the empathy and validation portion of the statement, and it can go a long way toward getting people to do more since they know that you really understand their feelings.

There's a statement of the problem: "We have people out, so there aren't enough people on this particular project." Then, there's the statement of what you want: "I need for you to pitch in with a few more hours so that we can meet this deadline."



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Empathy/Validation

In assertive communication, a portion of a statement intended to show that the speaker accepts (though does not necessarily agree with) the listener's perspective or action.

#### Statement of Problem

In assertive communication, a statement of what the speaker finds undesirable or problematic.

#### Statement of What You Want

In assertive communication, a declaration of the speaker's desired outcome or desired action from the listener.

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## 3. Techniques for Using Assertive Statements

You can use assertive statements anywhere, from at home to at school or work. You can use them wherever a conflict might arise, or whenever you know you have an interest at stake that you don't want to sacrifice.

You want to communicate your needs to the other person while simultaneously recognizing that person's

interest, so using an assertive statement can be a very positive thing to do.

However, there are times when just making the statement once is not enough; you oftentimes have to be iterative, which means you need to do it again.

The following are helpful techniques that you can use in certain situations or under certain conditions where the conversation is longer or more difficult:

- Defusing
- Fogging
- Content to process shift
- Broken record

### 3a. Defusing

**Defusing** is taking the time to let somebody calm down, particularly if the person is very upset about something and has come to you right in the middle of this emotion.

Defusing allows that person to get calm, and you want to do that before you make the statement again.

Perhaps the statement has made the person upset, and you need to let them calm down and process it before you restate it.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Defusing

In assertive communication, taking time to allow a person to become calm (generally after a provoking event) before starting/continuing communication.

### 3b. Fogging

The second tip is called **fogging**, which allows you to deflect some negative criticism by accepting just a little bit of it while still standing up for your right to choose, or make your own decisions.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Someone might say, “Why are you always shopping in that more expensive grocery store? You could save money if you shopped elsewhere.” You might reply, “Yeah, I’m probably spending a little bit too much here. I could probably get some things cheaper elsewhere, but I like to buy my vegetables here because I know that they’re always fresh.”

You’ve acknowledged that this person has a point; you could be saving money shopping elsewhere. However, you’re still standing up for your right to make your own decisions about where you shop.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Fogging

In assertive communication, a technique used to deflect negative criticism by accepting some of a person's statement of criticism but declaring/implying one's right to choose one's own behavior/action.

### 3c. Content to Process Shift

Another technique is a **content to process shift**. This means that you focus on the listener's behavior in the moment instead of the topic of conversation.

There may be times when you are talking about a particular topic, and you feel like the person you're talking to is trying to avoid you. They are not engaging; maybe you notice a lack of eye contact or that this person is nervous and fidgety.

Shifting the conversation from the content at hand to the behavior that you're seeing can be very helpful here. You could say, "You seem uncomfortable. I notice that you don't want to look at me when I say that." So now you're talking about how you are communicating with one another instead of what you're communicating about.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Content to Process Shift

In assertive communication, shifting the topic of communication to the listener's behavior at a particular moment; generally used when listener is using words or actions to try to avoid engaging with speaker.

### 3d. Broken Record

The last technique is called the **broken record**. This term originated in record players, where music would be played from a record that could be damaged with a scratch. Often, a scratched or broken record would get stuck in the same spot, so you'd hear the same half second of music over and over again until you removed the record.

Thus, a broken record is the repetition of a simple statement of one's need or goal. There are times when simply repeating yourself is very effective.

➡ **EXAMPLE** As a parent, you might say, "I need you to do your homework before you can go out. I understand that you want to see your friends, but I need you to do your homework first."

➡ **EXAMPLE**

In a work situation, you might say to your team, "We need to meet this deadline. We don't have enough people in the office, but we need to meet the deadline." You may be using all three elements of an assertive statement in one way or another, but your focus is on stating the need over and over again so that it is understood.}}



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Broken Record

An assertive communication technique involving repetition of a simple statement of one's need or goal when in conversation.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **assertive communication differs from aggressive communication** in that being assertive takes the needs of all parties into account as opposed to just the speaker's. You also learned that there are three **components of an assertive statement**: empathy/validation, statement of the problem, and statement of what you want. You now understand that there are techniques that you can use in assertive communication, particularly if the conversation is long or difficult, or if it has become heated. These techniques are defusing, fogging, content to process shift,

and broken record. They are all useful in different situations, so the one you choose to use will depend on the dynamic of the conversation. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Broken Record**

An assertive communication technique involving repetition of a simple statement of one's need or goal when in conversation.

### **Content to Process Shift**

In assertive communication, shifting the topic of communication to the listener's behavior at a particular moment. Generally used when listener is using words or actions to try to avoid engaging with speaker.

### **Defusing**

In assertive communication, taking time to allow a person to become calm (generally after a provoking event) before starting/continuing communication.

### **Empathy/Validation**

In assertive communication, a portion of a statement intended to show that the speaker accepts (though does not necessarily agree with) the listener's perspective or action.

### **Fogging**

In assertive communication, a technique used to deflect negative criticism by accepting some of a person's statement of criticism but declaring/implying one's right to choose one's own behavior/action.

### **Statement of Problem**

In assertive communication, a statement of what the speaker finds undesirable or problematic.

### **Statement of What You Want**

In assertive communication, a declaration of the speaker's desired outcome or desired action from the listener.