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Asserting yourself

Assertion is Not Aggression

All of us find ourselves in sticky situations from time to time. Depending on our personality and social skills, we may act assertively to resolve the situation in a manner we are comfortable with, or if we have difficulty expressing our true needs and feelings we may passively “go with the flow” or aggressively criticize. Passive individuals typically avoid any type of confrontation by keeping their true feelings to themselves. Others usually describe them as being easygoing, and interpret their silence as agreement. In reality, passive individuals often end up feeling forced into a particular situation or activity and as a result carry resentful feelings. As the resentment builds, passive people often find subtle ways to “even the score.”

Aggressive individuals are often mistakenly thought of as being sure of their needs and getting what they want. Think about it another way. Are verbal attacks or sarcasm a good way to build strong supportive relationships? Hostility masks a sense of feeling trapped. In the long run, hostile outbursts do more harm than good. Those on the receiving end of the anger become defensive, resentful and uncooperative.

Assertive skills curb passive or aggressive tendencies and help people express their needs in a manner that builds supportive relationships. Properly practiced, assertiveness is actually a middle ground between passivity and aggression. It is based on principles of mutual respect and compromise. When people act assertively, they show respect for others’ thoughts and feelings, communicate their own needs and feelings in a clear and respectful manner, and are willing to compromise.

tools for success

- Understand the role assertive behavior plays in weight management.
- Identify common behavioral styles in yourself and others.
- Learn how to send effective “I” messages.
- Learn how to use techniques like reflection and emphatic assertion to deal with aggressive behavior.

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Assertiveness is a cornerstone of successful weight management. Developing assertive skills will help you:

- Tactfully set limits on the demands others try to make on your time and energy.
- Communicate your true thoughts and feelings, thereby making you less likely to use food to manage your emotions.
- Build the support you need to manage your weight and help you cope with new situations including ones that threaten to sabotage your weight management efforts.
- Regularly practicing assertive behavior can lead to an increased sense of control over your life, which in turn can lower your stress level.

Spotting Sticky Situations

In general, people have difficulty acting assertively in three types of situations:

- Refusing or making requests.
- Expressing negative feelings about a person or event.
- Expressing positive feelings about a person or event.

As a result, you may have difficulty giving suggestions to, or correcting, someone who is doing a poor job, responding to verbal abuse, responding to high-pressure-sales tactics, asking for help or asking someone to change a behavior that is negatively affecting you.

What types of challenges have you encountered in dealing with others in relation to your weight management efforts? List some of the difficult situations below.

How did you react? Decide if your reaction was assertive, passive or aggressive.

Strategies for Solving Sticky Situations

These communication tips will help you navigate all types of situations. The following examples of how to deal with common sticky situations can speed your progression toward better communications.

key skills

- Consider your timing.
- Consider other viewpoints.
- Be tactful.
- Be direct: get to the point.
- Be specific.
- Use "I" messages, "I feel/I need."
- Focus on the present, not past.

Analyzing Behavior Styles

Instructions

Below are descriptions of various behavior styles. In each box, write the feelings and beliefs associated with these behaviors from both the sender's and receiver's point of view.

	Non-assertive traits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indirect • Self-denying • Inhibited 	Assertive traits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct • Self-respecting • Honest 	Aggressive traits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tactless • Self-expressive • Dominating
Sender's thoughts or beliefs			
Sender's feelings			
Receiver's thoughts or beliefs about the sender			
Receiver's feelings about the sender			
Winner/loser			

Deciding to Be Assertive

DESC Assertiveness Model for Problem Situations

Describe	Describe the problem situation and the behavior that is bothering you.	
Effect	What effect is this having on you, both behaviorally and emotionally?	
Specify	Specify what you would like changed.	
Consequences	What will be the consequences of your assertiveness? Rank the importance of each consequence and the likelihood of it occurring using a scale of 1 to 10, 1 = not at all and 10 = extremely high.	
		Importance to me
Good things		
Bad things		

Refusing Requests Graciously

You may be reluctant to refuse a request because you fear hurting the other person's feelings or making the person doing the asking feel rejected. Refusing a pleasant activity creates fear that you will never be asked to participate again. Refusing a request in a polite and assertive way gives you control over how you spend your time and energy, while preserving your relationships.

Remember: Be direct and polite. Use "I" statements and, if appropriate, broker a compromise.

A Polite "No". You can simply say "No thanks," which is a polite, assertive refusal or you can tie "No" to an "I" statement: "No thanks, I can't fit that into my schedule today." If you truly would like to participate, but the timing is wrong, you can say "I can't fit that in my schedule today, but I'd like to go another time."

Compromise. Meet the person part way by setting limits on how much help you are willing to give: "I can't work late every day this week, but I can stay later on Tuesday and Thursday."

Empathic Assertion. You can help the other person feel better about the interaction by combining empathy with assertion: "I can see you are in a bind, yet I don't want to give up my exercise time."

Mixed Feelings Statements. This is another good technique for gently declining a request: "Part of me wants to go to lunch with you. The other part of me is saying I'll be too tempted to overeat. That is the part I need to listen to now."

Asking for Assistance

Everyone can use help from time to time. Trying to handle everything yourself can make you feel tense, overburdened, and under-appreciated. Most people are happy to help if they are given the chance to

accept or refuse without consequences, and if you respect their time and needs. So don't wait until you are desperate to seek assistance. Help others help you by giving them:

- Clear and specific information about the type of help you need, but accept the fact other people may not do the job as perfectly as you do.
- The opportunity to ask questions about your request.
- Time to consider their response.
- Permission to say "No".

Expressing Anger without Aggression

Assertive communication skills can help you express annoyance or anger in a constructive rather than destructive way. Aggressive displays of displeasure can set up a "no win" psychological tug-of-war in which both parties dig in their heels and refuse to cooperate.

Before you express your displeasure, slowly count to ten. Then, consider how much anger you want to communicate and how you would feel if you were on the receiving end of the comments you are about to make. Remember to use "I" statements and the value of combining them with mixed feelings statements. ("I'm feeling irritated and disappointed that you backed out

of your agreement to walk with me three nights a week.") Also remember to use empathic assertion. ("I realize it is important to you that I eat whatever your mother

serves, but I am committed to sticking to my food plan and limiting portion sizes.")

empathy vs. sympathy

Empathy is the ability to identify with and understand another person's feelings or difficulties, but not necessarily share the person's feelings. Whereas sympathy means you understand and share someone else's feelings.

Productive Praise

Everyone needs positive feedback. Sincere praise reinforces behavior and makes it more likely that people will act in ways that support your needs. Praise strengthens personal relationships and makes it easier to resolve conflicts. For example, if you are in the habit of freely and sincerely praising a person, it is easier to give constructive criticism or express frustration in the future.

- Don't limit praise to times you are giving criticism or making a request for help.
- Be specific to reinforce desired support.
- Give small compliments more frequently, rather than rolling them into one larger expression of gratitude.

What's Your Style?

Chances are, you already know your personality type. Some people fall strongly into one category of behavior, but most people exhibit a combination of traits.

Non-assertive (Passive) Traits

You believe:

- Others' feelings and needs are more important than yours.
- There is a perfect way to handle every situation so that no one feels bad.
- It's your fault if things go wrong.
- You have no choice but to comply with the desires of others.

Aggressive Traits

You:

- Feel you are being attacked by others and must defend yourself.

- Believe you won't get what you want, or you will be forced to do something you don't want.
- Put others down to protect yourself: saying tactless, derogatory things makes you feel superior or like you "won."

Assertive Traits

You:

- Accept responsibility for protecting your own rights and needs without abusing others.
- Feel confident, valued, and self-respecting.
- Avoid feeling constantly angry or guilty.
- Accept you won't always get your way.
- Acknowledge you may be wrong.
- Recognize the need to take some risks.

Developing Assertive Skills

The enclosed worksheets are designed to help you recognize common behavioral styles, identify the probable consequences of acting in these ways, and brainstorm assertive techniques to help you achieve your weight loss goals. Assertiveness becomes easier with practice. Roleplay some common sticky situations with your group members to build skill and confidence.

key goals

Using the tips in this module, develop 2 – 3 goals to work towards.

1

2

3

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