LEARN TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

CAPS

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
Communication is one of the most important ingredients in any relationship, yet we are rarely taught how to communicate effectively. Some people seem to have an intuitive understanding of the skills involved in effective communication. Others may need to learn them. The good news is that you can improve your communication by learning and practicing the skills described in this booklet.
Effective communication could help you with a number of different areas in your personal, work and study life. These include:

– Getting on with your friends and classmates
– Starting and maintaining a conversation
– Approaching tutors/lecturers
– Saying no to unwanted social invitations when you need to study
– Negotiating suitable part-time work and work hours
– Getting the job done in group work at university
– Responding appropriately to feedback or criticism
– Getting along with people on clinical placements

WHAT SKILLS DO I NEED TO LEARN FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION?

Below are some important skills you need to learn in order to be an effective communicator:

– Listening and responding skills
– Conversation skills
– Assertiveness skills
– Listening and responding skills

Each of these skills will be addressed on the following pages.
LISTENING SKILLS

HOW DO I LISTEN AND RESPOND EFFECTIVELY?

– Prepare
    Be aware of your own feelings and needs. Are you able to shut out distractions and focus on what this person is about to say?

– Listen and clarify
    Listen to the speaker’s perspective, feelings and wants. If you don’t feel as if you’ve clearly understood what they are saying, ask for clarification or more information.

– Acknowledge
    Communicate to the speaker that you have heard their point of view, for example, “You seem to be very worried about finding the time to study for your exams.”

– Your posture
    Make sure your posture indicates interest in what the person is saying. This can be done by facing the person at an appropriate distance. It helps to have relaxed arms and legs as crossing or folding your arms or legs can act “like a barrier”.

– Eye contact
    Effective eye contact usually consists of “bursts” of eye contact with movement to other parts of the person’s face or hands and looking away. Be led by the speakers’ comfort with eye contact. In some cultures, direct eye contact may be considered offensive or aggressive.

A FURTHER NOTE ON RESPONDING SKILLS

When you are expressing a feeling, stating an opinion, making an observation, or asking a question the basic rule is to keep messages simple, clear and positive.

Rules for making clear, simple statements or questions:

– Use short statements or questions
– Ask one question or make one request at a time
– Be specific (eg. Instead of saying “I’d like you to try to get to our meeting on time” say, “I’d like you to try to get to the meeting by 10 o’clock”).
– Avoid strong emotional statements (eg. “I can’t stand this disgusting mess!”). We do need to remember that when we listen and respond sensitively, the other person is going to continue talking about what he or she is experiencing, so we need to make sure that we have time to listen.

CONVERSATION SKILLS

How do I break the ice?

– Mention something in common to both of you (eg. This lecture hall is hard to find/isn’t this lecture boring) OR ask a question eg. How are you finding this workshop?
– Make the topic something that is very non-threatening (eg. Don’t start with views on religion!)

How do I know whether to continue?

– Look for signs from the other person eg. A person who does not want to talk may look away or keep writing.
– If the other person asks a question back, smiles or volunteers some extra information they may want to continue to get to know you.
– If there is no response, don’t give up but think ‘not them today’. They may have other things on their mind that have nothing to do with your attempt at conversation.

How do I keep the conversation going?

– By using the listening and responding skills mentioned above, such as appropriate body language, an attitude of interest and listening and responding to what they have to say.
– Don’t spend your time wondering what you should say next (it shows). If you really attend to what the other person is saying, your comments will flow. In other words don’t be focused on yourself (this is often a trap for very shy people) but focus on the other person.
– When there is an appropriate space, take your turn in the conversation. Share information about yourself and your interests by expanding on Yes/No answers. If there are few areas of interest in your life that are of interest to others, take the time to learn about events by reading newspapers or books, watching TV, going to movies, or developing some new hobbies or interests.
– Don’t forget to ask for the person’s name. It shows interest and respect to use someone’s name during a conversation. If you have enjoyed the conversation you might suggest exchanging e-mail or phone numbers.

For more information on forming relationships go to our Learn To Build and Maintain Healthy Relationships ebook.
Assertiveness is a communication style that enables you to express your feelings, thoughts, beliefs and opinions in a way that neither violate the rights of others or ignores your own rights. Communicating in an assertive manner can help you to minimize conflict, control anger, have your needs better met, and to have more positive relationships with friends, family and others.

WHY CAN'T I COMMUNICATE ASSERTIVELY?

Many people struggle to put assertiveness into practice because there is confusion around what it means.

Assertiveness is not aggressiveness. Being assertive is often confused with aggression because it involves sticking up for yourself. However aggressive behaviour involves forcing your needs and opinions onto others and often involves bullying or pushing others around. This is very different from assertiveness where you express your needs clearly but respectfully.

Some people behave aggressively because they have a problem with managing their anger. If anger is an issue for you, refer to our Managing Anger Worksheet.

Assertiveness is not being passive. Assertiveness also different from a passive style of communication. Passive behaviour involves not speaking up for yourself and putting your needs last behind the needs of others. This can be damaging to both your self-esteem and your relationships. An equally ineffective form of communication is a passive-aggressive style. This involves expressing angry or aggressive feelings in a way that is not open. For example, your partner asks you to do something you don’t want to do, so rather than saying no, you procrastinate or ‘forget’ to do it.

Assertiveness is not manipulation. Another form of non-assertive behaviour is manipulation. Manipulative behaviour occurs when a person attempts to get what they want by making others feel sorry or guilty towards them. Instead of taking responsibility for meeting their own needs, they play the role of victim or martyr in an attempt to get others to take care of them. Assertiveness is the half-way point between passive and aggressive – just the right balance!

HOW ASSERTIVE AM I?

Most of us are very capable of being assertive in some situations but find it very difficult to express how we’re thinking or feeling in other situations. Try this assertiveness quiz to find out how assertive you are. It may also help you to identify situations in which you would like to be more assertive.

WHAT GET'S IN THE WAY OF BEING ASSERTIVE?

There can be many factors that can get in the way of assertive communication. Some of these are:

Self defeating beliefs and thoughts. We all hold beliefs about ourselves, other people and how the world works. These are derived from our experiences of the world in both the past and present. Non-assertive people generally believe that they do not have the right to express their feelings, beliefs and opinions, so if they do try to assert themselves they feel guilty. An example of such a belief is “It is uncaring, rude and selfish to say what you want”. There are three basic beliefs that need to be established before you can start learning to be assertive:

- You have the same basic interpersonal rights as others have
- You will be happier if you appropriately exercise your rights, as well as the rights of others
- Non-assertiveness is hurtful in the long-run to you and your relationships.

For more detailed information about your rights and how to think in a more assertive manner you can go to the Centre for Clinical Interventions website for an online workbook module.

Skills deficits. Sometimes people have not learned how to communicate assertively. Following is an outline of the skills we need to learn.

WHAT SKILLS COULD I LEARN TO COMMUNICATE MORE ASSERTIVELY?

Assertiveness involves the use of both verbal and non-verbal communication. Other factors such as managing stress are also important.

Verbal communication skills. There are some verbal assertiveness techniques you can learn that can help you to behave in a more assertive way. These techniques all involve expressing yourself clearly and respectfully as outlined on page 3.

When you are expressing a feeling, stating an opinion or making an observation, an appropriate format to use is called an “I-statement”. This is a major component of assertiveness techniques. “I-statements” allow us to state things in neutral terms and to express ourselves directly and honestly. They also enable us to take responsibility for what we think, feel and need while avoiding blaming or accusing others. e.g. *I feel upset when you turn away from me when I am talking because it seems as though you are not interested in
what I am saying”. In contrast, “You-statements” blame the other person, put him/her on the defensive, and often cause communication to be blocked eg. “Don’t turn your back on me when I am talking to you, you moron!”

**Non-verbal communication skills.** A large part of our communication is non-verbal. Sometimes our non-verbal communication conveys a different message to that we wish to convey from our verbal communication. To communicate effectively it is important that your non-verbal communication is consistent with the verbal part of the message, so you need to have appropriate:

- Eye contact
- Facial expression
- Tone of voice
- Posture and gesture
- Touch
- Intensity
- Timing and Pace

**Exercise.** Spend some time observing the non-verbal communication of people around you, such as waiters, shop assistants and people close to you. What impact does their non-verbal communication have on your interaction with them?

**Stress management skills.** When we are communicating in a passive or aggressive way we are often feeling anxious or angry and this can be reflected in our bodies. We can become tense in our shoulders, necks, jaw etc. To communicate assertively we need to be able to control the tension we may feel in our bodies when we are in a difficult or uncomfortable situation. Feeling very stressed can affect our ability to hear what someone else is saying as well as our ability to communicate our own feelings and needs clearly. For information on managing stress go to our Learn To Manage Stress and Anxiety ebook.

**WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU ASSERT YOURSELF AND THE OTHER PERSON DOESN’T AGREE WITH YOU?**

The answer is compromise if you can. Self-respect for each person is one of the principle goals of assertiveness, so let self-respect be your guide in deciding what to settle for. If there is a real conflict of interests, and provided you don’t feel that your self-respect is in question, offer a workable compromise. If the outcome involves loss of self-respect for you, there can be no compromise, and you need to make this clear.

For more information on problem-solving and conflict resolution go to Learn To Build and Maintain Healthy Relationships ebook.

**SOME FINAL POINTS**

Even if you are not a born communicator, it is possible to improve your communication. One of the most common problems in communication is caused by trying to read a person’s mind or expecting them to read yours. If you want people to respond to your ideas and needs, you have to be able to say what they are, and say it in a way that will make others want to respond positively. But this is not a one-way process, it is also important to take the time to listen to others and respond in a caring and sensitive manner.

**SKILLSHOPS**

The University Counseling and Psychological Services runs the following workshops which may be helpful in developing more effective communication skills:

- Confident Communication
- Shyness

Go to our Workshops page for further information and to register online.

**WEBITES**

The Centre for Clinical Interventions for an online workbook on assertiveness.


**BOOKS**

(available from the University of Sydney Library)


**INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE**

If after accessing the resources here you are still needing some further help in communicating effectively, please make an appointment with one of our counsellors at Counselling and Psychological Services.