Self-Assertion Skills

TI 043 - Thematic

By

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Revised by The Clearinghouse April 2002
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Overview

Goals: To facilitate the development of increased selfexpression and assertive behavior in interpersonal interactions by broadening options through changes in thought patterns and deepening of emotional awareness.

Target: Unassertive, directly or indirectly aggressive college students who want to become more appropriately assertive.

Differentiating among non-assertive, aggressive, and assertive behaviors and understanding personal values and beliefs and their effect on our actions (or inactions) are necessary prerequisites to acquisition of effective assertion skills. Once this basic groundwork is laid, the workshop adds to it at least the following: (1) we can choose when to be assertive; (2) assertion is a skill and can be learned much like a physical skill; (3) irrational beliefs can preclude assertion or evoke aggression; (4) techniques of "broken record," "shifting gears," "fogging" and so on; role play practice and homework assignments. Note: Instructions on giving this workshop are mostly provided in a general manner. It will be up to the leaders to tailor the materials to suit their needs.

Staff: Co-leaders (2)

Length: Six 2-hour sessions

Size: Maximum 12 participants

Equipment and Materials:

- If available, a video camera and playback monitor will be helpful in the feedback process during role playing.
- Handout and background information is found at the end of the manual.
- References are also found at the end of the manual.

Structured Exercises (a sample of the ones included in this workshop):

The Name Game
Non verbal assertive, aggressive and unassertive postures
Inane topics
Foolishness exercise
Giving and receiving compliments
Making and refusing requests
Positive self-statements

Evaluation: You might want to use an evaluation form of your own choosing for this group.
Session One
Your First Self-Assertion Skills (SAP) Group Meeting

Goals
The three important goals of the first session are:

1. To create group cohesion or getting participants “hooked” on the group and the concept of assertiveness.
2. To present the concepts of assertiveness and how it differs from non-assertiveness and aggressiveness.
3. To encourage participants to think in terms of examining and monitoring their own behaviors so they will attend to doing their “homework” assignments.

Activities
1. Introductions
An enjoyable first exercise is a chain of introductions. It begins with one of the co-leaders introducing him- or herself to the person on the left. Then the co-leader turns to the person on the right and says something like “Hi, my name is ____________and I'd like you to meet my friend_________”(the person on the left). The person on the left then responds by introducing himself or herself to the person on his or her left in the same fashion. This introductory chain is kept up until the last person has to introduce all the members of the group to the person who began the exercise. This is a good ice-breaker because it gets everyone to speak, and creates an atmosphere of friendliness, humor, and acceptance.

The group leader who discussed the exercise (whose turn will come around about half way through the circle if the co-leaders sit on opposite sides of the room) might want to make a point of not being able to remember each person's name perfectly, so that group members who make mistakes won't feel embarrassed by not being the only one unable to remember everyone's name. It's rather important that the group leaders be comfortable with making mistakes rather than feeling that they have to be perfect. (“Perfect” people make other people nervous!)

In addition, as the group continues over the session, leaders may want to present situations in which they have recently had difficulty coming up with an effective assertive response. In this way, participants can see that developing one's assertive skills is a continuous and ongoing process. The leaders are not perfect assertive “models.”
2. Discussion of Assertiveness and Aggressiveness.

In presenting content, begin with a rather didactic description of the differences between (1) assertiveness, (2) unassertiveness, (3) aggressiveness, and (4) indirect aggressiveness (passive aggressive behavior, which is the way most unassertive people express aggression if it gets expressed at all).

The distinctions among the four groups will need to be discussed again and again. The key factor differentiating aggression and assertion is the fact that assertive comments don't cause the other person to feel put down or degraded, because assertive responses always include an empathic component. To illustrate, present examples, or perhaps have the leaders role-play the examples, demonstrating the differences.

It is important to focus on the fact that helping participants develop assertive skills allows them to choose whether or not to respond assertively. It might be helpful to discuss the fact that we have actually been socialized to be unassertive and have been taught to inhibit expressions of standing up even for our reasonable rights. We have been socialized to be more concerned about protecting other people's feelings over our own.

The “unassertive credo” runs something like this: “I should never make anyone else feel _______ except me” (fill in the blank with any term like “inconvenienced,” “unhappy,” “put out,” etc.). It may be helpful to think of learning to be assertive as learning “enlightened selfishness.” Another way to think of becoming more assertive is to consider it as learning to dare to be more honest (i.e., not having to tell “white lies”), while still having concern for other people's feelings, as well as concern for one's own time, feelings, etc.

We have all learned in our culture to be modest and compliant, and some of this false modesty results in our not giving as much consideration to our own wants, thoughts, and feelings as we give to those of another person. This is particularly true for women, who have learned that it is wrong, bad, or inappropriate to cause any interpersonal anxiety or stress. This also means that many women have problems expressing anger, even when their angry feelings are really justified. (Generally, these get expressed by indirect aggression, which doesn't result in getting a response which clears the air.)

Point out that a person behaves unassertively when he or she allows his or her rights to be violated either by: (1) failing to assert him- or herself when someone else knowingly or consciously infringes on that person’s rights or (2) by not speaking up when someone unknowingly or unintentionally encroaches on that person’s rights. This tends to result in the unassertive person feeling hurt, misunderstood anxious, or angry. Aggressive behavior typically involves an overreaction or outburst following or resulting from pent-up unexpressed feelings. Being aggressive often results in an escalation of an argument, in that the other person feeling accused or “put down” needs to defend him- or herself against the aggressive response.
An important point for participants to think about is the situations or people with whom they are unassertive. Some of us are mostly unassertive, but only with one or two particular people, or only in expressing particular emotions. For example, some women can express anger very assertively, but then are unassertive when it comes to expressing positive feelings such as caring or loving. Some people can express all their thoughts and feelings to some people, but really clam up with others, like authority figures, for example. Ask participants to think about which people and feelings they individually have difficulty being assertive with or expressing their feelings.

It is often helpful to point out the parallel between learning assertive skills and learning certain physical skill such as skiing, swimming, or playing tennis, or the learning of some foreign language. People often feel awkward practicing their newly acquired skills at first, but will improve rapidly as they practice more and more.

It is important that participants understand they should not expect to become “perfectly assertive” right away. They will develop the skill by first breaking down the steps that go into an assertive response, such as the content of what they say, their voice tone, their eye contact, their gestures, etc. Then, it is critical that participants practice being assertive in relatively easy situations before gradually going on to be assertive in more difficult situations. Participants need to think of themselves perfecting and polishing skills on their own long after the group itself is over.

3. “Saying No” Activity

You may or may not get to this in the first session. Ask for a volunteer to begin by making an unreasonable request of any other group member. That person is instructed to refuse the request assertively, without a flurry of excuses, but including an empathic component into his or her statement. Then the leaders model giving positive and slightly corrective feedback, if necessary, and elicit feedback from other members. Next, the person who answered the original request makes an unreasonable request of someone else, and so forth, until everyone has a chance to “Say No.”

4. Homework: Goal Setting & Identifying Situations

Participants should understand that for the group to be relevant to their needs, they will have to be discussing personal goals. They need to try to specify some short-term goals to have a criterion by which to measure their progress. They should set some behavioral goals for themselves to accomplish between each meeting. Each person is there because he or she wants to learn how to be more assertive, but the goal is too broad to really be helpful. That is why it is important to set goals.
As homework between the first and second sessions, ask group members to jot down some short-term goals that they want to accomplish, say in one week, or by the end of the SAS group, in six weeks. Let participants know that their goals may change as they go along.

Another important task is for participants to become more sensitized to their own assertive and unassertive behaviors. Ask them to make a mental or actual note of situations in which they would have liked to have been more assertive, as well as situations in which they felt they were appropriately assertive.

OPTIONAL: To conclude, mention that you'll be using the video camera next session to help group members get an idea of how they came across in role-plays. Make it clear that no one will have to be video-taped if they have any particular objections to it. Emphasize the importance of their thinking about and getting baseline data on their assertiveness between now and next session and setting their own personalized goals.

You may want to pass out the “Self Assertive Skills Workshop Handout” at this point. Or you could choose to wait until a later session.
Session Two

Preparation: Before the second session begins, set up the videotape equipment and make sure that you can get it running properly. There's almost nothing as frustrating as trying to deal with equipment that won't work properly after the group has begun and you are in process! You'll need to have a tape too, if you intend to record and play back role plays.

Goals:
1. To discuss participants’ short-term goals, as recorded after the first session.
2. To role-play being assertive in problem situations.

Activities
1. “Name Game” Introductions Activity
   You may find it fun and helpful to begin the second session with the same “name game” exercise with which you began the first session. You'll find that it will go much more quickly.

2. Discussion of Homework: Goal Setting and Identifying Situations
   You might then want to ask group members to talk about what they discovered about themselves when they attempted to be more aware of their assertiveness (or lack of it) as part of their homework since last session.

   Also, if you asked them to jot down goals, you'll need to check on that at the very beginning of this session. Do remember to ask them about any homework assignments. It can be rather disappointing for a person to be sitting there, feeling proud that they've done their assignment and then not have leaders recall what the assignment was or even inquire about it. On the other hand, if you did ask them to do homework and there are people in the group who haven't done it, simply pass over that while at the same time verbally rewarding those who did do the assignment (the old behavioral notion of reward, but don't punish).

   In eliciting reporting about homework, break down your inquiries into the following categories:
   • Were there things that participants did since the last session that they felt good about, and
   • Were there things they thought needed improvement.

3. Role Playing
   The discussion of homework naturally can lead into role-playing if anyone volunteers and reports something that they want to work on. If this happens, remember that it is important to get all the group members to participate in the problem-solving and coaching for the one group
member, so that all members get a sense of being a part of the unit that provides help and support.

Leaders need to model supportive comments and coaching and be sure that all the members are encouraged to contribute. Especially in the first few role-plays done in any group, it is important that the role-players are encouraged: remember, it’s a scary thing to do a role-play (especially if you’re not a graduate student in psychology!). The tone of acceptance of these role-plays gives others encouragement to do some of their own role-plays later on.

When role-playing, it's often helpful to have people start with making their typical unassertive response, then have them make an aggressive response, conjuring up all the emotion that they feel, with no holds barred regarding language.

After they make that response, ask group members to comment on whether that was actually aggressive or really assertive. Often, it's a good idea to simply inquire of the role-player “how did that feel?” as so often it's a delightful feeling for people to express emotion. If the response was as simply assertive (not aggressive)— which often happens— let the group members give that feedback; if it indeed was aggressive, tell them that that was great, but that now they'll need to tone down the content so as not to be offensive, but to hold on to the affect and the conviction of their feelings and then make an assertive response.

This “defining the end points” (of unassertive and aggressive) often is more helpful in getting people to find the “middle ground” of the assertive responses than by just approaching it from the vantage point of their typical unassertive response style.

4. Advice to Leaders: Goal Discussion Tips & Role-Play Guidelines

**Goal Discussion Tips:** When discussing goals, be sure that participants don't make the mistake of setting goals at which they are unlikely to succeed right away. (Remember the notion of experiencing successes on easy tasks before going on to much more difficult tasks?)

This can be illustrated by referring to the *learning to ski* analogy: You don’t go to the top of the most difficult slope if you've only just learned to snowplow. You stay on the beginner slope until you've gained the confidence and skills to move on to the intermediate slope, etc. Another ski analogy is to explain that they can expect to feel awkward as they practice new behaviors. No one ever becomes an expert skier without feeling and appearing awkward in early attempts on the slopes. So, too, for learning assertive behaviors. Encourage participants to “hang in there” despite their awkwardness. It will become more natural.

If someone brings up a situation they want to role-play that you think will be very difficult, simply say that that sounds like a “tough slope” situation, and check whether or not the person feels ready to tackle it yet. If the answer is “yes,” then go ahead but temper any difficulties he or she might have with comments like, “Yeah, this one really is a tough one.” In this way, if the
person comes away from the role-play with a sense of failure, there will be the face-saving feeling that at least it was a really difficult one that proved an obstacle!

**Role Play Guidelines.** One of the hardest things for leaders to do in assertive skill groups is to keep the groups focused on assertive issues rather than rambling about personal relationships, etc. You'll find that this requires skill on your part. Another difficulty is keeping role-plays short enough that they don't become boring for half of the group.

Work on keeping all role-plays short, even if it means jumping in and cutting participants off like a movie director.

The only exceptions to this are a bit later on when you'll want to have participants practice “serial assertions.” Here the point is to be able to make repetetive assertive responses when the first one or two are not effective in the situation (i.e., the other person is really persistent, requiring the one learning to be assertive to be just as persistent).

Another situation to be dealt with later on that will entail longer role-plays is when you give participants a situation in which they are assertive and then get negative feedback regarding their assertiveness. That will necessarily be a longer role-play, but for right now simple, relatively uncomplicated and short role plays are in order.

One way to desensitize people to the videotaping process is to have them practice nonverbal unassertive, aggressive and asservive postures and stances and then tape them and play them back, looking for universals, or poses or stances common to each of those response styles. This can be done either by having one leader pan the camera on the rest of the group, or by having everyone stand and then walk to the front of the camera one right after the other, “Miss America” style, and then try to behave a particular way (i.e. aggressively). This can be quick fun, and it gets things moving.

5. Saying “No” Activity

If you didn’t get to the exercise of “saying no to unreasonable requests,” do get to it this session and emphasize the emphatic component of participants’ response without using tons of excuses.

One point of didactic information, especially for those of you leading all-women groups: Many women fear that by becoming more assertive they will be losing their femininity. Let them know the masculine and feminine are not bipolar opposites. It is possible for competent men and women to have some characteristics of the opposite sex. They can learn to be assertive and still be feminine!

6. Homework

Remember, have group members come up with homework tasks for themselves for next week.
Session Three

Goals:

1. To help participants learn to examine their values and beliefs to discover which ones are obstructing their ability to be assertive.

2. To continue to broadening participant awareness of what behaviors constitute assertive behavior, helping them to see it as a very generalized skill.

3. To help participants learn to receive compliments.

Important Note: One of the most crucial things participants should leave the group with by the end of six weeks is the ability to examine their values and beliefs to find which ones are getting in their way in their attempts to be assertive. If their belief system and their values have not changed as a result of some of the “teaching” you’ve done in this group, then they probably won't be able to sustain the gains they've made in behaving more assertively.

Activities

1. Rational Emotive Therapy Role Play or Discussion

One way to get participants to focus on their beliefs is a notion taken directly from *Rational Emotive Therapy* by Albert Ellis (see References for Ellis’ latest work on this subject). When doing a role play or discussing a situation in which someone had difficulty being assertive, or expects to have difficulty, ask the person to list the number of “irrational beliefs” that would get in the way of being able to be assertive. Then you and the group also add to that list. Finally, ask the person to come up with rational restatements of those “irrational beliefs,” which would make it easier for to be assertive.

For example, let's assume that the role player is being asked to loan a new sweater that has sentimental value, which the person really doesn't want to loan. The “irrational beliefs” are the following: *It's wrong to be selfish. I shouldn't put material possessions above friendships. She probably won't hurt the sweater. She's loaned things to me in the past, etc.* These self-statements will combine to make responding assertively in this situation very difficult unless they can be reformulated.

Rational restatements might go like this: *There's nothing wrong with valuing my possessions. I value this friendship very much, but that doesn't mean that I need to do things I really don't want to do in order to sustain it. She may indeed not hurt the sweater, but if she did I'd probably be so angry with her and with myself that the friendship would be affected. Yes, she's loaned things to me in the past, but that does not leave me in her debt to the extent that I have a moral obligation to loan her anything that I own, no matter what is sentimental significance to me, etc.* You can then go on to have the person role-play
an empathic and assertive response after she has listed the rational restatements of the irrational beliefs.

The term “irrational beliefs” is in no way intended to be judgemental, but instead highlights the fact that by maintaining these beliefs people will not be able to act or behave in ways that they really choose to behave. Many of our beliefs were learned during childhood as part of our early socialization, and because they are so deeply ingrained, they are difficult to ignore. But we must work at it if we are choosing to behave more in accordance with what we feel and currently believe. You might ask participants to give some examples of childhood beliefs that are simply not operable at this point in time.

Another cognitive point. When a person gets angry with someone because he or she is infringing upon the person’s rights, for example, by asking a favor which the person considers to be unreasonable, it is useful to think about directing some of the anger inward for being so afraid of being assertive, rather than aiming it all at someone who has dared to make the request. That self-directed anger can then motivate the person to respond assertively, thereby making the person feel better and alleviating anger by behaving in a way that is valued.

Being able to be more assertive involves altering one’s cognitive structure so as to support behaving more assertively, developing the content verbally (the assertive message), and being able to deliver it in a convincing manner (the non-verbal components of behavior).

2. Broadening the Understanding of Assertive Behavior

Even in the third session you will be working on broadening participant awareness of what behaviors constitute assertive behavior, helping them to see it as a very generalized skill.

You may do this by defining assertive behavior in four broad categories:

(a) Initiating social interactions (i.e. starting a conversation with a stranger, calling someone you barely know to go for coffee, etc.).

(b) Standing up for one’s rights (i.e. insisting on a roommate’s doing his or her agreed-to fair share of the chores, seeing an instructor about an apparently undeserved low grade, etc. Note that standing up for one’s rights occurs in situations in which rights are being infringed unknowingly by the other person, as well as situations in which the other person is somewhat aware that his or her request is an infringement.

(c) Expressing feelings, honestly and directly, both positive and negative (i.e. praising someone who’s done a fine job, telling a friend something about his or her behavior which would probably be helpful, but might hurt his feelings, telling a parent tactfully but with conviction that your values are not what they were when you were in high school, etc.

(d) Being able to express anger or annoyance in provoking situations, as opposed to “sitting on it,” expressing it by snide comments, or blowing up (i.e., express feelings to
someone you feel is being unjustly critical, responding to “put downs” by someone you’re with, and groups of people such as a minority group, etc.

Why the separate focus on expression of anger or annoyance? Because there are so many prohibitions against the expression of anger in our society. Yet there are so many instances in which people feel angry that the discrepancy between feelings and expressions of those feelings is probably greatest for the emotion of anger than any other emotion. But underscore that empathy is still a component of expressing feelings of anger and annoyance!

3. “Giving & Receiving Compliments” Exercise

We have been brought up to be so modest that many of us cannot accept compliments for what they are— gifts! In fact, some of us project our discomfort about being complimented onto others and therefore “spare” others the discomfort of being complimented by never complimenting them, even when we might want to.

For this reason, a great exercise, is the exercise of giving and more important of receiving compliments. This will also add to group cohesion. Have a volunteer begin by giving a compliment to someone else in the group and have the recipient respond in a way that acknowledges the gift, rather than throwing it away.

For example, the compliment is “I like your shirt.

The throwaway response would be “Oh, this old thing.”

Whereas, “Thank you, it’s a well-worn favorite” is an acceptance of the compliment.

4. “Doing Something Foolish” Exercise

You might want to end the session with the exercise of doing something foolish. This will help participants get over their fears of appearing anything but in command or dignified at all times. Do it at the very end— be foolish yourself. Make sure everyone does something silly and experiences the sensation that the world didn’t cave in because they behaved foolishly for half a minute.

5. Homework Assignments.

Homework assignments should be made for the next session.
Session Four

Goals:
1. To focus on behavioral techniques to help group members behave more assertively.
2. To continue discussing homework assignments and doing role-play.

Activities
1. Discussion of Behavioral Techniques

It’s important to present behavioral techniques at this point in time because participants’ cognitive belief system should be established first. The belief system can support their assertive or expressive behaviors. After that, participants can identify more assertive behavior and construct self-statements they can say to themselves which will help to maintain, justify, or reinforce their new assertive behavior.

Next, it’s important to focus on the non-verbal components of behavior to make the message more convincing. It might be helpful in role-playing to ask the question of the group as to whether any role-player has voice characteristics which detract from his or her assertive message.

For example, is the person’s voice high and whiny?, Does it trail off in volume? Does the person not complete sentences or end them in “but”? And are there any comments the person habitually makes that are self-discounting phrases, like: “You’ve probably already thought of this, but…."

It’s sometimes important to encourage people to engage in a cognitive silent rehearsal of a successful outcome of an assertive encounter before they engage in it. We probably have gotten into the habit of rehearsing negative outcomes of encounters, and the layman’s term for that is “worrying.”

Behavioral Techniques

The following techniques have been culled from several sources, including Manuel Smith’s When I Say No, I Feel Guilty. The various techniques are designed to focus on group members applying a greater level of behavioral control in making their assertive responses. The first two are simply social skills. Note that a handout version appears at the end of the manual.

1. Teach people to recognize cues given in a social interaction during everyday conversation to indicate what is interesting or important to that person. You might practice the exercise by having two people talk about anything that comes into their minds and have a third person try to interject his- or herself into the conversation by picking up on some of the free information.
2. “Self-disclosure” is also an assertive skill. This skill makes it more acceptable for persons to disclose either positive or negative aspects about themselves, their personality, their lifestyle, their behavior, etc., and feel less invested in maintaining a social facade. This again can be practiced by having two people interact in an everyday kind of conversation with one partner or the other practicing making self-disclosing comments. This should enhance the depth of the interaction rather than keeping it on a socially superficial level.

3. In dealing with conflict, the first assertive technique can be considered a “persistent serial assertion” (often referred to as “broken record”). This skill involves staying on the track of your point by repeating it despite the possible manipulative attempts of the other person to get you into side issues or irrelevant logic. This should make it possible to stick with your initial point. I think of this as being very closely related to another skill of not “taking the bait.” For example, if someone is trying to evoke a response from you, or provoke you into long explanations or reasons for your behavior, an important skill is to be able to give a minimal response and not respond to the manipulation or take the bait, getting into defensive, long, drawn out explanations.

4. The “content to process shift” (often referred to as “shifting gears”) is another very important assertive skill. It involves confrontation, but it is important for group members to realize that in a confrontation it is critical to begin with a minimal assertive confrontation and not draw out the “big guns” unless absolutely necessary to later on. For example, if a person is persistent in repeating his or her request despite the fact that you've said “no” three times, you might switch from the content of what you're talking about to the process of being ignored and make a comment like “You've repeated your request enough times, and I'm beginning to think that you're trying to get me to change my mind.

5. Negative inquiry is another useful assertive technique. Here a person actively elicits criticism that he or she believes the other person is feeling in order to use that information or to exhaust it. This is a skill to be used in more intimate relationships and friendships that will lead to improved communication. It is one that people would probably not want to use in less intimate relationships. For example, a person, by practicing the skill of negative inquiry, might say to a mate “I know that you're feeling angry and hurt because I didn't get home in time to clean up the kitchen and make dinner, but you seem especially angry and I'm wondering if there is anything else that you're feeling annoyed with me about as well.”

6. A related technique to negative inquiry is “fogging.” This technique enables people to accept a manipulative criticism by calmly acknowledging that you hear the criticism and accept the possibility that there may be some truth in what they're saying without needing to get trapped and to defend or explain yourself or get detracted away from your main point.

7. “Time out” is a skill which is useful when a person is feeling confused, highly anxious or panicky and it simply involves being able to request some time rather than respond to the pressure of making a decision or a statement right at the moment. An example would be
saying something like “I don't want to make a decision about that right now, but I'll get back to you in 20 minutes.”

8. A final technique is that of a “workable compromise.” This is a skill in which you propose a compromise to the other person if you are sure that your self-respect is not in question in doing so. If your self respect or self worth is involved, however, it might be best not to compromise.

These techniques and skills can be practiced in role plays and you can teach them to your group. It should be understood, however, that the techniques in themselves are not helpful if people have not established a supportive belief system and focused on nonverbal components of their messages.

2. Positive Self Statements Exercise

Part of the modesty we have been socialized to display has often made it difficult for people to state good things about themselves. An exercise you might want to use in this fourth session is that of making positive self statements.

Begin by pointing out to the group that if you were to ask them to come up with some things they didn't like about themselves or that they want to improve, they probably would have little difficulty coming up with a substantial list. But it is often difficult to “own” or admit to positive self attributes in a public situation. Ask them to think of a positive thing about themselves and tell them they are going to tell the rest of the group this one thing.

Begin by having one of the co-leaders model making a positive self statement. The more personal this self statement is, the more likely the other group members will make very personal self-disclosing self statements. After the co-leader models, ask the group members to volunteer making positive statements. Leaders should give feedback and encourage others to give positive and constructive feedback to the person making the self statements. (For example, about their voice tone, their manner of delivery, etc.)

After the exercise process, explain how difficult it was to disclose to others things that you feel good about yourselves.

4. When Assertive Responses are Ineffective

A topic of discussion which you may not have time for in this session but might want to give next time instances in which group members found their assertive responses to be ineffective.

One reason assertive behaviors might be ineffective is because other people are aware of the fact that they can “hook” these people emotionally. It might be helpful to group members to focus on determining what emotional hooks other people may be able to use effectively in keeping them from being assertive (i.e., guilt, loss of friendship, etc.)
5. Homework Assignments

After discussing a variety of hooks that people can use, ask participants to list particular hooks to which they are most vulnerable. This is also something they can do as a homework assignment.

Another assignment might be to have them focus on or perhaps write down what factors in others might block their being able to be assertive. You could also ask them to attend to what behaviors they have which negate or neutralize the convincing quality of their acting assertively. These include the non-verbal things we've talked about before, such as voice too soft, holding head down when speaking, blushing when angry or offended, etc. You might want to ask participants to think up some ways in which they can reinforce themselves in behaving assertively until the satisfaction of being assertive is or becomes self reinforcing.

It's important to reiterate that being assertive is not merely being able to rattle off set scripts, but rather it's a process of expressing feelings and thoughts in open and direct manner without being aggressive.

If one or two group members have not participated in a particular session, it is important that in some way you indicate your realization of that to them at the end of the session or at the beginning of the next session. You might do this by checking out whether or not the silent person/persons got something out of this meeting vicariously. Or ask participants if they had something of their own that they wanted to work on but didn't get to. If this is the case you might want to offer them the option of having the first portion of the next group session to deal with their issue.

Alternately, instead of dealing with this kind of thing at the end of the session, you might begin the next session by saying something like, “Mary, you weren't very involved in the last group session. I wonder if there's something you want to work on for yourself this time.” The point is not to put the person on the spot, but to let him or her know that you're aware of the lack of participation and to help the person have the opportunity to ask for time if he or she is having difficulty asking for group time directly.
Session Five

Goals:

1. To begin the transition of participants being on their own again in dealing with situations requiring assertive efforts.

2. To begin to prepare participants for some negative feedback when they are once again in the “real world.”

3. To continue discussing homework assignments and doing role playing.

Overview of Activities

For the most part, you will be continuing to do many of the things that you have been doing in previous sessions in this and the next session. The bulk of your activity will focus on discussing participants’ homework and role-playing any situations with which they had difficulties.

You might want to ask participants to look back at the goals that they established for themselves at the beginning of the group to see how they are progressing. This may also be a “taking off” point for them to establish some target behaviors for their homework between now and the last session, next week.

This will be the last opportunity for participants to try some difficult tasks and process them with this group afterwards. Most of your time will be spent doing role-playing, with very little focus on the kind of group exercises you've done in earlier sessions. This is because you are beginning the transition of participants being on their own again in dealing with situations requiring assertive efforts. Help group members think of people they will be able to talk to about their assertiveness who will applaud their efforts and will be able to encourage them.

When role playing in the group, be sure that when a person makes an assertive response he or she gets “balked” again, or have the person with whom they are attempting to be assertive play the “guilt” game.

For example: “What's the matter with you these days? You never used to be this contrary. . . or ‘never used to mind. . . working during your lunch hour. . . or . . . taking out the garbage all the time or loaning me your clothes or . . . always picking up the tab, etc.”

The purpose of practicing this in the group is two-fold: (1) to require participants to make serial assertive responses and (2) to prepare them for the possibility that they may encounter some negative feedback for their assertive behaviors. This preparation for negative feedback will likely decrease the traumatic effect that they might otherwise experience in a real-life situation in which they get negative feedback.
Women especially need to be aware of the fact that not everyone is going to applaud their greater assertiveness! Awareness of this, and practice in dealing with it, will probably decrease their anxiety about it when it is encountered.

If you are having difficulty finding enough time for everyone to have turns role-playing (which may be a problem in some of the larger groups), you may want to break up into dyads for some of the role-playing. If you do, however, be sure to come back into the larger group to process what that was like and what their experiences were. In the dyads, have people take turns being assertive and being the “responder” or the “one making requests.”

At this stage, people may be more anxious to get to some of the more difficult assertive encounters, or the ones which will simply be difficult because they are so laden with emotion. It makes a lot of sense to begin doing those now, especially if they have been doing their homework on some of the less difficult tasks and have been succeeding.

When doing a difficult task, help participants put the responses together, utilizing some of the skills and techniques outlined in the Behavioral Techniques Handout. Also, when doing some of the more difficult tasks, help participants do some positive self-talk about the anxiety they may be feeling.

For instance, instead of saying to themselves: “I’m feeling so anxious. I know I’m just going to blow this,” refocus to something like: “I’m feeling butterflies and anxious, but I can use this feeling to motivate me to do this thing which is important to me.

Good Luck and have fun in this session!
Session Six

Goals:

1. To encourage each member to take responsibility to make plans to continue their assertive growth.

Activities

1. Homework discussion and Future Planning

Begin by as usual to by asking participants to share the results of their homework. Then you may want to encourage members to take responsibility for concrete plans to continue their assertive growth in methods of their own choosing.

2. Group Problem Solving

Have the group members problem solve how to continue their assertiveness work after the group ends.

To do this, they may want to get together with a friend each week to discuss their assertive behaviors. They may want to make a list of target behaviors which they will want to work toward after the group itself has terminated. They may want to think up ways in which they will be able to reward themselves for working on behaving more assertively.

3. Role-Playing

You will probably want to continue role-playing as you have in previous sessions, in which group members bring in and want to work on or get feedback about specific situations.

4. Closure

Toward the end of the session time (probably 30 minutes before the end) tell the group that you want to use the bulk of the remaining time to take care of any unfinished business such as saying things they have not previously said and would like to say; telling each other “good-bye”; expressing feelings toward each other nonverbally, etc.

This time is designed to give a definite sense of closure to the series and help the group members feel finished with the group.

You may want to do the final wrap-up with a group hug, if the rapport of the group has been good and you feel that the group would be responsive to this. Have all the group members put their arms around the person on either side of them, forming a complete circle. Then you might encourage participants to share positive feelings or remarks about the group in general, such as
“We're gutsy people for having put ourselves on the line and risked trying out new behaviors,” or “This is one of the finest groups of people I've gotten to know,” or whatever is appropriate. You as leaders need to judge whether this wrap-up exercise is appropriate for your group or not.
Handouts and Background Information

Assertive Behavior in Relationships

What is assertive behavior?

Assertive behavior always communicates respect for your partner and takes into account the mutuality of needs between people. Although much of the popular literature on assertion training makes it sound like a technique to use when you are in an adversary situation, the broad meaning of assertiveness skill training is simply training people to be less inhibited in expressing themselves. The purpose of assertiveness training is to deepen the expression and experience of your individuality and humanness, and has nothing to do with turning you into a “con artist” able to get your own way.

Both self-awareness and social-awareness are fundamental to being assertive. Self-awareness is necessary in order to determine what you want; whereas social awareness is important to be able to examine what your partner needs in order to judge the consequences of particular actions, and thereby prepare yourself to take responsibility for your choices.

Why is assertiveness important in relationships?

Maintaining harmony in our intimate relationship with our partner or spouse is typically so important to us that we often choose not to air our grievances, out of a sense of fear that by doing so we would jeopardize the relationship. Paradoxically, it is precisely our fear of isolation from our partner which can lead, over time to a relationship based on a mere charade of harmony, where each partner grows truly isolated from the other in their inner, unexpressed thoughts and feelings. Sidney Jourard said it well: “Being polite out of a fear of offending our partner, or biding one’s discontent with a situation or the behavior of our partner, is a sure way of either destroying a relationship, or of preventing one from ever really forming.”

Expressing thoughts and feelings honestly will likely reveal numerous ways in which two people’s perception, tastes, opinions, and values differ. The differences discovered when shared with a partner can be viewed as adding interest, excitement, and dynamism to a relationship; however they could also be viewed and experienced as a potential threat to the relationship, especially if one believes that precise compatibility of tastes, opinions and values are the keystones to a good relationship.

Is assertiveness a technique my partner and I can learn?

Assertive behavior must be rooted philosophically in people’s value systems. Often our early socialization has not helped us to develop the skills with which to be assertive. These skills can be learned anytime, although they are just that—skills and not techniques. It is difficult for one person in a relationship to be assertive or to develop their assertive skills if their partner does
not value assertiveness, or belittles their partner's when they are assertive. There must be mutuality of values and beliefs in order for assertive behavior to be effective in a relationship.

**What are some other types of assertive behavior?**

1. *Basic assertive statements* disclose a thought, a request, preferences, opinion, etc.
   
   Examples: “I think the dinner was excellent tonight”; I appreciated your thoughtfulness today”. “I feel ignored when you spend so much time in the evening—reading, working, watching T.V., etc.”. “I would prefer you didn't fill the coffeepot so full that it overflows when it begins to boil.”

2. *Empathic assertive statements* genuinely recognize the other person’s situation, dilemma, or feelings, but reflects your own need or position.

   Example: “I know you have really been looking forward to our going to the lake this afternoon, but I am feeling that there are some things that I really need to get done here.”

3. *Escalation assertiveness* includes statements made after a minimal or basic assertive statement has not been acknowledged, or has not been effective. In escalating you gradually increase the power of your statement, moving from a request to a demand.

   Example: “I would like to talk with you about ________.” If that basic assertive statement has not been responded to, you might move to a statement such as “If this is not a good time to talk with you about ________, I want us to set up a time when we will sit down and discuss it.”

4. *Confronting assertiveness* consists of basically two kinds of statements:

   a. Non-judgmental statements concerning one's partner's deeds being inconsistent with their words.

   Example: “We agreed to clean the kitchen on alternate days but you have not done it on Tuesday or Thursday and I would like to talk with you about it.”

   b. Content-to-process-shift statements which focus on the interaction after a direct assertive message appears to have not been heard, or, if heard, has not been responded to.

   Example: “I have already said three times that I need to study and can't play bridge tonight and you don't seem to want to accept my answer. I would like you to respect my decision to work.”
5. *I-language assertiveness*, which consists of a simple formula for communicating specific concrete effects of your partner's behavior on you.

   When . . .
   The effects are. . .
   I feel. . .
   I'd prefer. . .

The formula can be easily abbreviated and still maintain its effectiveness.

6. *Responding to the negative feelings* of your partner:

   a. When your partner expresses negative feelings, it is important that you first listen and avoid defending yourself. Get clear about what your partner is saying and when responding simply stick to your point and avoid being sidetracked into irrelevant side issues

      Example: “I don't want to talk about getting the car fixed right now, we were discussing kitchen chores and I would like to get back to that.”

   b. Negative inquiry: used as a way to elicit whatever criticism there is in order to know what it all is, exhaust it, and then be able to use it in proposing compromises.

7. *Proposing Compromises*: this is often the best way to meet both your needs and your partner's. Proposing compromises reflects flexibility rather than rigidity.
Self-Assertive Skills Workshop Handout

Defining assertiveness: Differentiating it from nonassertiveness and both direct and indirect aggressiveness. Assertiveness communicates respect, but not deference, and can often involve an honest or genuine expression of empathy. Assertiveness recognizes the mutuality of needs between people. The purpose of Self-Assertive Skill training is to deepen the expression and experience of your humanness, not to turn you into a con artist.

The measure of your success in being assertive is not whether you “get your way,” but rather how you feel about yourself. Do you respect yourself? It's the process, not the end result, that really matters. Learning to be assertive involves broadening the range of your options, and provides for the choice of responding assertively: sometimes you may choose not to exercise your option.

Both self-awareness and social awareness are fundamental to being assertive:

• self-awareness in order to determine what you want and
• social awareness to examine what others need in order to judge the consequences of particular actions, thereby preparing you to take responsibility for your choices.

Steps toward becoming more assertive:

1. Analyze beliefs, assumptions, and internal injunctions which make being assertive more difficult

   Examples: Don't ever inconvenience others. Don't ever refuse help to a friend. Don't ever feel mad. Don't ever make someone else feel bad.

   Develop rational restatements for irrational ideas and modify internal injunctions and assumptions. Discover the roots of your unassertive and aggressive behaviors.

   Examples: the confusion of assertion with aggression and the confusion of nonassertion with politeness and sincerity.

   Examine the effects of early social learning, including sex-role stereotypes. Did you learn the secret of JOY? Are you a victim of the Compassion Trap?

2. Identify and accept the rights and needs of yourself and of others.

   Example: Right to have respect, right to form your own opinions, right to ask others to respond to your needs.

3. Develop cognitive ways of coping with excessive anxiety, worry and guilt through self-talk.

4. Examine non-verbal and verbal cues (body language):

   Does your body language detract from your assertive message or add strength, support and emphasis to it?
Do you use habitual self-discounting or self-deprecatory phrases? (i.e. Maybe it's just me but...) Do you immediately get apologetic?

Become aware of assertive language (i.e. “I'd like” instead of “Could I please...”). Monitor saying “I'm sorry” insincerely.

5 Set goals or target behaviors, being very specific, answering questions of who, what, where, when.

Problems in being assertive can be general but more often they are people, emotion and situation specific. Identify your most difficult problem areas.

6. Rank goals from least to most difficult.

7. Begin practicing easiest goals, developing skill and confidence to move on to more difficult goals.

8. Develop content messages: Specify what you want to communicate.

9. Practice, practice, practice and do homework!

10. Get a partner with whom to discuss your assertive efforts, and from whom you can get trusted feedback. Devise ways to reward yourself when you've been appropriately and effectively assertive. Remember: the world won't always applaud!

**Types of Assertive Behaviors:**

1. **Basic assertive statements** disclosing a thought, request, preference, opinion

   Examples: I don't want any more advice. *Or*, I like you a lot.

2. **Empathic assertiveness:** statements which genuinely recognize the other person's situation, dilemma, or feelings but reflect your own need or position

   Example: I can see you are in a bind to get that work done but I can't stay after 5 to help you with it today.

3. **Escalation assertiveness:** after your minimal or basic assertion hasn't been acknowledged or effective, you gradually increase the power of your statement, moving from request to demand.

   Example: *from* “I'd like to talk with you about...* to* “and if this is not a good time I want us to set up a time when we will sit down and discuss it.”

   Another form of escalation, sometimes referred to as “Broken Record,” is to simply repeat your original assertive statement.
4. Confronting assertiveness:
   a. Non-judgemental statements concerning another's deeds being inconsistent with their words.
      Example: “We agreed to clean the kitchen on alternate days and you've not done it on Tuesday or Thursday and I'd like to talk about it.”
   b. Content-to-process-shift: focusing on the interaction after direct assertive messages appear to have not been heard or responded to.
      Example: “I've said I need to study and can't play bridge tonight four times and you don't seem to want to accept my answer - I'd like you to respect my decision.”

5. I-language assertiveness (from Gordon): A simple formula for communicating specific concrete effects of other's behavior on you.
   When….
   The effects are….
   I feel….
   I'd prefer ….
   Note: can be abbreviated and still be effective.

6. Responding to negative feelings of others:
   a. Don't take the bait: avoid defending yourself: simply stick to your point and avoid being side-tracked into irrelevant issues.
   b. Negative inquiry: disarm anger or seek more criticism to know it all, exhaust it, and use it to compromise.

7. Proposing Compromises: Often the best way to get your needs and the others persons needs met. Reflects flexibility rather than rigidity. Only situations which involve personal integrity are not open to compromise.
Behavioral Techniques

The following techniques have been culled from several sources, including Manuel Smith’s *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*. The various techniques are designed to focus on group members applying a greater level of behavioral control in making their assertive responses. The first two are simply social skills.

1. Teach people to recognize cues given in a social interaction during everyday conversation to indicate what is interesting or important to that person. You might practice the exercise by having two people talk about anything that comes into their minds and have a third person try to interject his- or herself into the conversation by picking up on some of the free information.

2. “Self-disclosure” is also an assertive skill. This skill makes it more acceptable for persons to disclose either positive or negative aspects about themselves, their personality, their lifestyle, their behavior, etc., and feel less invested in maintaining a social facade. This again can be practiced by having two people interact in an everyday kind of conversation with one partner or the other practicing making self-disclosing comments. This should enhance the depth of the interaction rather than keeping it on a socially superficial level.

3. In dealing with conflict, the first assertive technique can be considered a “persistent serial assertion” (often referred to as “broken record”). This skill involves staying on the track of your point by repeating it despite the possible manipulative attempts of the other person to get you into side issues or irrelevant logic. This should make it possible to stick with your initial point. I think of this as being very closely related to another skill of not “taking the bait.” For example, if someone is trying to evoke a response from you, or provoke you into long explanations or reasons for your behavior, an important skill is to be able to give a minimal response and not respond to the manipulation or take the bait, getting into defensive, long, drawn out explanations.

4. The “content to process shift” (often referred to as “shifting gears”) is another very important assertive skill. It involves confrontation, but it is important for group members to realize that in a confrontation it is critical to begin with a minimal assertive confrontation and not draw out the “big guns” unless absolutely necessary to later on. For example, if a person is persistent in repeating his or her request despite the fact that you've said “no” three times, you might switch from the content of what you're talking about to the process of being ignored and make a comment like “You've repeated your request enough times, and I'm beginning to think that you're trying to get me to change my mind.

5. *Negative inquiry* is another useful assertive technique. Here a person actively elicits criticism that he or she believes the other person is feeling in order to use that information or to exhaust it. This is a skill to be used in more intimate relationships and friendships that will lead to improved communication. It is one that people would probably not want to use in less intimate relationships. For example, a person, by practicing the skill of negative
inquiry, might say to a mate “I know that you're feeling angry and hurt because I didn't get home in time to clean up the kitchen and make dinner, but you seem especially angry and I'm wondering if there is anything else that you're feeling annoyed with me about as well.”

6. A related technique to negative inquiry is “fogging.” This technique enables people to accept a manipulative criticism by calmly acknowledging that you hear the criticism and accept the possibility that there may be some truth in what they're saying without needing to get trapped and to defend or explain yourself or get detracted away from your main point.

7. “Time out” is a skill which is useful when a person is feeling confused, highly anxious or panicky and it simply involves being able to request some time rather than respond to the pressure of making a decision or a statement right at the moment. An example would be saying something like “I don't want to make a decision about that right now, but I'll get back to you in 20 minutes.”

8. A final technique is that of a “workable compromise.” This is a skill in which you propose a compromise to the other person if you are sure that your self-respect is not in question in doing so. If your self respect or self worth is involved, however, it might be best not to compromise.

These techniques and skills can be practiced in role plays and you can teach them to your group. It should be understood, however, that the techniques in themselves are not helpful if people have not established a supportive belief system and focused on nonverbal components of their messages.
References

Separating the wheat from the chaff is important! The best guide for trainers is:


Other popular books of varying quality include:


