

verbal assertiveness: overview and response techniques

OVERVIEW

Practicing our verbal skills can help us deal with a wide range of situations from annoying or intrusive to threatening and potentially dangerous. Communicating assertively, with a clear but non-aggressive message, may also give us the opportunity to de-escalate a potentially dangerous situation. In practicing assertiveness, it is important to use strong, confident verbal and body language. Raising our voices, cursing, and getting too close to someone are all examples of aggressive behaviors that can escalate a situation. Being assertive, on the other hand, helps you to think more clearly and enables you to breathe and stay calm in the situation, so you can plan your strategy and keep things from escalating.

ASSERTIVE RESPONSE TECHNIQUES

The goal of practicing assertive techniques is to increase our verbal skills and give us more verbal options. The techniques listed below help you get your point across clearly and quickly, without escalating a potentially volatile situation. Each person reacts differently to different techniques; these responses are often the product of different cultural norms and traditions. If one response technique does not work, try another. While each individual and situation is unique, these responses can be effective in a range of situations.

How to Use your Voice

It is important to use a strong, confident voice and to be direct, without using hints, excuses, and/or apologies. You should try to make statements, rather than asking questions. Also, speaking slowly can give you time to think and can help you feel more in control of yourself. All of these techniques empower you to stay calm so you can make better decisions for your safety.

Making “I” Statements

“I” statements can be used to voice your feelings and wishes without expressing a judgment or blame. Simply put, if you start a sentence off with “You,” it can be interpreted as more of a judgment or attack, and put people on the defensive. If you start with “I,” the focus is more on how you are feeling and how you are affected by the other person’s behavior. Also, it shows more confidence and ownership of your reactions.

For example: *You Message:* “You are being a total jerk.”

I Message: “I don’t want you to speak to me like that in public.”

Awareness of Body Language

Be aware of behaving in a way that might seem threatening or aggressive to the other person: finger-pointing, swearing, etc. are more aggressive behaviors. Use confident body language. This includes standing with planted feet, shoulders back, hands available, and looking at the other person so you can see as much as possible. Eye contact is generally important, but there are cultural differences here. Acceptable distance between people is also culturally determined, and may be further influenced by where you are (city versus suburb, on the bus versus in the street, etc.)

Refusal

You always have the right to say “NO.” Saying “NO” repeatedly can be a very strong statement, whether you say it loudly or quietly and firmly.

Naming the Behavior

“Name the behavior” is a basic self-defense technique that can keep a situation from escalating out of control. In any conflict situation, the use of negative language can ignite an exchange of name-calling, and can lead to blows. Avoid using labels or sarcasm, or making assumptions about someone’s motives. Instead, speak directly to the person, and address the *specific behavior* that is offensive. Naming the behavior is more specific and can help a person to change their behavior.

For example: “The way you talk to me in front of others is insulting,” instead of, “You are a jerk and I can’t stand you.”

Broken Record

The technique consists of simply repeating your statement (or need) every time you are met with resistance. If you do not get the desired results, as with all strategies, it is time to move on to another technique.

Interrupting

It's all right to interrupt! An effective assertiveness technique is to say something like, “I'm really sorry; I'm going to interrupt you.” You can then use whatever tool best fits the situation, i.e. Refusal, Naming the Behavior, etc. If you let someone have their whole say without interrupting, it can create the impression that you are interested and/or willing. If you do not interrupt, they may think you're on board with their plan to get you to do whatever it is they are pushing for.

Assertive Ignoring

Ignoring someone is a valid self-defense strategy. While we often think of ignoring as a passive response, CAE sees it as a proactive choice. An example of a good time to use this technique is when an attacker makes some *parting shots*, or additional comments at the end of an interaction in an attempt to regain their dominance. Using assertive ignoring and strong body language, you can choose to walk away from this situation, diffusing these inflammatory statements. (You may not physically leave, but by choosing not to engage any further, you are attempting to de-escalate the situation.)