

Military Caregiving Communication Series

Assertive–Open, Honest & Direct Communication

Assertive Communication



Assertive communication is a communication style used to express one's thoughts and feelings. It is an open, honest, and direct form of communication which helps you express your feelings, while respecting the rights

and feelings of others. It enables you to listen attentively and validate what you are hearing so problems and concerns can be solved. Assertive communication helps you speak up for what you think, feel, want or need.

Assertiveness is not a form of aggression. While aggressive people express their thoughts and feelings, they do so at the expense of others. Verbal abuse, intimidation, and sarcasm are all signs of aggressive behavior.

Assertive “I” Messages

“I” messages are the foundation of assertive communication. Using “I” says, “These are my feelings, needs, and motives.” “I” statements explain what you are feeling and what you want or need, while respecting those who may disagree. “I” statements are clear and direct, while providing a positive environment that does not pose blame or accusations. For more details about “I” messages refer to the “I” Messages: *Strategies for Caregiver Conversations* handout.

4 Steps to Maximizing Assertiveness

Sharon Bower, author of *Assert Yourself*, identifies four steps to assertive communication: (1) describe, (2) express, (3) specify and (4) consequences. The following caregiver scenario “sets the stage” for understanding the steps to assertive communication.

Caregiver Scenario

Doris has been a military caregiver to her husband, Tom, since he was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury he received while deployed. In addition to monitoring Tom’s daily activities and medication intake, Doris is responsible for their two children who are 2 and 4. Janet, Doris’s mother-in-law, agreed to take care of the two children when Doris had to take Tom to his medical appointments. Janet forgot she agreed to take care of the children this week so Tom missed his medical appointment with the TBI specialist because he is unable to drive.

Let’s look at how Maggie uses the four steps to assertive communication when voicing her concerns to Janet about forgetting to take John to his appointment.

#1. Describe: Use “I” messages to describe an apparent behavior or problem, as if you were giving a report.

Example: “I was unable to take Tom to medical appointment with the TBI specialist today.”

#2. Express: Using an “I” statement, identify your feelings without placing blame on the other person.

Example: “I am upset and disappointed that Tom missed his medical appointment with the TBI specialist today.”

#3. Specify: Tell the other person specifically what needs to happen or be done, using “I” messages.

Example: “I need to be confident you will follow through with your commitment to care for the children so I can take Tom to his medical appointments.”

#4. Consequences: End with an “I” statement explaining the consequences of what will happen if the person doesn’t follow through.

Example: “I won’t ask you anymore to care for the children if you can’t follow through with your commitment to care for them.”

Example #2

Caregiver Scenario

Juan and Marie are a military family with three girls. Juan just returned home from his second tour of duty in Iraq. During his last tour of duty, Juan was involved in an improvised explosive devices (IED) accident, which left him with numerous facial scars and the need to have leg prostheses so he could walk.

The couple’s daughters are old enough to understand their dad’s conditions but are still embarrassed when people look at him strangely especially when his leg prostheses are visible.

#1. Describe: “I realize you have been getting better at walking with your leg prostheses. The girls get upset when they see how people look at you when you don’t wear pants to cover your leg prostheses.”

#2. Express: “I know you don’t care what other people think about how you look but the girls are uncomfortable and have shared how embarrassed they are when people look at you when you don’t have your pants on to cover your leg prostheses.”

#3. Specify: “I wish you would wear your pants to cover your leg prostheses when you go out in public with the girls so they are more comfortable being with you.”

#4. Consequences: “If you don’t wear pants to cover your leg prostheses the girls may not want to go out in public with you.”

Limitations to Assertive Communication

There may be times when assertive communication is not appropriate, especially when the other person:

- is already trying to do what you want.
- is unstable medically or emotionally.
- has the power to penalize you or cause you harm.

The timing of when to bring up your concerns using assertive communication is critical so determine the most appropriate time and place. For example, if your care-recipient has home healthcare and you need to discuss an issue or concern with the healthcare provider, do so privately, not when others are present or several months after the concern or incident happened. When using assertive communication be mindful of your situation and how the individual may react to your conversation. When sharing a consequence you must be willing to follow through with it. For example do not state you will fire the individual as a consequence if you are unwilling to do so. At times it may be helpful to know when to say nothing or when to let go of an issue or concern.

It takes practice to master assertive communication. It helps to write out your conversation ahead of time including possible responses from the other individual so you can anticipate what you will say. Sometimes you will need to go back to a previous step of the assertive communication process before progressing to the next step. For example, you can’t specify (step three) what you need or want until you have described the situation (step one) and expressed your concerns (step two). The assertive communication process steps build on each other so it’s difficult to move the conversation forward unless each step has been completed, so you may find your conversation going back and forth until all the steps are used.

Remember, assertive communication is an honest and direct form of communication. It expresses your needs without creating disputes. It empowers you to voice your needs and concerns so others can help you with your caregiver role and responsibilities.

To learn more about family caregiving communication techniques and additional caregiving information go to: http://www.extension.org/family_caregiving

Reference

Bower, Sharon. 2004. *Asserting Yourself: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*. Da Capo Press.

Schmall, V., Cleland, M., & Sturdevant, M. (2000). *The Caregiver Helpbook: Powerful Tools for Caregiving*. United States of America: Legacy Health System. Adapted with permission.

To access the current edition of the Caregiver Helpbook and to learn more about the self-care education program, Powerful Tools for Caregivers, visit www.powerfultoolsforcaregivers.org