

## Ep #25: How to Communicate More Assertively



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With Your Host

**Nicole Symcox**

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Here's your host, educator, coach and licensed psychotherapist, Nicole Symcox...

Hey, hey everyone, welcome episode 25. Let's talk about communication. Yes, we're talking about communication today. So there are three types of communication. Passive, aggressive, and then passive-aggressive. So we're going to go through, we're going to define each one, and we're going to give you some tools on how you can be more assertive in your communication.

Because assertive is where we want to be. We don't want to be passive, we don't want to be aggressive, and we sure as hell don't want to be passive-aggressive. So we're going to break down what those three negative communication habits are and then we're going to rewrite it. We're going to try to shoot for assertive because that's where we all want to be.

Because when we are utilizing assertive communication, it makes it easier for people to hear what we are actually trying to say, and it makes us feel better because we actually feel heard. Feeling heard and seen in our communication is incredibly important to us as humans. And the best way

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to make sure your message is received for what it is, is to be able to use and employ assertive communication tactics.

So assertive is where we want to be. Before we get there, let's first call out the three most common communication tactics that people use, and they're not great. They all have sort of their positives or negatives, mostly negatives, but we're going to break this down. So let's dive into this.

Alright, to kick this off, let's talk about aggressive. Aggressive is probably the most easy to define. We all have a picture that pops up for us immediately when we think of someone who has aggressive communication. Like, I think most people have had some kind of encounter with another human being who is aggressive in their communication style.

And so the problem with aggressive is that it doesn't make space for people to be people. It's very accusatory, it's very dominating. It can be intimidating, and sometimes the communicator is employing these tactics for those reasons. They want you to be afraid of them or they think it's a way to get people to take them seriously.

And so they feel like they almost have to "power up," get aggressive in their communication, and so it's meant to do just that. It's meant to provoke fear in another person and there's a large spectrum of how much fear it produces in a person because there's a spectrum on how aggressive someone's communication is.

And so on the lower end of the spectrum, probably aggressive communication looks like criticism or putting someone down or not really allowing them to have a voice in a conversation. Like you're kind of dominating over them. On the very far end of the other spectrum, we probably have verbal abuse or emotional abuse where we're being extremely dominating and aggressive and we're intending to hurt someone.

So just kind of know, even within these three communication styles, there is a spectrum that even goes within them because nothing is quite black and white. Everybody kind of employs different tactics based on who they are

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and what they've been through as a person and what they're trying to accomplish.

Okay, so a lot of times, these aggressive communication styles also are wrestling with impulse control. So you'll see this a lot in people that have issues with anger management. Like, they tend to go from zero to 60. They're fine and then all of a sudden, they are not fine, and they are just launching heaps of verbal attacks on people and getting extremely aggressive until they get what they want.

And so navigating someone who communicates like this is a whole skillset in itself. But for this episode, we're kind of just calling out how communication can be laid out and how you can be better at communicating. Because dealing with an aggressive person is an entirely different podcast episode that we'll do in the future.

Alright, number two is passive. This is the exact opposite of aggressive. Passive communication means you are passive, it is quite that simple. You don't communicate, you let other people take control, you don't really fight for yourself. And the problem with this is people have passive communication often feel like they don't matter or they're not heard because they're not asserting themselves.

They don't tend to make their needs and wants known, and if they do, they do it in such a passive way that people can't necessarily hear you. People can't necessarily see what you're trying to say because you're doing it in such a passive way, it's not clear to the listener what you are saying.

And so many times, passive people, they don't fight for themselves, they don't really assert themselves, and so they just go along for the ride. They're like, oh well, they didn't hear me, it's no big deal, I'll just go along with whatever is happening.

People-pleasers tend to fall more into this passive communication because they don't like conflict, they don't like to rock the boat, they don't like to stir up issues. And so that is where passive shows up.

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Number three, passive-aggressive. Now, believe it or not, in the world of psychology, we consider passive-aggressive to be the most dangerous form of communication. And yes, you hear me say that right. Over aggressive, passive-aggressive is actually worse.

Passive-aggressive is the mix of the two and so these are your people that basically are the martyrs. They're the victims and they want to make you feel bad any time you do something that they don't like. But they don't feel confident enough to be full-blown aggressive so they'll never be direct.

They'll never say, "Oh, I really didn't like when you did that." What they'll say is like, "Well, I guess it doesn't really matter if I get sick. I mean, I'm old anyway so it doesn't really matter." There's always that mind-fuck of guilt, there's always that little bit stir and it feels controlling is what ends up happening with passive-aggressive.

Although the communicator will never own up to that. They will say, "I'm not trying to control you, I'm just trying to make it nice for you." They say little underhanded things like that all the time. And so for the person that tends to have passive-aggressive communication tactics, a lot of times they have a wounded inner child that is extremely angry, that they weren't heard or seen, and it's mixed with this other piece of maybe not even feeling worthy of being seen and heard.

So it creates an inner conflict. Many people that are passive-aggressive don't even realize they're doing it. Until it's called out, a lot of times they don't even realize it. They just don't see it that way. And so once it's called out and they can get some awareness around it, then they can kind of track and see what they're doing, but it really comes from an angry, powerless place.

And not feeling like your voice is worthy to be heard, and so you kind of go through the backdoor, so to speak, and you end up making these jabs, you can be biting, you can be shaming, blaming, and you don't even realize that you're doing it. And so because you're not being outright aggressive, people who are passive-aggressive think they get a pass.

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They're like, "Well, I didn't attack you. Well, I didn't say that to you directly." Like, they hide behind the fact that they're not direct, as if that makes their communication any less offensive, and it doesn't. So anyone who was raised by a passive-aggressive parent knows what I'm talking about. Anyone who has to deal with a passive-aggressive person, it's incredibly frustrating and irritating to be around someone because for more direct communicators, they're like, can't you just say what you mean? Why does this have to be a game?

So passive-aggressive can almost come across as a game because everybody knows you're mad, but you're not owning up to being mad, and it just creates a very unhealthy dynamic of communication. Alright, so these are the three most common things that humans kind of fall into.

So we have aggressive, we have passive, and we have passive-aggressive. And a lot of times it has to do with our roles in the family, how we were raised, our personality types, the experiences in life that we've had, and how we've been taught to communicate or get value in the world by communicating. And so we all sort of develop these communication habits.

Now, what is so interesting to me is as I clearly laid out all three, I've laid them out in a pretty negative light. And so many of you are probably thinking, "Well, I don't want to be any of those three," and yet all of us default into one of these categories until we go to therapy or we take a communication class, we do coaching. We have to learn how to be assertive.

Unless you lived in a very healthy family unit, where this was modeled to you, where you were taught how to be assertive and how to communicate in healthy ways, it's always been fascinating to me how human nature defaults into one of these three dysfunctional categories unless somebody intervenes and you figure out a new way to communicate.

So in other words, if you're noticing as I'm talking that you're falling into one of those three and we are all guilty of it. I'm actually not calling anybody out

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in this particular episode because we all fall into one of these three categories unless we have made a conscious decision to learn how to communicate better and own what we're saying.

Otherwise we fall into one of these. And truthfully, assertive communication is a way for you to be seen and heard in healthy ways. It's a way to respect another person's wants and needs while honoring your own. It is a beautiful, healthy communication dynamic that is designed to make sure that each party gets their needs met in a conversation.

But this is always a conscious effort. So whatever category you're falling into, passive-aggressive, aggressive, passive, whatever, you just have to be aware that you can go there when you're not feeling well or when you're feeling stressed out or when you're feeling triggered, that you can kind of go into one of these categories.

And then you make a conscious choice to switch over. It's almost like switching over your programming, going, "I feel so tempted right now to just really attack you for what you just said to me with anger, I feel like I just want to be so aggressive and show you how mad you've made me," if you're someone that defaults there, there's always going to be a temptation or a lure to go back to dysfunctional communication.

And so then you have to take a stand and say no, I've been there, I've done that, did not produce fruit in my life so I am not going to go there again. I am going to try to reframe this and I'm going to come from it from a healthy perspective. But it takes you taking a minute, talking to yourself that way before assertive communication starts to become more automatic.

And it will, but again, it's one of those things, like with any kind of habit, we have to put forth a little bit of effort in the beginning before we can employ it with confidence, we can employ it feeling like it's easier for us to access, that we can do it more automatically.

So when it comes to assertive communication, and again, this is what we all want to do. We want to leave our former communication styles behind

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because they create a lot of strife in our relationships. As a therapist, whenever I see families in session, communication is one of the first things we have to establish some healthy communication rules.

Because the reason why is if people aren't owning their feelings without throwing it on other people, it's very difficult to have a healthy conversation. So give yourself space and grace as you learn and get curious on how can I invite more assertive communication in my life.

And the good news in this is that it starts with you. It doesn't really matter what the other person is doing. This is about you getting control over you and how you communicate. So we don't care what other people are doing. We care what we're doing.

Okay, so let's break this down. Three ways to be more assertive. Number one, assertive communication means being okay with saying exactly what you want. But you're going to do it in a way that is not disrespectful, that is not shaming or blaming, that is not coercive. You are not trying to manipulate the other person. You are simply stating a need that you have.

But you have to have confidence in what that thing is, otherwise you're not going to be able to communicate it. So this is the trouble that people with passive-aggressive communication styles and passive communication styles wrestle with. They usually lack confidence in even what they want, and so passives don't fight for it and passive-aggressives don't really know what they want but they know they don't like what you've offered.

And so they are going to throw something back at you that is biting or unhelpful and so that's why sometimes when people are passive-aggressive, you can almost feel like they're impossible to please. They don't really know what they want. They just know they don't like what you're offering. So when you are being assertive, you need to be really confident.

Number two, you need to be clear. You need to have a clear message and objective when you are communicating. If you are throwing in a bunch of

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details, if you are throwing in a bunch of emotion, people are going to have a hard time hearing you because they don't know what to respond to.

So be clear. If your message is to communicate that you are angry about something, then you need to make that very clear on why you're angry and the reason for that, but you have to do it in a clear, concise way. Otherwise, you're likely to fall into aggressive or passive-aggressive and saying something to someone like, "Well, you've just ruined this entire day."

Versus being assertive and saying, "I had other ideas for today but I'm open to perhaps us discussing what we would like to do today." It's a totally different approach. Being attacking, like, "Well this whole day is fucked up, thanks a lot for coming," that's aggressive. Or passive-aggressive of like, "Well, I really don't like this but I suppose it's fine. I'll just be really tired at the end of the day but it's fine. I mean, it's fine if my feet hurt. It doesn't really matter."

Laced with guilt. Laced. It's annoying. Don't do that. So you want to be clear in what you want in, "Hey, I had another idea for today, I'm trying to conserve energy because I have a big meeting tomorrow. I'm wondering if we could come up with a plan that feels good to both of us." That's more in the assertive realm.

Number three, controlled. When you are being assertive, you need to watch your tone. Do you notice the difference in those examples that I just gave you? Do you notice how my tone changed for each one? When I was kind of narrating aggressive, my voice was louder, it was more pointed, it was more aggressive, to be frank. Passive had a little bit more of a mind-game tone to it. It had an ulterior motive.

Versus when I used an assertive statement, my tone was very matter of fact and it had a kind vibe to it, if you will. I wasn't slamming anyone, I wasn't attacking anyone, there wasn't a lot of highs and lows in the emotion. Because my tone stayed consistent throughout the entire sentence.

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And the reason for that is I want my message to be heard and not confused. If I throw in a bunch of added details, a big emotional tone to it, the listener is going to get confused on what we're actually talking about. They need to know what to respond to. People can only respond to one or two things at a time. Mostly one.

Sometimes people can respond to two, but if you really want to be heard, you need to be clear and concise and controlled. That's the easiest way to remember these three steps. You need to be really clear on what it is you're trying to communicate so that the person has an opportunity to respond.

Now again, they might respond like a total dick. That's not your issue. Your issue is making sure you stay within the realm of assertive communication and that you are being helpful and articulate in what you want to say. So again, we can't control another person's reaction, we can't control what another person thinks about what you're saying. None of that is any of our business.

It's none of our business what someone else interprets or does with that information. It is our business in being able to identify what we need, being able to be clear about articulating it, and managing our tones and our emotions when we are communicating. Having a clear outcome.

So when we are doing assertive communication, we have an outcome in mind. And it's usually resolution between two parties. Making sure our needs are heard and being respectful of the other person who we might be doing an activity with or we might be trying to problem solve with. It is inclusive.

So assertive communication is almost like this 50-50 exchange of trying to make each person feel heard and understood, without pushing their needs to the side and ignoring them. Now again, assertive communication is tough. It requires a lot of learned internal boundaries, so just have patience for yourself and just kind of challenge yourself this week in what is my

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communication patterns, how can I improve them, and how can I work towards assertive communication every single day.

You might need to keep a journal or a log to kind of track yourself and figure out what am I saying, what am I doing, what triggers my reactions, and being clear that sometimes we get triggered by other people and we have to take a minute before we can respond to them. You don't have to respond to everyone immediately, especially in a triggered space.

It is better for you to get your life together, get your emotions, have your moment, and then get clear what you want to say back to a person, rather than just reacting out of emotion and regretting it and having to apologize for being out of line. So take a second to pause, breathe, and figure out how you want to proceed.

Alright my friends, I hope this was helpful to you in learning some new assertive communication skills. And if strong emotions came up for you or you noticed that you felt triggered throughout this episode or any podcast you listen to, take it as information that something in your internal world needs support.

There is never shame or blame in getting mental health support in your local state of residence. And if you liked today's episode, feel free to get on my email list and we'll let you know every time a new episode drops. Alright my friends, I am rooting for you. Take care.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Mental Health Remix. If you like what you've heard and want to learn more, go to [nicolesymcox.com](http://nicolesymcox.com).

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