

Assertive vs. Aggressive Communication

In mindful communication, we learn to communicate in ways that are assertive rather than aggressive. By setting firm boundaries in non-aggressive ways, our interactions with others become assertive without resulting in hurt feelings, arguments, or conflict.

If setting assertive boundaries does lead to conflict, learning to be assertive rather than aggressive allows us to find peaceful and productive resolutions to differences of opinion.

Assertive Communication: No “Buts”

In grad school, I had a supervisor who said, "After 'but' comes b.s."

The first step in moving from aggressive communication to assertive communication is to eliminate the word “but” from our vocabulary. Using the word “but” is rationalizing our behavior, and rationalizing is evading. Evading conflict can be a type of emotional aggression in that we are asking others to interpret what we mean without giving them enough information to draw such conclusions.

Also, using the word “but” means that we’re offering excuses for our behaviors instead of owning up to them and taking responsibility for them. For an example illustrating this point, look at the sentence below:

“I’m sorry I swore at you, BUT it was because you made me angry.”

In this sentence, the person speaking has just rationalized the swearing by making excuses. If this statement were offered as an apology, the sentiment would have been weakened because this person has shifted the blame to the other person. The implication is that it is the other person’s fault because the other person did something that the person speaking chose to react angrily to.

Would it sound more like an apology if this person had simply stopped at the first part of the sentence, leaving everything after the word ‘but’ out? By saying “but,” this person is attempting to manipulate the other person into being responsible for the swearing. He has evaded responsibility by blame-shifting.

Assertive speech agrees with specifics, not with generalizations

The Three Ps are *personal*, *permanent*, and *pervasive*. Statements that include ‘always’ and ‘never’ are broad generalizations that eliminate the possibility of change by stating that one instance of a behavior indicates a permanent or pervasive pattern of behavior.

Look at the statement below:

“You always ignore me!”

In the above sentence, the person speaking is attempting to make a particular instance of a behavior permanent and/or pervasive by generalizing it to ‘always.’ If you’re on the receiving end of such a statement, you can agree to a specific instance where you engaged in the behavior without agreeing to the generalization in the following way:

“I’m sorry, I did ignore you that time.”

Here the speaker is agreeing to a specific occurrence of the behavior by using the phrase, “that time.”

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When agreeing with a specific instance, you may point out that you are agreeing with that specific instance, as long as you avoid the temptation of following it up with a “but,” such as:

“I’m sorry, I did ignore you that time, but I don’t always ignore you.”

If you add the word ‘but,’ you’re back to rationalizing and evading. When agreeing with a specific instance, you’ll have to trust that the other person understands implicitly that you are not agreeing. In mindful communication, we learn to communicate in ways that are assertive rather than aggressive. By setting firm boundaries in non-aggressive ways, our interactions with others become assertive without resulting in hurt feelings, arguments, or conflict. If setting assertive boundaries does lead to conflict, learning to be assertive rather than aggressive allows us to find peaceful and productive resolutions to differences of opinion.

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“I’m sorry, I did ignore you that time, but I don’t always ignore you.”

If you add the word “but,” you’re back to rationalizing and evading. When agreeing with a specific instance, you’ll have to trust that the other person understands implicitly that you are not agreeing with the generalization. If you feel tempted to point out that you don’t agree with the generalization, remember to avoid blame-shifting.

Don’t try to make it their responsibility that you behave in a certain way.

Playing dumb

If you find yourself the victim of a barrage of criticism, you can de-fuse it by ‘playing dumb.’

You can play ‘dumb’ by asking “What do you mean?” After a critical statement. The idea here is that you are refusing to engage in arguing by asking for specifics in an attempt to understand what’s really bothering the other person.

Children are really good at this. Here’s an example:

Child: *“Daddy, why is the sky blue?”*

Daddy: *“Because the air absorbs all the other colors of light”*

Child: *“Why does the air absorb all the other colors of light?”*

Daddy: *“Because the other colors of light bounce off the molecules in the air”*

Child: *“Why do the other colors bounce off the molecules?”*

...and so on, and so forth. You get the idea.

In a relationship, here’s a possible scenario in which playing dumb might be used:

Husband: *“Why did you look at Jim that way?”*

Wife: *“I don’t know what you mean. What way was I looking at Jim?”*

Husband: *“You know...that way.”*

Wife: *“No, I don’t know what you mean by ‘that way.’”*

Husband: *“Like you were flirting with him!”*

Wife: *“What do you mean, ‘flirting with him?’ Can you explain?”*

The conversation would continue in this manner until the husband realized the absurdity of his assertion and gave up. You have to exercise caution in using this technique. The underlying goal is to illustrate the absurdity of the accusation without letting it turn into a full-blown argument.

Avoid the temptation to become emotionally aggressive when using this one. This should only be used playfully, and not in a mean-spirited way.

Assertive communication means admitting your mistakes

Saying, “I’m sorry, I messed up this time” defuses any conflict because if you are agreeing with a person who is attempting to criticize you, there’s nothing to argue about. We have a natural tendency to go into defensive mode when being accused of something, but if the accusation is true, then there’s nothing to defend against.

For example, a more assertive response might be:

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Wife: *"You forgot to pick the kids up from soccer practice!"*

Husband: *"I'm sorry, you're right! I did forget!"*

It will be very tempting, when agreeing with a criticism, to give a reason for your behavior. You should avoid this temptation for two very important reasons:

1. If you offer an excuse, you're being aggressive, not assertive, by evading responsibility for the error; and
2. If you offer an excuse, and the other person can invalidate the excuse, then you're left without a leg to stand on. Instead, you don't have to give a reason. Just accept responsibility for the error and move on.

Here's an example to illustrate the point:

Wife: *"You forgot to pick the kids up from soccer practice!"*

Husband: *"I'm sorry, you're right! I did forget, BUT I had a lot of work to catch up on at the office!"*

To start with, there's that word "but." It's an attempt to evade responsibility by making an excuse. Furthermore, suppose the wife in the above scenario replies with:

Wife: *"All you can think about is work! Sometimes I think you care more about that job than you do about your own children!"*

Granted that the wife in the above situation is making a generalization about a specific instance of a behavior, but by making the above statement she has also effectively negated her husband's excuse and added another accusation on top of it. If the husband responds in kind, the conversation will degenerate into a series of rationalizations, excuses, and accusations. If you find yourself caught in such an episode of blamestorming, the best response is:

"I'm sorry. What can I do to make it better?"

With this assertive statement, you are showing that you are acknowledging the mistake and also being proactive in finding a solution by asking the other person to help you to find a solution. This has the added benefit of moving the other person from a problem-focused mode to a solution-focused mode.

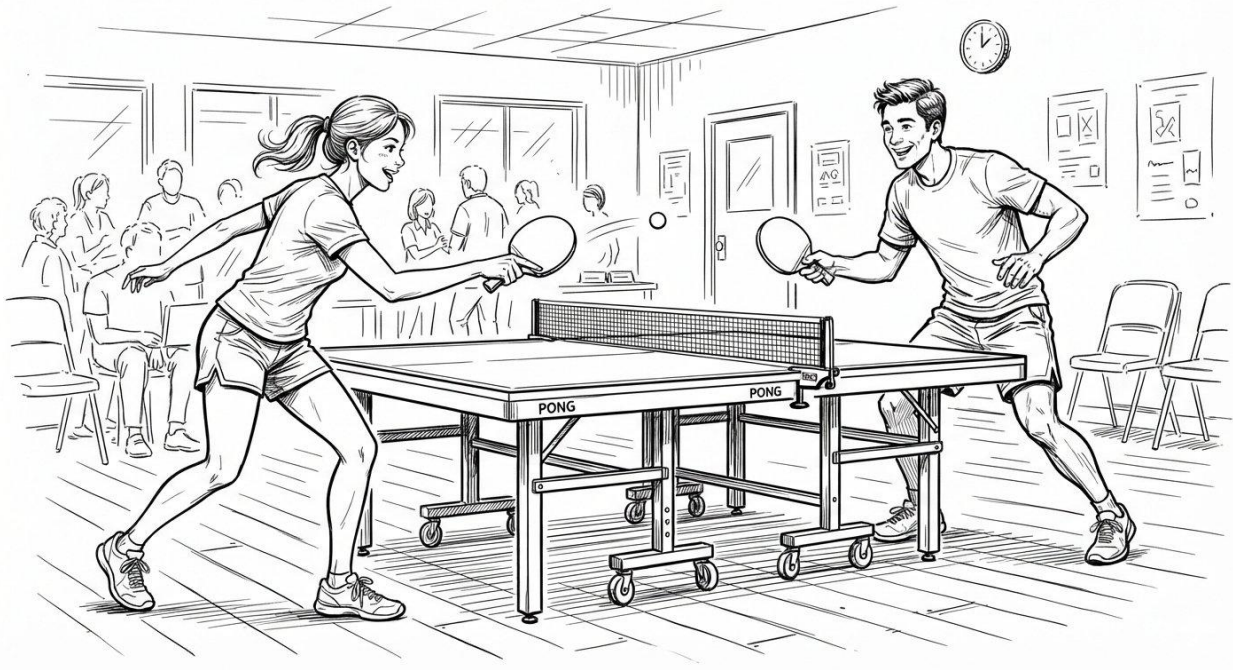
Communication Ping-pong

Think of it like a game of ping-pong. Every time you are served an accusation or a criticism, hit it back over the net by asking the other person to help you come up with a solution so that it doesn't happen again. In doing so, you're engaging their help in solving the problem, and you're not stuck having to guess what sort of solution they might find acceptable, because you're asking them to be assertive by telling you instead of you having to guess.

If they respond with, "I don't know," they've capitulated. This can become a manipulation strategy in which they expect you to come up with a solution. If you offer a solution and they reject it, you could respond with something like: *"I'm willing to consider your solution if you can tell me what sort of solution you have in mind."*

Note also that communication ping-pong doesn't mean you have to accept every solution they offer. If they offer a solution that you're not willing to consider, try to modify it and give a choice that might be acceptable to both of you. Continue this pattern until you've achieved a workable compromise.

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Offer a compromise

In any conversation where there is disagreement, there are some areas in which you may be willing to compromise, and there are other areas in which you are not willing to compromise.

An issue in which you are willing to negotiate is a compromise issue. An area in which you are not willing to negotiate is a core issue. The way to tell the difference between a core issue and a compromise issue is to ask, "Will my own feelings of self-respect be compromised if I give in on this issue?"

If the end goal requires you to sacrifice your own sense of self-worth, then it is a core issue, and you should not compromise in that area.

Validate but don't capitulate

When met with resistance, the way to be assertive without becoming aggressive is to validate the other person's feelings without allowing them to tread on your boundaries.

You can let them know that while you don't agree with their feelings, you respect their right to see things the way they see them. Neither of you have to agree on every single aspect of life.

For example:

Wife: *"George Clooney is the sexiest man alive!"*

Husband: *"I respect your right to feel that way."*

Here you've acknowledged that your partner is entitled to her opinion without you having to share it. Remember that you can always validate your partner's feelings without having to agree with them. When you have practiced all these skills, you will be well on your way to developing an assertive rather than aggressive communication style.