

Passive, Aggressive and Assertive

Women's Self-Defense Handout - © Jade de la Cruz, Instructor

The Timid/Passive Response

When we are passive, we give priority to what the other person wants, feels and “needs” and little or no priority to what we want, feel or need. What the other person says, does, or feels is *more important* than our own opinions, actions or feelings. Often, when being passive, we don't even know what we want or how we feel because we are so focused on the other person.

Where does this behavior come from? People often learn passive behavior as a survival strategy growing up: if we asked for what we needed, we may have been risking the pain of being ignored, ridiculed, verbally or physically abused. Traditionally, women have been conditioned to be passive and put everyone else's needs before our own. Men can also have a tendency towards passive behavior.

As we come into our power, are more able to take care of ourselves, honor our needs and be in charge of our lives, we can see how our passive behavior does not serve us and actually makes us more vulnerable and at higher risk for abuse or assault.

What can passive/timid behavior look like?

- Lack of eye contact, looking down and away
- Body shrinking down, back or away, turned away from the person
- Shoulders hunched down, slumped posture
- Hands fidgeting with hair, clothes, in our pockets, held in tight
- Voice soft, sometimes barely audible, stumbling over our words
- Unnecessary apologies, saying “I'm sorry” excessively
- Using excuses, instead of saying “No, I don't want to”
- Saying “I'm not sure”, or “Maybe”, when our true answer is “No”
- Never using the word “No”, when we know our true answer is “No”

How is a person feeling when being passive/timid?

- Feeling guilty, nervous and afraid of saying “no”
- Feeling obligated to say “yes” to something you don't want to do
- Feeling manipulated and/or violated by others
- Feeling resentful and angry after doing things we didn't want to do

What is communicated by passive behavior?

- I can't set boundaries, I am easily manipulated, I am an easy target
- If you just push harder, you'll get what you want
- My needs are not important
- You will have the control in our relationship

What are some of the possible results?

- We may look like an “easy target” to an attacker (someone unable or unwilling to physically defend themselves)
- The situation can escalate to a more dangerous situation
- We will expend too much energy taking care of others (or giving in to what others want) to the point of feeling like a victim: disempowered, bitter and resentful
- We won't have enough time and energy to take good care of ourselves
- We will feel unsatisfied and unhappy with ourselves and with our lives. And in worst cases, we can become clinically depressed.

The Aggressive Response

When we, or others, are aggressive we give priority to what we want, feel and “need” and little or no priority to what the other person wants, feels and needs. We believe that our opinions, wants and needs are more important than those around us. Often when being aggressive, we don't even think about what the other person feels because we are so focused on ourselves.

Where does this behavior come from? People often learn aggressive behavior as a survival strategy growing up: being aggressive is one way of trying to get our needs met. Our needs may be valid, but dominating and manipulating others to get them met is unhealthy and abusive. Underneath the aggressive behavior can be someone who is very afraid and hurt. Our feelings of pain, fear and anger are valid: we need to choose appropriate ways to express these feelings. Traditionally, men have been conditioned to be in charge, be aggressive and have power over others. Women can also behave in these ways.

As we come into our power, we have power-from-within, emotional strength and inner confidence. We learn that acting out of fear in an aggressive way hurts others and prevents us from having healthy, loving relationships and deep connections with people. We begin to see that aggressive behavior does not serve us and keeps us afraid and isolated.

What can aggressive behavior look like?

- Angry facial expression, glaring eyes
- Moving into the other person's personal body space
- Pointing the finger at the other person, making fists, large gestures, arms waving around
- Voice loud or yelling - could have a sarcastic, harsh, biting tone
- Blaming the other person, insisting that you are right and they are wrong
- Using phrases like “You never...”, “You always...”, “You are such a ...”

How does an aggressive person typically feel?

- Angry, frustrated, resentful, and at times violent and “out of control”
- We feel entitled: “You owe me and you should give me what I want.”
- We feel righteous: “I have every right to be mad at you.”
- We feel blaming: “It's your fault that I'm angry.”
- Underneath the anger we may feel powerless, hurt and scared
- Later we may feel guilty for acting aggressively and hurting others

What does aggressive behavior communicate?

- My needs are more important, I don't value you as an equal
- I am insensitive, disrespectful and determined to get what I want even at the expense of others
- If I don't get my way, the situation will escalate, I'll get angry
- If you won't give me what I want, I won't love you, I'll leave you

What are possible outcomes?

- We intimidate and alienate others to the degree that people are afraid of us
- We are unable to create safe, healthy relationships based on mutual respect & love
- We are unhappy and unsatisfied with ourselves and our lives. In worst cases, we can feel clinically depressed.

The Assertive Response

When we are assertive, we give equal priority to all people involved. We believe that our opinions, feelings, needs and desires are equally important to those around us. When we are assertive, we are focused on ourselves *and* others. We respect ourselves *and* others.

Where does this behavior come from? Unfortunately, many of us do not have enough examples of healthy, assertive behavior. We often equate being assertive with being aggressive. Most of us come from families that have some degree of dysfunction and unhealthy power imbalances. We learn to set boundaries and be assertive when we have the goal of being both considerate of others and of ourselves, of not dominating others and also not being dominated **by others**. Both men and women struggle with finding this balance and learning to come from a place of mutual respect and equality.

As we discover our inner strength and inner power, we learn to value relationships based on equal power and equal respect. We have the ability to be powerful *with others*. We do not exert power over others and we do what we can to prevent others from dominating us. Although some people have more power in certain relationships such as parents over children, teachers over students, and employers over employees, that does not mean the person with more power will *abuse* their power. We learn to honor each person's feelings, needs, opinions and wants as well as our own. We resist thinking in terms of who is "right" and who is "wrong." We can "agree to disagree" and still respect each other. We can equate being a "good" person, with taking good care of ourselves.

What can assertive behavior look like?

- We are able to look people directly in the eye
- We stand up straight or sit up straight in order to face other people directly
- When we choose to say "No," our body language also communicates "no"
- We use a strong and clear voice, at times calm and friendly, at times firm and strong
- We use "I" statements to express how we feel or what we need
- In a clear and direct manner, we name the behavior that is inappropriate
- We avoid attacking statements that blame or criticize

How do we feel when we're being assertive?

- Our feelings will vary depending on the situation: we may feel strong, proud, uncomfortable, scared or guilty but *still act* in an assertive manner
- We feel more empowered and relieved when we take good care of ourselves
- We are less concerned about others' opinions of us (I don't need everyone to like me)
- Our feelings of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth grow
- We feel loved and appreciated by others as we create safe, healthy relationships

What do we communicate?

- In my everyday relationships, I value myself and others equally
- I am a strong and confident person – also a friendly, caring and fair person
- I am willing and able to stand up for myself, set boundaries, say "No"
- I am not an easy target. I will express my strength and power to stand up for myself or verbally and physically defend myself if needed

What are possible outcomes?

- We are much more able to build healthy, happy relationships
- We attract people into our lives who respect & admire our inner strength & confidence
- We have the inner confidence to set goal and take action to reach them.
- We lead healthier, happier, more fulfilling lives
- We reduce our risk of being abused, harassed or assaulted

(Revised 2017)