

Handout 6.1: Common Myths About Conflict

Myth 1: If someone is rude to you, it's okay if you call them on it and are rude back. Otherwise they will "get away with it."

Except when you need to protect your physical safety, it is never appropriate to be aggressive. By definition, aggression is being bossy and choosing for others instead of letting them choose for themselves. The goal of behavior is not healthy if it is to get your own way; it is healthier if your goal is to express your needs. (That doesn't mean you can't escalate the assertion, but the ability to meet your goal is not then contingent upon others' falling in line.) Express—don't impress!

Myth 2: If I start speaking assertively and it doesn't work, then it's okay to be aggressive.

The goal of assertiveness is not to get your way, but rather to ask for a change. Sometimes you don't get your way, but this doesn't justify getting aggressive. For example, it is hard for some parents not to get bossy when their child doesn't listen, but setting limits and consequences—rather than being bossy—is much more respectful to children and pays off in the long run.

Myth 3: There are situations in which it is best to be non-assertive.

By definition, non-assertive behavior is self-denying, people pleasing, and motivated by fear and insecurity. It is never desirable to have low self-esteem and people-pleasing neediness. However, there are times when you might decide—after weighing the pros and cons—not to assert yourself. This assertive decision comes from a place of confidence. You decide out of logic, not fear. The rational decision to not assert yourself is still an assertive one!

For example, if you only see your Uncle Harry once a year, you might not want to assert yourself by telling him that he has bad body odor. However, if you see him daily or even weekly, or if he lives with you, then you might decide to say something!

The Conflict Solution

Myth 4: People who are aggressive (bullies) are very confident in themselves.

Certainly this type of communicator seems to feel superior and righteous, but the reasons behind bullies' behavior are faulty thinking, negativity, and insecurity. People who are aggressive are generally not happy campers, and their show of strength hides a lot of weakness and vulnerability. Also, many people remain nonassertive for too long and then eventually blow up.

Myth 5: People who learn the differences among the three types of communication can readily apply them.

It's one thing to recognize the differences among the three types of communication and to be able to identify them. Old habits are hard to break, and the communication style people develop is part of their personality which has been adaptive over time in response to their unique situation. It might look easy to change your communication style, but this can be quite challenging for those who haven't really learned how to express themselves confidently, and who do not feel confident inside. It takes a lot of practice to change the thinking patterns that lie beneath unhealthy communication. It is like learning a new language—often the accent is hard to break!