

## Being Understood: The Scoop on Assertiveness

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In my counselling practice, by far the most common presenting problem for couples I work with is their struggle with communication. These tensions only increase as children are added to the mix. Not surprisingly, communication issues crop up in every kind of setting that communication is ever attempted: between partners, children and their parents, in individual friendships, business relationships, in groups, and on and on.

I will attempt to speak to two key aspects of healthy communication that I believe apply to any relational context: that of understanding others, and that of making ourselves understood to others.

### Part 1 – Being Understood: The Scoop on Assertiveness.

It may be obvious that if we want to make ourselves understood, we need to effectively communicate what we feel and think. Unfortunately, despite the simplicity of the concept, it is often very difficult to perform well. We get stuck saying things we don't exactly mean, or we say things that are misunderstood or misread, or we don't say anything at all even when we're feeling lots of things. Sometimes we know we are feeling lots of things, but we're not exactly sure how to even begin expressing those feelings. Or perhaps we know exactly what we want to say, but we are concerned that our words will simply not be heard. Accurate words are important, but how we communicate those words matters...a lot. We are quite aware that tone and body language communicate as much as anything.

If we pay attention to our expression of feelings and thoughts, we may note that our expression probably tends to fall somewhere on the continuum between "Bottled" and "Aggressive". Notice the diagram of the Continuum of Expression below. On one end of the continuum, the Aggressive end, we express our feelings openly, but in ways that are hurtful and disrespectful to others. This is a type of communication that is frank, maybe even clear, but it is insensitive. Most of us can think of a handful of people who generally express on the aggressive end of the scale, but in my experience, far more people lean toward the other end of the continuum, the Bottled end, where we tend to suppress our expression. We may feel lots of things, but we actually say very little or nothing, effectively stuffing our feelings. With bottled feelings, the pressure can build to points where the cork pops, and what comes out is usually messy. This is how bottled feelings can unintentionally lead to aggressive expression.

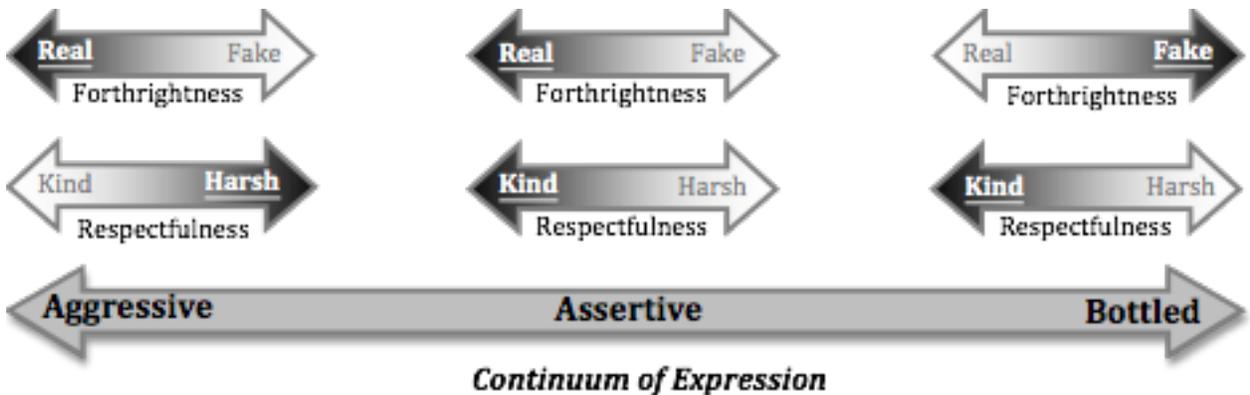


Effectively expressing what we feel and think is called "Assertiveness" and this falls in the balanced middle of the Continuum of Expression. It essentially consists of two things:

1. Moving our feelings and thoughts from an inner place of processing to an outward expression.
2. Doing so in a way that is respectful.

Many people believe that assertiveness is mainly just being blunt. Actually, assertiveness is the fine art of saying what we really feel while doing so in a way that is respectful. Make no mistake. Speaking assertively to someone does not mean ensuring that feelings are not hurt. Rather, it is speaking in a way that holds sacred the dignity of another person and identifies him or her as a fellow human being while at the same time working to be as authentic to our own voice as possible.

In effect, to practice good assertiveness, we need to balance two other continuums: the Continuum of Forthrightness and the Continuum of Respectfulness (see diagram below). We can tend to believe that if we are going to be respectful, we have to dampen down our forthrightness, that is, the expression of what we really feel. I'd call this making "nice", as it is kind, but fake. This is a more bottled style of communication and its goal is to avoid conflict. On the other hand, we can also tend to believe that if we are truly forthright, or real, our expression will automatically be mean or harsh. Here we have a more aggressive style of blunt communication without tactfulness.



True assertiveness believes that it is possible to be both real and kind at the same time. While it may be easy to see this reality, the question remains as to how to be both forthright and respectful at once, and I think it involves a couple of important disciplines:

- In the arena of forthrightness, we need to work hard to become aware of what we feel and why we feel it, and we need to take ownership for our own feelings. We must recognize that

just because we feel and think something doesn't mean it is true or accurate. In other words, we must exercise both self-awareness and humility.

- By the same token, respectfulness is much more attainable when we actually believe that other human beings carry value, no matter what they've done or said. It is much easier to respect another person when we come to them with the assumption that they are acting or behaving – even if poorly – usually for a reason. If we are able and we have his or her permission, it is worth the work to understand the underlying motives behind another person's behaviour.

Here I have shown, I believe, that an important aspect of making oneself understood actually links closely to the work of first understanding. St. Francis of Assisi had it right when he prayed, "...Grant that I may not so much seek ... to be understood as to understand." We might go further to say that if we ever truly want to be understood, we must work authentically to understand others, and with humility.

Stay tuned for Part 2 – Understanding.