



# International Journal of Advanced Psychiatric Nursing

E-ISSN: 2664-1356  
P-ISSN: 2664-1348  
[www.psychiatricjournal.net](http://www.psychiatricjournal.net)  
IJAPN 2021; 3(2): 20-23  
Received: 11-05-2021  
Accepted: 16-06-2021

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## Assertiveness in nursing

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### Abstract

Assertiveness is communicating and expressing your thoughts, feelings, and opinions in a way that makes your views and needs clearly understood by others, without putting down their thoughts, feelings, or opinions. This article highlights on the need of assertion among nursing professionals. It further arguments the benefits and techniques of assertiveness. It also clarifies the difference between assertive behavior, aggressive behavior and non-aggressive behavior that would allow the nurses to handle the situations tactfully. Assertiveness is considered also to be an essential social skill, especially for nurses. Becoming more assertive can lead to increased respect and recognition as a person and as a nurse. As nurses work in different situations they have to be assertive in order to meet the challenges and to win the cooperation from others <sup>[1]</sup>.

**Keywords:** Assertive behavior, aggressive behavior, non-aggressive behavior, nursing

### Introduction

Assertiveness is the ability to express your opinions, feelings, ideas, and needs openly, in a way that is true to who you are and respectful of others. It involves standing up for yourself in a way that encourages conversation rather than defensiveness <sup>[2]</sup>.

Assertiveness is one of the essential skills in the modern working environment, there are many benefits of being assertive such as; better time management, increased self-esteem and the ability to negotiate more effectively. Nurses are confronted with the daily responsibility of assessing, intervening and evaluating client responses to stress and client interactions. Some nurses may have learned to express their needs honestly, to use anger constructively, to improve personal and work relationships and to build self confidence through assertive behaviour <sup>[3]</sup>. Assertiveness is thought to be a healthy form of behaviour. Becoming more assertive can lead to increased respect and recognition as a person and as a nurse. It can get individual more of what his/her want <sup>[4]</sup>. Assertiveness is considered to be an essential skill for nurses. It is a key attribute for nurses without it true autonomy and personal empowerment cannot be achieved <sup>[5]</sup>.

Assertive behaviour demands control over outbursts of anger, crying or other behaviour patterns that exhibit lack of professionalism. Assertiveness skills can be seen as "valuable component" for successful professional nursing practice, with which many conflicts in a nursing situation can be successfully ruled out <sup>[6]</sup>. Assertive behaviour allows to express ideas and convey value in organization, which boosts self-confidence of nurses. This behavior allows to establish and project the image of a poised and polished professional. Assertiveness enables nurses to reduce interpersonal conflicts in personal and professional lives, thus removing a major source of stress for many. Direct communication, openness and honesty during assertive communication allow nurses to receive messages without distortion, which help to maintain relations with others. By using assertive skills, job satisfaction of nursing personnel as well as patients' satisfaction and level of services can be improved.<sup>7</sup> Sociologists and mental health professionals are finding that assertiveness is usually displayed in certain circumstances. That is, assertiveness is not a personality trait which persists consistently across all situations. Different individuals exhibit varying degrees of assertive behavior depending on whether they are in a work, social, academic, recreational or relationship context <sup>[7]</sup>.

### What is assertiveness?

Assertiveness is communicating and expressing your thoughts, feelings, and opinions in a way that makes your views and needs clearly understood by others, without putting down their thoughts, feelings, or opinions. Assertiveness is the ability to express our thoughts and feelings openly in an Honest, Appropriate, Respectful and Direct way.

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It can be HARD to do, but it gets easier with practice. In assertive communication both individuals are considered to be equally important [8].

Assertiveness is an expression of self-esteem. Studies have shown that individuals who have assertive behaviors generally have higher self-worth and are more successful in life. Assertive persons maintain self respect and respect for others by assertive behaviour which directly expresses one's true, basic feelings, needs, desires, opinions and personal rights in a positive, productive way without denying the rights of others. It enables one to act in her or his interests without undue anxiety [9].

Assertiveness skills allows both parties to maintain self-respect, pursue happiness and satisfaction of their needs, and defend their rights and personal space – all without abusing or dominating other people [10].

### Passive, Aggressive and Assertive behavior Styles

**Passive behavior:** Passive behavior involves allowing your own rights to be violated by failing to express honest feelings, thoughts, and beliefs, or by expressing your thoughts and feelings in an apologetic manner that others can easily disregard. The messages you communicate might be:

“I don’t count; you can take advantage of me.”

“My thoughts and feelings don’t matter; only yours do.”

**Aggressive behaviour:** Aggressive behavior involves communicating in a demanding, abrasive, or hostile way. It is insensitive to others’ rights, feelings and beliefs. The usual goals of aggression are domination and winning, forcing the other person to lose.

Some people mistakenly think they are being “assertive” when in fact they are being aggressive.

### Assertive Behaviour

An assertive behavior involves acting in his/her own best interests, stands up for self, expresses feelings honestly, is in charge of self in interpersonal relations, and chooses for self. The basic message sent from an assertive person is “I’m OK and you’re OK.”

An assertive person is emotionally honest, direct, self-enhancing, and expressive. He/she feels confident, self-respecting at the time of his/her actions as well as later.

### The Basic Assertive Rights of Every Human Being include

1. Having dignity and self-respect.
2. Saying NO when justified without feeling guilty.
3. Expressing your feelings.
4. Asking for what you want directly.
5. Feeling good about yourself.
6. Being able to change your mind.
7. Negotiating and reaching compromises when conflict exists.
8. Being able to make mistakes.

### Techniques of assertive behaviour

1. **Assertive Body Language:** Body language is a powerful way of communicating to people how has on others. When you are trying to use the following assertiveness techniques, try to also use assertive we would like to be treated. Sometimes, we are unaware of

our body language and the impact it body language. Assertive body language includes the following:

- Face the other person, standing or sitting straight.
- Listen carefully to what they say.
- Have a pleasant facial expression.
- Keep your voice calm and pleasant.
- Make sure that your body language supports what you are saying

2. **Basic Assertion:** Basic assertion is when we make a statement that expresses clearly our needs, wants, beliefs, opinions or feelings. This type of assertion can be used every day to make our needs known. Typically basic assertion uses “I” statements.
3. **Saying “No”:** Many people have great difficulty saying “No” to others. Even people who are quite assertive in other situations may find themselves saying “Yes” to things that they really don’t want to do. Now saying “Yes” to something you don’t really want to do can be inappropriate in some situations.
4. **Broken Record:** Be persistent and keep saying what you want over and over again without getting angry, irritated, or loud. Stick to your point.
5. **Free Information:** Learn to listen to the other person and follow-up on free information people offer about themselves. This free information gives you something to talk about.
6. **Self-Disclosure:** Assertively disclose information about yourself – how you think, feel, and react to the other person’s information. This gives the other person information about you.
7. **Fogging:** An assertive coping skill is dealing with criticism. Do not deny any criticism and do not counter-attack with criticism of your own.
8. **Agree with the truth:** Find a statement in the criticism that is truthful and agree with that statement.
9. **Agree with the odds:** Agree with any possible truth in the critical statement.
10. **Agree in principle:** Agree with the general truth in a logical statement such as, “That makes sense.”
11. **Negative Assertion:** Assertively accepting those things that are negative about yourself and Coping with your errors.
12. **Workable Compromise:** When your self-respect is not in question offer a workable compromise.
13. **Accepting Compliments:** Some people find it extremely difficult to accept compliments. Understandably there are times when it may feel uncomfortable; however, being able to accept other people’s positive comments about our appearance, our work or some other aspect of ourselves is an important assertiveness and social skill.

### Benefits of being assertive

1. Improve communication skills, create effective, healthy and satisfied IPR
2. Increase self-respect and respect for others.
3. No stress and improve emotional and physical health.
4. Reduces friction and conflict.
5. Ability and productivity at work and the home increases.
6. Achievement of individual and organizational goals.
7. Autonomy, improve patient care.
8. Maintains rights and dignity of self and others.
9. Enhance self esteem and self actualization.

## 10. Prevent social anxiety, depression, shyness and anger.

### Assertion in Nursing Education

McCaffrey *et al.* argues that before effective communication occurs, an Understanding of the basic components that build up proper communication, including assertiveness is of utmost importance. Hence, education in communication styles should appear in the curricula of undergraduate student nurses in order to prepare them in being autonomous so as to meet the challenging roles of the nursing profession in a complex health care system. Qualified nurses should also receive further education and training in assertiveness, as according to McCaffrey *et al.*, This may assist them in the development of positive communication styles by promoting collegiality and team work <sup>[11]</sup>.

Hertting *et al.* in another study, demonstrate the importance of analysing feelings relating to professional ambiguity and the gaining of influence in a gender-related, hierarchical environment, and the need to support professional assertiveness in relation to superiors and doctors. Hertting *et al.* concluded that the level of education was an important factor, by stating that when nurses have a higher level of education, the higher their level of assertiveness <sup>[12]</sup>.

Particular attention is being paid to the role of assertiveness in the modern educational system. Many authors have accepted assertive behaviour as the most constructive method of communication in teaching process. Its application in teaching practice not only increased the effectiveness of training activities, but also had a positive educational impact on young people, facilitating development of valuable personal qualities amongst them <sup>[13, 14]</sup>. Many of these studies have noted that changes in assertiveness as a result of assertiveness training are also accompanied by changes in variables like self-esteem, self-concept, social skills, participation in different activities and academic achievement <sup>[15]</sup>.

Special attention has also been paid to development of assertive skills among upper grade and college students, as it is believed that this age is conducive to build a vision, perseverance, self-reliance and initiative, qualities that are prerequisite for development of assertiveness <sup>[16]</sup>. Factors affecting assertiveness among student nurses were explored by Ibrahim. This study highlighted positive relationship between assertiveness and psychological empowerment. Introduction of specific courses for enhancing assertiveness skills among student nurses was recommended by the study Eldeeb *et al.* <sup>[17]</sup> Aimed to assess assertiveness and stress levels among nursing students and revealed statistically significant positive correlation between assertiveness and stress levels. The study recommended introduction of specific courses for acquisition of assertiveness skills, including stress management and coping strategies in curricula <sup>[18]</sup>.

### Assertion in Nursing Practice

According to Timmins and McCabe, as nurses start to adopt certain roles, they need to behave in an assertive manner. <sup>19</sup> Furthermore, DeMarco, suggest that an institutionally imposed powerlessness has taught many nurses not to assert themselves individually or collectively in the workplace. This means that nurses do not possess the power to behave assertively <sup>[20]</sup>. Hence, Timmins and McCabe, highlight the importance of exploring nurses' and midwives' assertive

behaviours in the workplace as little empirical evidence exists about this issue <sup>[19]</sup>. The rapid and dramatic change of nursing and the healthcare industry is an important step for nurses to develop the skills of leadership roles and management functions <sup>[21]</sup>. In addition to the increasing complexity of nursing services, qualified and competent nursing staff is demanded for high quality care. Hence, it is essential for nurses to be proficient in management skills, since they are in a key position where they influence not only patient care outcomes, but also the organization's effectiveness in which they work <sup>[22]</sup>.

The profession of nursing lacks teamwork not only between nursing colleagues but also between different nursing disciplines <sup>[23]</sup>. Therefore, nurses have a long way to go so before instilling the culture of teamwork in their everyday work practices <sup>[24]</sup>. Hence, instead of being objects of the social system in the sense that they do what they are told to, nurses should take the opportunity to become subjects of their own history by using their newfound assertiveness, knowledge and competence to engage in the healthcare debate and therefore being able to take their own decisions without fear and with the use of proper assertion <sup>[25]</sup>. An institutionally imposed powerlessness has taught many nurses not to be assertive on an individual basis or collectively as a group <sup>[20]</sup>. Therefore, education to support nurses in their developing professionalism is what the current climate of healthcare entails. Hence, nurses may develop self by being actively engaged in conscious reflection with the help and support of others <sup>[26]</sup>. Riley argues that assertiveness is an essential communication style for the nursing profession as it provides a successful link between the nurses, their clients, families and also their colleagues <sup>[27]</sup>.

Timmins and McCabe, argue that the work of a nurse manager is very demanding, however, they tend to forget that supporting and encouraging staff to behave in an assertive way, is a priority <sup>[19]</sup>. To support this issue, West, emphasises that the most important thing that a leader can do is to organize team members so that they can work jointly together for a common goal, that is, the promotion of trust, open communication and interpersonal support, which are crucial for productivity; and the empowerment of staff members to be able to innovate, experiment, and take risks and grow professionally <sup>[28]</sup>. Tradition, training, and hierarchical structure of the working environment are barriers to assertive behaviour whereas knowledge, confidence, and uniforms help to exhibit assertive behaviour <sup>[29]</sup>.

In current healthcare environments, professional nurses need to become more aware about the use of assertive techniques in their workplaces to manage the challenges they face when dealing with human resources. So it is important to develop some assertive training program in order to improve assertive behavior <sup>[30]</sup>.

### Conclusion

Nurses interact with patients, colleagues and other health care professionals on a daily basis; such an interaction is improved when nurses have good communication skills. The potential benefits of assertive behaviour to nurses are enormous where it enhanced self awareness, improved staff performance, improved patient care and interdisciplinary collaboration and cohesiveness <sup>[31]</sup>.

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