

Aggressive Communication

The following is the first of 8 articles. It is not sufficient on its own. Other articles will follow over time.

The article is intended for current clients who have heard the information at least once in a couple session. It is intended to be used as review. If you have not been seen and you are reading this article, I hope you find it helpful but do recommend you see a therapist to discuss the information.

Most of us believe we know what aggressive communication looks like when we see it. Certainly, in the middle of an argument we can recognize that both parties are using aggressive speech. But I believe it is useful to think of aggressive speech more broadly than this. It is



useful to think of aggressive communication as occurring ***anytime*** you are trying to get someone to drop their opinion and take yours.

This might seem confusing. When you discuss an issue important to you, aren't you trying to change the other person's mind?

Yes, sometimes the purpose of your communication is to change someone's mind. Whenever you take that approach, recognize that doing so is taking an aggressive stance; you are using an aggressive style of communication to convince someone else to drop what they are thinking and think like you.

Why is this important?

It is important to understand that whenever you use an aggressive communication style, you are automatically putting the other person in the position of defending themselves. It's human nature. You are inadvertently triggering your partners "fight, flight, freeze, fawn" response. They will automatically feel the need to get you to drop *your* position.

This type of interaction can be relatively uneventful if the issue is not big and you both have healthy levels of trust. I will cover the importance of trust in other articles. But, aggressive communication easily and often, degrades into an argument as each person becomes more certain that their partner is trying to control them ("He must think I am an idiot!"). That concern will result in them becoming more emphatic about the correctness of their point of view and your, "obviously" inferior position.

Each is now primed to:

- Fight: "I must win this argument!"
- Flight: "I am getting out of here before this becomes a fight."
- Freeze: "I'm trapped! I'll just try to agree and get out of this!"
- Fawn: "This is going to be too much to bear. I might as well be dead."

Each of these responses (or combination of responses) occur largely "non-consciously." That is, they are rather automatic and we are often not aware we are using one of them. They are not "unconscious," as that would imply these behaviors and emotions cannot be accessed. This is an important distinction! We can, with practice and awareness begin to recognize our automatic responses and learn to manage and overcome these behaviors.

Here is an example of how Aggressive Communication can affect an otherwise positive interaction:

It is usually considered a nice thing to surprise your spouse with an evening at a nice restaurant. If I come home from work and say to my wife Karen, "I wanted to surprise you, so I made reservations at Southside Bistro," she most likely would be pleased, and we would have a great evening.

Still, I consider my communication here to be aggressive, because I did not check with her first. It was a nice thing to do, but imagine if I did it all the time. I am not asking her whether or not she wants to go out to eat, nor what restaurant she prefers. Instead, I am simply informing her of what the evenings agenda will be.

Imagine if I "surprised" her every week for eight weeks with a dinner date. Everybody is different, but it would not be long before Karen would tire of this, suspecting that my real agenda was to control where we ate. She would suspect that I really wasn't interested in her opinion on the matter. She would eventually point this out to me and would become irritated that I am not asking her opinion.

Remember her response is non-conscious, at least at first. I shouldn't get mad at her eventual reaction. My communication style was triggering her all along, she just wasn't aware of it until it came into consciousness when her brain started suspecting foul-play.

Assertive Communication (not Aggressive Communication) should be our goal. This article is meant to introduce you to the first style. All four styles will be covered in separate articles.