

# Assertiveness in Nursing

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## **Abstract**

Assertiveness is the ability to express one's feelings and one's rights without violating the rights of other people. Assertiveness as a form of behavior is also based on principles of equality, respect and responsibility. This article highlights the need for assertion among nursing professionals in the field of nursing education and practice as well. It further augments the benefits and techniques for being assertive. It also clarifies the difference between assertive behavior, aggressive behavior and non-assertive behavior that would allow the nurses to utilize with emotional intelligence and handle the situations tactfully. Assertiveness is highly influenced by the situation, that is, the relationship of the individual and with others. Professional nurses are expected not only to have knowledge and technical skills but also to influence the team of nurses to manage their jobs and create an assertive climate in the work environment.

**Keywords:** Assertive behavior; Aggressive behavior; Non-assertive behavior.

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## **Introduction**

Assertiveness is considered healthy behavior for all people that, when present, militate against personal powerlessness and results in personal empowerment. Nursing has determined that assertive behavior among its practitioners is invaluable components for successful professional practice.[1] Professional nurses need to become more aware of how to use assertiveness effectively in the current health care environment to manage the challenges they face in dealing with human resources. Assertiveness is crucial for nurses to deal with complex human relations situations and the ability to communicate assertively is often considered as a most precious skill that a professional nurse can possess.[2]

Assertiveness is frequently misunderstood. Some people believe you have to be confident to be assertive. But being assertive is less about being

confident and more about valuing yourself and your profession. Becoming more assertive can lead to increased respect and recognition as a person and as a nurse. It can get you more of what you want. Becoming more assertive is a process. It is not something that happens overnight. You can, however, make some small changes now to start moving in the right direction. Assertiveness is an antidote to fear, shyness, passivity, and even anger. As nurses work in different situations they have to be assertive in order to meet the challenges and to win the cooperation from others.[3]

### *What is Assertiveness?*

Assertiveness is the ability to express yourself and your rights without violating the rights of others. It means that we have respect both for ourselves and for others. We are consciously working toward a 'win-win' solution to problems. A win-win solution means that we are trying to make sure that both parties end up with their needs met to the degree possible. An assertive person effectively influences, listens, and negotiates so that others choose to cooperate willingly. Dorland's Medical Dictionary defines it as 'a form of behavior characterized by a

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confident declaration or affirmation of a statement without need of proof; this affirms the person's rights or point of view without either aggressively threatening the rights of another (assuming a position of dominance) or submissively permitting another to ignore or deny one's rights or point'.

Assertiveness is very different from aggressiveness. Aggressiveness involves expressing our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a way that is inappropriate and violates the rights of others. By being aggressive, we put our wants, needs, and rights above those of others. Where assertiveness tries to find a win-win solution, aggressiveness strives for a win-lose solution: 'I will be the winner; you will be the loser'. Assertiveness is also different from non-assertiveness. Non-assertive behavior is passive and indirect. It permits others to violate our rights and shows a lack of respect for our own needs. It communicates a message of inferiority. It creates a lose-win situation because the non-assertive person thinks his or her own needs are secondary and opts to be a victim.

#### *Techniques for being Assertive*

1. *Be Direct:* Deliver your message to the person for whom it is intended.
2. *'Own' Your Message:* You can acknowledge ownership with personalized ('I') statements such as 'I do not agree with you' (as compared to 'You are wrong') or 'I would like to talk without being interrupted' (as compared to 'You always interrupt my talk').
3. *Ask for Feedback:* Am I being clear? Asking for feedback can encourage others to correct any misperceptions you may have as well as help others realize that you are expressing an opinion, feeling or desire rather than a demand. Encourage others to be clear, direct, and specific in their feedback.
4. *Stop Apologizing All the Time:* Many of us say 'I am sorry' on a regular basis without even thinking about it. Although we say it in an effort to be polite, it sounds like we are apologizing. When you say you are sorry all the time, it sounds as if you are taking the

blame for everything that happens. It makes you seem like a self-appointed scapegoat. Do not say 'I am sorry' unless you have done something you truly need to apologize for.

5. *Learn to Take a Compliment:* When complimented on a job well done, many of us could have responded: 'Oh, I did not do anything', 'It was nothing' or 'Don't mention'. A more appropriate response would be to say: 'Thank you. I had a great team to work with on this'. Accepting a genuine compliment is not sign of conceit and when you deflect a compliment, you are basically saying, 'My actions were meaningless or minimal and unworthy of acknowledgement'.
6. *Do not Be Self-deprecating:* Merriam Webster defines self-deprecating as 'belittling or undervaluing oneself: excessively modest'. Although modesty is an admirable trait, taking it to an extreme is counterproductive.
7. *Act Confident even if You do not Feel Confident:* Force yourself to make good eye contact with people and use a steady, audible voice when speaking. Stand or sit erect with your head upright and straight on your shoulders, not tilted to the side or bent forward. Act like you have a right to be there, even if you do not feel that way. If someone attempts to interrupt you while you are talking, keep talking until you are done and raise the volume of your voice if necessary to be heard. If you stop talking midstream in an effort to be 'polite', you are making a statement that they have more of a right to speak than you do.
8. *Feel Free to Say 'I do not Know', 'I did not Understand', and 'No':* Feel free to change your mind and make requests when necessary. [3]

#### *Benefits of being Assertive*

Being assertive offers many powerful benefits. It helps you keep people from walking all over you, as the saying goes. On the flip side, it can also help you from steamrolling others. Behaving assertively can help you:

- Gain self-confidence and self-esteem

- Understand and recognize your feelings
- Earn respect from others
- Improve communication
- Create win-win situations
- Improve your decision-making skills
- Create honest relationships
- Gain more job satisfaction

Some research suggests that being assertive also can help people cope better with many mental health problems, including depression, anorexia, bulimia, social anxiety disorder and schizophrenia. [4]

#### *Assertion among Nurse Educators*

Assertiveness is an important behavior for today's professional nurse. As nurses move away from traditional subservient roles and perceived stereotypes it is increasingly being recognized that a nurse needs to behave in an assertive manner. Assertiveness is necessary for effective nurse/patient communication, and it is suggested that its development may also aid the confidence of the profession as it develops. Assertive behavior may be encouraged through educational methods. It is preferable that nurses receive this educational preparation during undergraduate programs. Nurse educators have an important role in the development and implementation of assertiveness training/education programs for undergraduate nursing students. Little empirical evidence exists to support teaching in this area, however role-play is a concept that is suggested for the experiential teaching of communication/interpersonal skills in general. Using role-play as a central focus, and available literature on the topic, a 3-hour assertiveness workshop is devised for undergraduate nursing students. This paper describes this workshop from the teacher's perspective and outlines student responses. The experience is both positive and enlightening. Nurse educators have an important role to play in the development of education programs of this kind. The sharing of this experience allows educators to examine current practice and

presents pathways for future empirical studies in this area. [5]

#### *Assertion in Nursing Practice*

Assertiveness is an important issue in nursing practice. After a period of reflective practice, when the nurses in this project identified their need for assertiveness at work, the literature was explored with the intention of assisting in the creation of the action plan. Nursing literature repeats the call for nurses to become more assertive. Education programs in assertiveness knowledge and skills have been in vogue for some time in nursing because nurses have recognized the need for assertiveness in quality nursing care. All of these authors agree that assertiveness is important in nursing practice, but that it is complex and requires time and practice to make it effective.

Timmins and McCabe undertook a preliminary pilot study to assess how assertive nurses are in the workplace, in order to develop an instrument and report on the results. The results showed that nurses in the study responded strongly to items 'allowing others to express opinions, complimenting others and saying no'. The researchers concluded that the nurses behave in a passive, nice way and were 'less adept at disagreeing with others' opinions and providing constructive criticism'. Addis and Gamble aimed to understand what nurses had learned from an assertive outreach (AO) experience. The project was informed by the phenomenological concepts of Heidegger and data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews of five rural AO nurses working in one county in England. The thematic analysis revealed that nurses understood their experience of assertive engagement as involving: having time; anticipatory persistence and tired dejection; pressure, relief and satisfaction; being the human professional confluence; accepting anxiety and fear; working and learning together; and bringing the caring attitude. Thus it was shown that being a rural AO nurse involves contradictory yet rewarding experiences in practicing assertive behaviors with clients.

Nursing in hospitals involves negotiating complex interpersonal relationships and working in a social and political context within economic constraints, while balancing a multiplicity of tasks and roles. Nurses are busy clinicians who need to have a broad range of clinical knowledge and skills, and they are accountable to many people. Hospital nurses are caught up in the complexity and busyness of daily work, but these constraints can be managed effectively by reflective processes.[6]

### Conclusion

The contribution of assertiveness among nurses towards human resources in health care is now widely recognized. Yet, findings from numerous assertion studies suggest that nurses are generally non-assertive. Because assertiveness is viewed as a valued behavior within nursing, resulting in positive outcomes such as the enhancement of leadership skills, an increase in job satisfaction, an avoidance of compromising patient care, alleviation of job stress

, the heightening of nurses' effectiveness in bringing about change, and a greater insight into the factors that influence the responding style is necessary.[7]

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