

**'If you haven't the strength to impose your own terms upon life,
you must accept the terms it offers you'**

– T S Eliot –

■ **What is assertiveness?**

The word *assertiveness* is used to describe a certain pattern of behaviour or a style of communicating with others. It is a way of behaving which means we are communicating our feelings, thoughts and beliefs in an open, honest manner without violating the rights of other people. It is an alternative to being either aggressive, where we abuse other people's rights, or to being passive, where we abuse our own rights.

Being assertive means we are able to ask for what we want from others; it means we can say 'no' to the requests of others; it means we can express a range and depth of emotion, for example, love, liking and anger; and it means we can express personal opinions without feeling self-conscious. Very few people manage to be assertive all the time in all areas of their lives. It is undoubtedly true that we could all benefit from being more assertive in some areas of our lives.

■ **Why are we unassertive?**

We act in an unassertive manner because we have learned through our experiences to behave that way. This learning process can be traced back to our early childhood. Small babies have no fear of expressing themselves and communicating their needs. They cry and smile openly; there is no inhibition or 'beating about the bush'. But very quickly children learn to adapt their behaviour to the kind of responses they receive from those around them. Children's behaviour is subtly shaped by the models they are exposed to and by the encouragement, or lack of it, received from parents, family, friends and school.

Some children are encouraged and rewarded for expressing themselves openly and honestly and are quite comfortable expressing a range of emotions. Others may be encouraged to express their thoughts but find it more difficult to

express emotions. We have all learned to be the way we are; therefore we can learn to behave differently.

■ **The effects of being unassertive**

The long-term effect of being unassertive is a growing loss of *self-esteem*. This term refers to our own evaluation of ourselves in respect to how competent, significant and likeable we see ourselves as people. The more we act in an unassertive way, the weaker is our positive sense of identity: the sense of, 'this is me, this is how I feel and how I think'. This can result in a lack of sense of purpose, or a feeling that we are not in control of our lives, which in turn leads to negative feelings and symptoms of stress.

If we are failing to express ourselves openly and we are concealing our feelings and thoughts, this can lead to internal tension, also resulting in physical and mental symptoms of stress. Inherent in unassertive behaviour is poor communication which leads to the development of unhealthy uncomfortable relationships. Communicating effectively in relationships is the best possible insulator against symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression.

■ **Why be more assertive?**

By being more assertive we can improve our sense of identity, our confidence and our self-esteem. A snowball effect is created: the more confident we feel, the more assertive we are and so on. By stating more clearly what our needs are, we increase the chances that these needs will be met.

Being assertive leads to a saving in energy and a reduction in tension. We are no longer preoccupied with avoiding upsetting others, and no longer overly concerned with making gains in an aggressive way. People who are generally assertive are confident people who are simply happy to be themselves.