Assertive communication: making yourself heard in a health care team
Background

Clear, confident, respectful and open communication maximises the effectiveness of health care teams who often operate within an environment that is busy, crowded and with competing priorities (Curtis, Tzannes, & Rudge, 2011). Poor patient outcomes, adverse events and stress have all been associated with poor communication and communication overload in the healthcare setting (Curtis, et al., 2011).

Assertive communicators are able to clearly and openly express their needs, wants, feelings and opinions in a manner which is respectful to themselves and others (Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011). Assertive individuals are able to make requests without belittling, abusing or dominating other people (Bolton, 1986; Dale Carnegie Training, 2009). Learning to be an assertive communicator can be challenging and requires the skills to express one’s thoughts and opinions in a self-confident, positive, respectful manner (Kolb & Stevens Griffith, 2009; Sundel & Sundel, 1980).

Assertive behaviour falls within the centre of a spectrum ranging from passivity at one end to aggression at the other (Hasan, 2008). This is conceptualised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The spectrum of assertive behaviour

Adapted from: (Sundel & Sundel, 1980)

Under-assertive individuals are often described as meek, passive, or easily manipulated and identified from nonverbal indicators such as a lack of eye contact, excessively soft voice and hesitating speech (Bolton, 1986; Sundel & Sundel, 1980). Passive individuals will go to almost any length to avoid conflict, often believing they are inferior to others (Hasan, 2008).
Morrissey and Callaghan (2011) identify the following characteristics in under-assertive individuals:

- Allowing oneself to be treated with little respect, i.e., being a ‘doormat’;
- Comparing oneself constantly to others;
- Struggling to identify or state needs and wants;
- Finding it difficult to make decisions;
- Fear of upsetting others and apologising excessively;
- Avoiding confrontation, e.g. saying ‘yes’ when really they want to say ‘no’;
- Using self put-downs;
- Dismissing self-worth and their value as a person; and
- Using long rambling sentences that lack focus and avoid the use of ‘I’

Source: (Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011, p. 110).

Non-assertive behaviour is often encouraged from an early age with children being praised for acts of caring and selflessness and being encouraged to behave ‘nicely’, that is, being quiet and obedient (Bolton, 1986).

Over-assertive individuals are often perceived as aggressive, hostile, arrogant, coercive, overbearing and intimidating (Sundel & Sundel, 1980). They typically communicate in a loud, abusive or sarcastic manner expressing their own thoughts and feelings at the expense of others (Bolton, 1986). Often, over-assertive individuals are disliked and feared in the workplace (Bolton, 1986; Sundel & Sundel, 1980). Morrissey and Callaghan (2011) outline the following characteristics of over-assertive individuals:

- Find it difficult to acknowledge mistakes and blame others;
- Use verbal attacks or sarcasm, employing threatening tones and body language which may include finger wagging and a raised voice;
- Do not invite others to share their views;
- Take over from others and make decisions with minimal consultation;
- Use put-downs; and
- Give heavy-handed advice


Few individuals are assertive all of the time but the skills of assertive behaviour are important to develop so they can be utilised in appropriate situations (Morrissey &
Callaghan, 2011; Sundel & Sundel, 1980). Individuals should reflect upon the risks and benefits of being assertive as there will be times when assertive behaviour may not be the most appropriate course of action, such as in situations that may result in the potential for injury to themselves or others (DeVito, 2011; Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011).

Assertiveness also has a cultural component whereby individualist cultures that value competition, individual success and independence place a higher worth on assertive behaviour than do collectivist cultures that value cooperation, harmony and group achievement (DeVito, 2011; Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011). Therefore perceptions of assertive behaviour will be mediated by an individual's cultural background. As such, it is important for individuals to gain an understanding of the different cultural customs and rules that may impact on individuals' interpretations and understandings of assertive communication and behaviour (Sundel & Sundel, 1980). In addition, assertiveness can be influenced by gender, age, confidence, life experience and education background (Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011).

Assertiveness is a skill that can be developed and involves making changes to one’s thoughts and beliefs as well as behaviour (Gray & Moffett, 2011; Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011). It involves developing self-confidence and valuing one’s own worth as a human being (Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011). This is a process which takes time and making even small changes can result in benefits (Sudha, 2005). Balzer-Riley (2012) has identified the following advantages from developing assertiveness:

- Being more likely to get what you want by asking for it clearly
- People respect clear, open, honest communication
- Standing up for your own rights and feel self-respect
- You avoid the invitation of aggression when the rights of others are violated
- You are more independent
- You become a decision-maker
- You feel more peaceful and comfortable with yourself

Source: (Balzar-Riley, 2012, p. 9).

Other benefits that have been identified include being more effective in influencing one’s environment; improved self-worth and confidence; decreased levels of anxiety and tension and associated health problems (headaches, stomach upsets, skin rashes); increased job
Developing assertive communication skills

Assertive individuals are self-assured, direct and sincere communicating their thoughts and feelings in a manner that is not disparaging to themselves or others and are willing to accept differing points of view (Kolb & Stevens Griffith, 2009; Sundel & Sundel, 1980). The following characteristics have been identified in an assertive communicator:

- Appears self-confident and composed
- Maintains eye contact
- Uses clear, concise speech
- Speaks firmly and positively
- Speaks genuinely, without sarcasm
- Is non-apologetic
- Takes the initiative to guide situations
- Gives the same message verbally and nonverbally

Source: (Balzar-Riley, 2012, p. 8).

Assertive communication requires a range of skills and techniques. These include ‘initiating and maintaining conversations, encouraging assertiveness in others, responding appropriately to criticism, giving negative feedback respectfully, expressing appreciation or pleasure, being persistent, setting limits or refusing requests, and expressing opinions and feelings appropriately’ (Hasan, 2008, p. 2). Despite the common belief that good communication is an innate skill, individuals can develop their assertive communication skills (DeVito, 2011; Gray & Moffett, 2011). This requires an understanding of some of the basic principles of assertive communication as well as being able to develop goals and a plan for putting the knowledge and skills learnt into practice (Dale Carnegie Training, 2009; Kolb & Stevens Griffith, 2009).

A basic tenet of assertive communication is to be clear, concise and factual (Cornell, 1993). Try and remain calm and avoid blame (Cohen, 2008). The use of ‘I’ statements is seen as key as it allows speakers to take ownership in expressing their thoughts and feelings rather than making the conversation accusatory and making people defensive (e.g. ‘you’ make me
...)(Dale Carnegie Training, 2009; Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011; Sudha, 2005). Cornell (1993) believes that 'I' statements are most effective when used as:

1. A statement of feeling, e.g. "I am concerned, upset".
2. A statement of why you feel this way e.g. "I am concerned because I trust whoever is assigned to check the crash cart will do so".
   A statement of desired action e.g. "I'd like to discuss this with you, do you have some time this week?"
3. Repeat steps if necessary

Source: (Cornell, 1993, p. 2).

It is also important to be clear in communicating one's message. Cornell (1993) suggests that too often individuals provide unclear or mixed messages, hinting at what they want rather than just coming out and saying it. This should also be communicated in a confident manner with assertive body language (e.g. good eye contact and upright posture) and vocal qualities (e.g. even tone, volume) (Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011; Sudha, 2005; Sundel & Sundel, 1980). Appear confident even if you do not feel it (Sudha, 2005).

In order to effectively communicate your message it is important to determine what outcome you are hoping to achieve (or what you are hoping to avoid) (Cohen, 2008). The likelihood of a successful outcome is increased by taking the time to prepare your thoughts and feelings and determining the desired outcome prior to any interaction (Curtis, et al., 2011). The DESC script (Balzar-Riley, 2012) is a useful framework for structuring thought processes. Steps include:

- Describe the situation
- Express what you think and feel
- Specify your request
- Consequences


In addition, Balzar-Riley (2012) also highlights the importance of considering the timing of communication, the content of your concern, as well as the receptivity of the individual in hearing your words (i.e. are they calm?) in determining when to use an assertive response.
Writing has been recognised as a useful tool for clarifying thoughts and feelings when developing assertiveness skills (Dale Carnegie Training, 2009). It can allow individuals to identify the changes that are required in behaviour, and in what settings and circumstances, as well as recording successful attempts at assertive communication (Dale Carnegie Training, 2009). When a particular situation is identified as one requiring assertive communication, writing a detailed concrete plan can be valuable including 'what happened in the past, what's happening now, and what you'd like to see happen in the future' (Dale Carnegie Training, 2009, p. 11). Keep the dialogue factual and non-confrontational.

Once a plan has been developed, it can be useful initially to practice the skills and techniques in a supportive environment (Balzar-Riley, 2012; Kolb & Stevens Griffith, 2009). Engaging a spouse, family member or friends to assist you in developing your assertive communication skills can be extremely valuable (Balzar-Riley, 2012). Support people can assist in brainstorming the most effective techniques for a particular situation as well as discussing how to best apply ideas and concepts to real-world situations (Dale Carnegie Training, 2009; Kolb & Stevens Griffith, 2009). Role playing can also be particularly valuable with the support person able to give tangible feedback on content as well as posture, eye contact and tone of voice during practice (Sundel & Sundel, 1980).

Once preparation is complete it is useful to put the developed assertive communication skills into practice. If possible in the first instance, select circumstances that are realistic and achievable. Once confidence has developed in this new style of communicating, more challenging situations can be attempted (Dale Carnegie Training, 2009).

**Conclusion**

Being assertive means being able to effectively communicate your thoughts and feelings whilst respecting the rights others by not being abusive or denigrating (Sundel & Sundel, 1980). Learning to be assertive takes time, practice and internal motivation (Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011). For an individual who in the past has not been a capable assertive communicator, mistakes may be made and support is necessary to assist in integrating new skills and techniques into everyday practice (Morrissey & Callaghan, 2011).
Once successful, however, the assertive individual is rewarded by:

- Being skilled in a variety of communication strategies for expressing thoughts and feelings;
- Having a positive attitude about communicating directly and honestly;
- Feeling comfortable and in control of anxiety, tenseness, shyness, or fear; and
- Feeling confident that they can conduct themselves in a self-respecting way while still respecting others.

Source: (Balzar-Riley, 2012, p. 8).