

Assertiveness or Aggressiveness – The Difference it Makes.

Ashit began to feel tired and washed out day and night. The whole day he would feel worn out until he went to sleep. At night he would wake up a few times feeling exhausted. In the morning he would get up still feeling tired. His problem did not end there. Though he used to be good in maths, now he was making mistakes even in simple calculations. That was affecting his career as an accountant. Pathological tests revealed that he had no physical problem. He was sure that he had no mental problem either. Happily married to Nilu, with one sweet child, Ashit could not think of anything better.

Both Ashit and Nilu would vouch that they had no big problem between them. They were well adjusted to each other. Conflict was almost absent in their family life. They could not understand why couples should quarrel at all. Privately, however, he admitted that his wife was making all the decisions and he had to do things he was not keen on doing. But he did not mind that.

Counselling revealed that Ashit had a basic difficulty to articulate his needs and differences. Too accommodating by nature, he was swallowing his feelings to avoid friction. He did not realise that this was taking on his mental health.

As a child, Ashit was very timid. He always tried to please others. He used to be afraid of bigger boys and even boys of his age. He never fought with anyone. He used to play with smaller children who did not pose a threat to him.

Assertiveness requires Self-esteem. Self-esteem brings in a power which comes forward in our words and actions. Persons with self-esteem will be spontaneous and can express their needs and wants genuinely. They can show displeasure or disagreement in a nice way without making you feel put off.

He was afraid of his mother who was a domineering figure and always had the upper hand in the family. His father gave in to her whenever there was a difference of opinion. Ashit rarely spoke about his father during the counselling sessions. But he spoke of his mother many times. It was clear that his mother was the dominant figure in his life. It appeared as if his father had very little influence on him.

Nilu was happy to have a husband who never opposed her. She had the freedom she wanted. She was a responsible wife and mother. Moreover Ashit was a gentleman and so it appeared to be natural that Ashit just accepted her views and whatever she did. Theirs seemed to be a good match.

Although at first Ashit went on insisting that he was fine as a husband, later it came out that he had a lot of resentment buried deep within. He had difficulty to speak about them even to the counsellor. At one point he was shivering when he spoke about some incidents and the feelings he had. But he had not let Nilu know about these feelings.

Once it was clear that he had many unexpressed feelings and these were causing his problem, he needed to learn how to express his feelings and needs without hurting. This indeed was very difficult because from his childhood he was used to swallowing his feelings and he had the fear of displeasing others. This had become a habit and he suppressed his feelings before they surfaced into his consciousness. In addition, he did not know the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness. It took a few sessions to train him to become assertive. First he was made to understand that it is natural and normal to have feelings, especially feelings of anger and there is no reason to feel guilty or bad about his feelings. Then he was helped to accept his feelings and be comfortable with himself for having the feelings. Next was learning the healthy way to express his feelings. The final thing was to get Nilu accept him with his feelings. Though this took a few sessions of counselling, the problem was finally solved.

There are people who have difficulty to speak out what is in their mind. They value relationship and fear displeasing others. They forgo their needs and goals in their effort to please others. They always oblige others and overburden themselves doing chores for others as they can not say 'No' to anyone.

Some people have difficulty to be firm without becoming aggressive. Some of those who hold positions of authority can be like this. This is the case with some parents and teachers. They raise their voice and show anger when they want to insist on something. They can not say the same thing convincingly without a show of temper. They equate anger with power and control. There are others who shout the opponent down when there is a difference of opinion, especially if they have no sound argument.

Most people mistake aggressiveness for assertiveness. When we vent our emotions unmindful of others' feelings, it is aggressiveness. This happens when our feelings take the upper hand. Assertiveness on the other hand is the ability to express ourselves forthrightly, without making anyone feel put down. Two things are involved here. One is the ability to articulate our needs. The other is the management of our emotions. The former needs self-esteem and self-confidence. The latter needs emotional maturity. Healthy expression of emotions involves a process. First we have to become aware of our feelings. In the case of Ashit it was anger and hurt. We have to accept our feelings as legitimate and normal and accept ourselves together with our feelings. We also have to take full responsibility of our feelings instead of saying, "They made me angry." Then we have to find a way to express our feelings without hurting, blaming or frightening others. Obviously this requires some training and practice. Verbalising the feelings can help in situations where it is not possible to express our feelings. In some situations it may be necessary to control the emotion. An example is when one is angry with someone in a higher position. Controlling the emotion consciously is not suppressing, as long as we are able to accept our emotion.

I have seen some parents training their children to become assertive. I have heard them say, "You are angry; it is OK to be angry; now just sit there and let your anger cool down; say you are angry because of this ... etc." Very few children are fortunate to have parents who train them to become comfortable with their feelings.

Assertiveness requires Self-esteem. Self-esteem generates self-confidence. Those who lack in self-esteem either try to please others and in the process they swallow their feelings or they lose their cool when they have to make a point. Self-esteem brings in a power which comes forward in our words and actions. Persons with self-esteem will be spontaneous and can express their needs and wants genuinely. They can show displeasure or disagreement in a nice way without making you feel put off. They usually foster a win-win attitude and are supportive of others. Assertiveness and self-esteem go hand-in-hand.

People generally do not understand that emotional health is very important for our mental and physical wellbeing. There are many who try to avoid conflict by swallowing their feelings. There are others who give free vent to their feelings and later feel bad about it. In both cases it affects the mental and physical health of the person. In the case of Ashit, once the emotional problem was resolved, his tiredness and lack of concentration also vanished. He was back to his normal self as a good accountant.

Lack of assertiveness also can affect relationships. Ashit and Nilu had said that they had no big problem between them. Nevertheless, their relationship was very shallow. It was a working relationship which suited them, but not as intimate as marital relationship should have been. The change happened after the counselling which served to boost up Ashit's self-esteem. When he learned to express his feelings in a healthy manner, Nilu also was able to express her feelings. Nilu could understand and respect Ashit's needs and views. There were conflicts. But these were

constructive. They grew in mutual understanding and experienced a closeness they had not even imagined.