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An Assertive Attitude

Session Length: 2 hours

Objectives

Understand importance of communication in maintaining relationships

Distinguish assertiveness from aggressive and passive communication

Learn how to use “I-Statements” in communication situations

Rationale

Many problems in intimate relationships are communication problems. Men often have been socialized to approach communication in relationships from an aggressive or controlling stance and may benefit from learning the parameters of different communication styles, especially the assertiveness option. This session seeks to introduce skills for effective communication by helping participants embrace the importance of an assertive attitude in communication interactions with their partners. I-Statements are highlighted as a foundation skill for good communication.

Session Outline

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<td>Total Time for Session 2</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
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Materials
Easel and flip chart (or chalkboard)
Magic markers; pencils, pens, writing paper
Prepared flip chart  *An Assertive Attitude*
Prepared flip chart  *Making an I-Statement*
Copies of handouts

Preparation Notes

*Prepare flip charts*

*An Assertive Attitude*
Write out the key points on a large piece of flip chart paper or poster board, as shown:

*An Assertive Attitude*
I respect myself and I respect you.
I have needs and you have needs.
My goal is to be open and honest with you.
I am not afraid to listen to you.
I am willing to work on mutually agreeable solutions to our problems.

*Making an I-Statement*
Write out key points on a large piece of flip chart paper or poster board, as shown:

*Making an I-Statement*
I feel very angry about this! Instead of You make me angry!
I’d like to finish what I was telling you. Instead of You always interrupt me.
I don’t agree with what you’re saying! Instead of You must be stupid to say that!
I felt put-down by what you said. Instead of You’re always putting me down!
Welcome and Process Homework

Welcome participants as they arrive.

1 Use the first 10–15 minutes to review and process the homework assignment. Begin by briefly reviewing a few key ideas from Session 1, such as:

Last week we started this group by looking at how some of the things our society teaches us about being a man and being a woman can get in the way of good relationships. When we have too many expectations or when we compare ourselves or our partners to a fantasy ideal we can end up unhappy.

We also started thinking seriously about what we like about and need from our relationship with our partner, and what we’d like to work on to make things better. So let’s talk for a few minutes about the homework assignment.

2 Ask for volunteers to share their experiences with the homework. Here are a few ideas for questions to start the ball rolling:

How did your partner respond to the homework?

What did you learn about your partner that you hadn’t realized before?

Did any strong feelings come up for either of you as you talked?

Procedure
An Assertive Attitude

1 During the next 20–25 minutes, lead a discussion on the importance of an assertive attitude for effective communication in relationships. Here are some ideas you’ll want to include:

Good communication is the foundation of a good relationship. Without some level of satisfying communication with another person, love, intimacy, and commitment are difficult if not impossible. The reason is simple—as human beings, we are born to communicate. We want to be known. We want to know other people. We enjoy telling stories and sharing our opinions and thoughts, and we enjoy hearing stories and other’s opinions. But here’s the catch—for all the satisfaction that communication brings, it’s still very hard work! Oh, we learn language (words) fairly easily and fairly young in life—but learning to communicate well with others is difficult and is something we must keep on learning throughout life.

Maintaining good communication in a long-term relationship is a skill. It’s not something that just happens naturally, on its own, without any work. It’s a skill—like riding a bike, or changing a sparkplug, or operating a tractor. And like all skills, it requires that we pay attention to a few basic guidelines, and that we practice the skill frequently.

Today we’re going to look at some basic attitudes and skills that are essential for improving how we communicate in our important relationships. Let’s start by thinking about the kinds of characteristics we associate with being a “good communicator.”

2 Ask participants the following questions, and use a flip chart or erasable board to list the characteristics they describe:

How did the two of you handle them?

What’s the most important thing you learned from this exercise?

3 Thank volunteers for their input. (“I know it may have felt awkward, but you got the job done, guys. Thanks for telling us about it.”) Encourage participants to keep up the good work.
Think about someone you know with whom you really like talking or with whom you really think it’s easy to talk.

What characteristics make this person so easy to talk with?
Why do you like talking with this person?

3 Briefly discuss the characteristics generated by the group, touching on why each is important for good communication. Conclude with the following point:

As you can see, it was fairly easy to come up with a list of skills that we associate with good communication, although we don’t usually think of them as skills. More often, we think that being easy to talk with has to do with a person’s temperament or personality. And although personality is an important issue, it’s possible for people with all kinds of personalities to learn and practice the skills of good communication. The first step is to develop the right kind of attitude—we’ll call it an assertive attitude.

4 Ask participants if they are familiar with the word “assertive,” and ask what the word means to them. Briefly discuss the responses.

5 Use your prepared flip chart of key points to lead a discussion of the components of what, for the purposes of this workshop, we’re calling “An Assertive Attitude.” Elicit participants’ ideas about each characteristic first, using discussion questions. The main idea here is to stress that good communication in intimate relationships (with people we care about) is based on a foundation or “attitude” of mutual respect, honesty, openness, willingness to listen, and willingness to compromise. As you discuss each characteristic of assertiveness, contrast it with “aggressiveness” and “passivity,” using ideas provided in the discussion points.

Start off by saying:

The very first thing we have to deal with as men who sincerely want to have better, closer relationships with the women in our lives is our attitude. We want to work toward developing an assertive attitude when we communicate. In order to do this, we have to be willing to give up having an aggressive attitude or a passive attitude. We have to learn to be there, be involved, and be up front. Assertiveness is based on mutual respect, honesty, and openness. Let’s talk about what’s involved in an assertive attitude:
I RESPECT MYSELF AND I RESPECT YOU.

What are we saying here?

How can we show respect for ourselves? For our partners?

Why is this important for good communication?

First and foremost, an assertive attitude conveys respect—not only for ourselves but for our partners. We convey respect in different ways. One important way is how we behave when we communicate. This means that we avoid yelling, being hostile, attacking the other person, using put-downs, saying things that we know are mean or hurtful. When we communicate with an assertive attitude, we try to use a calm, level tone of voice and put the other person at ease. By contrast, an aggressive attitude basically says “I only want respect for myself—I don’t care about you!” People with aggressive attitudes tend to talk loud, use put-downs and sarcasm, and try to intimidate or scare others with threats and violence. This conveys not only a lack of respect for their partners, but, in reality, a lack of respect for themselves, too. A passive attitude says: “You deserve respect, but I don’t.” People with passive attitudes often have difficulty standing up for themselves. They may allow others to verbally push them around and to treat them badly. What we’re saying here is that an assertive attitude is balanced. It says: “I value this relationship—we are both important.”

I HAVE NEEDS AND YOU HAVE NEEDS.

What does this mean?

How do we make sure both partners’ needs are equally considered?

Why is this important in a relationship?

A lot of men feel awkward or embarrassed talking about their needs. It’s that old socialization BS we talked about last week—men are supposed to be strong, in control, independent, self-sufficient. We sometimes hear people say to their partner: “I don’t need anything from you.” Wrong! We got together with our partners in the first place because we have a basic human need for companionship, love, tenderness, and wanting another person we can depend on, trust, count on when the chips are down, and share our happiness and successes with. Of course, beyond these “soulful” needs, we have basic day-to-day needs as well—jobs, taking care of family, sex, recreation, feeling good about ourselves. An assertive attitude means we are willing to consider our needs and our partner’s needs equally. In contrast, an aggressive attitude is selfish—it says: “Only my needs are
important, your needs don’t matter.” The passive attitude says: “My needs aren’t important; I’ll ignore my needs to take care of yours.” You can see how these other attitudes can cause problems in a relationship over time.

**MY GOAL IS TO BE OPEN AND HONEST WITH YOU.**

*What does this mean?*

*How can we be open and honest with our partners?*

*Why is this important in a relationship?*

Honesty and openness are important components of an assertive attitude. When we are open with a partner, we avoid secrets, playing games, and having “hidden” agendas. We try not to hide, pretend, or avoid facing up to problems and concerns in the relationship. To be honest with our partner is to be real or genuine. This requires speaking for ourselves, taking responsibility for our actions, and being honest about our feelings, too. An assertive attitude says: “I need to be myself and I need for you to be free to be yourself, too.” In contrast, an aggressive attitude says: “My goal is to control you, to keep you guessing, to play mind-games with you.” People with an aggressive attitude sometimes use honesty as a weapon. They do things and say things to really hurt their partner or put their partner down. When the partner becomes hurt or angry, the aggressive person says: “Hey, what’s your problem? I was just being honest.” Saying things to intentionally hurt someone, then calling it “honesty” is a pretty destructive mind-game (and it’s pretty dishonest, as well.) The person with a passive attitude is basically shutdown and fearful. This attitude says: “I can’t be open and honest with you because I’m afraid you won’t like me—so I’ll pretend to be what I think you want me to be.”

**I AM NOT AFRAID TO LISTEN TO YOU.**

*What does this mean?*

*How do we show our partner that we’re willing to listen?*

*Why is listening so important?*

It’s been said that listening is the first requirement of love. Certainly listening is one of the most important (if not the most important) communication skill. We’ll be talking about listening in more detail in our next session. When we carry an assertive attitude, we are willing to listen. Not only that, we are not afraid to listen. It means we are willing to overcome the fear of hearing something we don’t like or
learning something we didn’t realize. As men, it also means we’re willing to overcome the fear of not being in control, of not having all the answers all the time, of appearing to be a little “unmanly” by patiently and lovingly opening ourselves up to our partner’s words. In truth, it takes a lot of courage to be a good listener. People with aggressive attitudes don’t listen well (probably because they are too afraid). When they do listen, it’s usually only long enough to find something they can disagree with. They may monopolize the conversation, put down other people’s ideas, or try to analyze everything that is said—they don’t listen! And those with a passive attitude don’t listen very well either. They may let others do all the talking in order to be liked, and they may smile and nod a lot—but you get the feeling after awhile that somehow you’re just not connecting with them.

I AM WILLING TO WORK ON MUTUALLY AGREEABLE SOLUTIONS TO OUR PROBLEMS.

What does this mean?

What does it take to work on a mutually agreeable solution?

Why is this important for a good relationship?

By now you’re probably beginning to realize that an assertive attitude is the mark of a mature, fair-minded, and caring man (or woman). It is not always easy to work on finding mutually agreeable solutions to problems—in fact, it’s hard to do most of the time. That’s because both people in a relationship are individuals, with individual needs and different points of view. The key word in this characteristic of an assertive attitude is “willing.” Being willing means you stick to it, talk it over, manage conflict, and don’t let yourself go running off in a huff when you hit rough road. What we’re talking about here is compromise and negotiation. A man with an assertive attitude wants to settle things in a way that he can live with, and equally important, he wants to settle things in a way that his partner can live with, too. On the other hand, those with an aggressive attitude only want things their way—they come across as selfish, immature, and controlling. And those with passive attitudes get pushed around a lot—they usually back down and let others have their way and then later feel really hurt and angry about it.
Discussion: Understanding Assertiveness

1. Take about 15 minutes to process the previous information on assertiveness by asking participants to think about the points covered so far.

   Do you know anyone who seems to respond to most situations with an aggressive attitude? Describe some of the things they do that are aggressive.

   How about someone who mostly responds with a passive attitude? Describe some of the things they do that are passive.

   Do you think men are socialized to respond to situations more aggressively? In what ways?

   In what ways is an assertive attitude healthier?

   In what ways can an assertive attitude benefit recovery?

2. Distribute An Assertive Attitude handouts, and encourage participants to find time to share this information with their partners. Encourage them to have an adult-to-adult talk about these characteristics and why they are important for healthy relationships.

3. Thank participants for their input. (“You guys have really done some good work on this issue—thanks for sticking with it!”).

Break
Using I-Statements

1. Use the next 20 minutes to introduce the use of I-Statements as an important skill for assertive communication. Help participants understand and identify what an I-Statement is and how I-Statements can be used to express feelings and make assertive requests to get one’s needs met (or at least considered).

2. Use the prepared flip chart to point out the differences between I-Statements and You-Statements. Here are some ideas of things to say:

I-Statements are sort of the “gold” standard of an assertive attitude. I-Statements are direct, assertive expressions of your feelings, needs, preferences, ideas, thoughts, etc. I-Statements are especially important for expressing feelings. An I-Statement is actually a self-awareness statement. It expresses your reality without blaming, accusing, or putting others down. I-Statements are honest!

One way to understand I-Statements is to compare them to “You-Statements.” You-Statements are usually aggressive and they send a message of blaming and labeling others. In general, I-Statements are honest and respectful (assertive) and they open up the doors of communication, while You-Statements may close down those doors. Let’s look at some examples:

I’m very angry about this!
Instead of
You make me angry!

I’d like to finish what I was telling you.
Instead of
You always interrupt me.

I don’t agree with what you’re saying!
Instead of
You must be stupid to say that!

I felt put-down by what you said.
Instead of
You’re always putting me down!
For most of us, learning to use I-Statements is a little like learning a new language. It takes time and practice to get comfortable with it. Using I-Statements reflects a change in attitude, away from an aggressive attitude, toward an assertive attitude.

Be on the alert for “false” I-Statements. For example, “I feel that you are taking advantage of me,” is not speaking honestly about feelings. Basically, “I feel” should be followed by a feeling-word (anger, fear, happiness, etc.). A simple way to monitor this is the word “that.” If the statement begins “I feel that...”, then the speaker may be avoiding an honest statement of feelings.

In addition, I-Statements may be incorrectly used to disguise what is really a You-Statement. For example, “I feel you are making me mad,” or “I think you are stupid.” Remember, I-Statements reflect an assertive, rather than an aggressive attitude. “I wish you'd go jump off a cliff,” or “I hate you because you are mean and stupid,” may sound like I-Statements, but the intended meaning is angry, critical, and hurtful—making them aggressive rather than assertive.

**Practice: Making an I-Statement**

During the next 20–25 minutes, allow participants to practice making I-Statements and You-Statements for comparison.

Here are some things to say to introduce this practice activity:

Most of us have used I-Statements before, probably without really being aware that we were using them. Learning to consciously use I-Statements more frequently can help us improve our communication style, not only in relationships, but in all walks of life.

The best way to learn and become more aware is through practice. Like most new skills, using I-Statements may feel a little awkward or “phony” in the beginning. When we make a commitment to use I-Statements more frequently, however, we can eventually get beyond the “clumsiness” we may feel.
As men, we may worry that modifying our communication style may make us appear to be “weak” or “sissies.” Actually, the opposite is true. Assertiveness, including the use of I-Statements instead of You-Statements, is a marker of self-respect, respect for others, and maturity. Being assertive and using assertive communication skills separates the men from the boys.

Since practice is the best way to learn, we’ll spend the rest of today’s group practicing and learning more about the differences between I-Statements and You-Statements.

2 **Distribute 1 or 2 Making an I-Statement “scenario slips” to each participant, and after going over the following instructions, allow time for them to write out their responses.**

The slip (slips) of paper you’ve been given describes a difficult scenario or situation that you may have encountered before.

There is space at the bottom to write out 2 responses—an I-Statement response and a You-Statement response. First write out what a You-Statement would sound like, and then how you might say it using an I-Statement.

For example, here’s a scenario: “The guy in the next door apartment always takes your assigned parking place.” If I were to respond with a You-Statement, I might say: “Hey, you jerk, you’re always stealing my parking spot.” Using an I-Statement, I might say: “This is my assigned parking place. I would appreciate it if you’d park somewhere else in the future.”

3 **After participants have completed the activity, go around the room and ask each person to read his scenario aloud, followed by his You-Statement and I-Statement responses.**

Provide feedback and encourage other group members to comment on the responses. As needed, dispell negativity. Some participants may counter that I-Statements and assertiveness would “not work” in the real life situations they deal with. Help them distinguish between the possibility of a negative reaction from others and the probability of that happening (i.e. challenge irrational thinking).

4 **Next, ask participants to think of a current real-life situation they are dealing with that might benefit from an assertive response.** Have them jot down a very brief description of the situation, and then how they might respond using a You-Statement and an I-Statement.
Go around the room again and ask each person to describe the situation, followed by the You-Statement and I-Statement responses. Provide feedback and encourage discussion.

Thank participants for their work (“I really appreciate your willingness to learn and practice a new skill”) and wrap up the discussion using some of the following ideas:

Conclude with the following point:

Improving communication is one of the most important things you can do to help improve the quality of your relationships. Assertiveness and I-Statements are skills that can help make communication with those you care about better, and like all skills they take time to master. It’s important to give yourself time to practice and learn.

Remember that an assertive attitude is a mature, respectful attitude. Give it a try!

Homework: Assertiveness Logbook

Distribute Assertiveness Logbook homework handouts and provide the following instructions:

Your assignment for next week, gentlemen, is to share what you have learned today with your partner. Review the characteristics of an assertive attitude with her and talk about how you both can work toward bringing this kind of attitude into your relationship.

Likewise, review the information about I-Statements and You-Statements, and encourage her to read over the handouts.

Your second assignment (and the assignment for you partner, too, if she’s willing) is to make a conscious effort to make at least three (3) I-Statements each day. In other words, you are being asked to make an I-Statement in situations where you might not normally do so. It should be a conscious effort—that means that at least 3 times each day you will stop and think before you speak, and then purposefully choose the assertive option of using an I-Statement. (Give yourself credit for any type of situation in which you are able to do this—home, work, with friends, with strangers, etc.)

Use the Assertiveness Logbook handout to keep track. At the end of each day, sit down with your partner and jot down a few notes about the situations where you chose to make your I-Statements.
2 Thank participants for attending and invite them back next week.

3 Ask each person to complete an evaluation form before leaving.

Evaluation, p. 38
An Assertive Attitude says...

I RESPECT MYSELF AND I RESPECT YOU

First and foremost, an assertive attitude conveys respect—not only for ourselves but for our partners. We convey respect in different ways. One important way is in how we behave when we communicate. This means that we avoid yelling, being hostile, attacking the other person, using put-downs, saying things that we know are mean or hurtful. What we’re saying here is that an assertive attitude is balanced. It says: “I value this relationship—we are both important.”

I HAVE NEEDS AND YOU HAVE NEEDS

We got together with our partners in the first place because we have a basic human need for companionship, love, tenderness, and for a relationship with another person we can depend on. Of course, beyond these “soulful” needs, we have basic day-to-day needs as well—jobs, taking care of family, sex, recreation, feeling good about ourselves. An assertive attitude means we are willing to consider our needs and our partner’s needs equally.

MY GOAL IS TO BE OPEN AND HONEST WITH YOU

Honesty and openness are important components of an assertive attitude. When we are open with a partner, we avoid secrets, playing games, and having “hidden” agendas. We try not to hide, pretend, or avoid facing up to problems and concerns in the relationship. This requires speaking for ourselves, taking responsibility for our actions, and being honest about our feelings, too. An assertive attitude says: “I need to be myself and I need for you to be free to be yourself, too.”

I AM NOT AFRAID TO LISTEN TO YOU

It’s been said that “listening is the first requirement of love.” Certainly listening is one of the most important (if not the most important) communication skills. When we carry an assertive attitude, we are willing to listen. Not only that, we are not afraid to listen. It means we are willing to overcome the fear of hearing something we don’t like or learning something we didn’t previously know. In truth, it takes a lot of courage to be a good listener.

I AM WILLING TO WORK ON MUTUALLY AGREEABLE SOLUTIONS TO OUR PROBLEMS

By now you’re probably beginning to realize that an assertive attitude is the mark of a mature, fair-minded, and caring man (or woman). It is not always easy to work on finding mutually agreeable solutions to problems—in fact, it’s hard to do most of the time. That’s because both people in a relationship are individuals, with unique needs and different points of view. To find solutions, you must stick to it, talk it over, manage conflict, and don’t let yourself go running off in a huff when you hit rough road. What we’re talking about here is compromise. An assertive attitude means settling things in a way that you can live with, and equally important, settling things in a way that your partner can live with, too.
UNDERSTANDING I-STATEMENTS

How does an I-Statement express feelings?

I feel... I seem to be feeling...
I am feeling... I enjoy feeling...
I felt... I don’t like feeling...

What else does an I-Statement express?

I think... I like... I consider... I love...
I believe... I hope... I will... I am...
I want... I wish... I would... I do...
I need... I don’t... I won’t... I can...

How do I use I-Statements?

Speak for yourself. Communicate what you feel, think, or want without blaming or making assumptions about other people.

Begin your statements with the word “I,” and express your feelings, thoughts, or needs in a manner that respects the other person.

Avoid beginning statements with the word “you.” You-statements suggest blame, and may lead others to feel defensive.

Examples of I-Statements and You-Statements

You make me angry when you ignore me. You never let me use the car.
I feel angry when you ignore me. I want to use the car more often.

You should be more careful. You make me worry when you’re late.
I would like for you to be more careful. I feel worried when you’re late.
Making an I-Statement
Practice Scenarios

Situation: Your teenager didn’t get home until 3:30 a.m. last night.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: You loaned your brother your car and he brought it back with a big scratch on the door.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: You hate “roughing it.” Your partner suggests a camping vacation.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: A co-worker distracts you by yakking away when you have work to do.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: A persistent salesperson calls you for the 4th time in a week to try to sell you something you don’t want.
You-Message:

I-Message:
2

Situation: Your teenager has been negligent in getting his homework done on time.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: Your partner is often forgetful. You want to make sure your anniversary is remembered this year.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: Your boss is moody and sometimes yells at you in front of other people.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: The grocery store clerk is making a mess of your groceries by sacking them incorrectly.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: You’re the boss. One of your employees comes in late every morning.
You-Message:

I-Message:
Situation:  A friend is constantly borrowing things and failing to return them.
You-Message:

I-Message:

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Situation:  Your partner is in the habit of leaving clothes all over the house.
You-Message:

I-Message:

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Situation:  Your neighbor allows her dog to poop on your lawn every morning.
You-Message:

I-Message:

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Situation:  A store clerk short-changes you then refuses to admit the error.
You-Message:

I-Message:

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Situation:  Your partner is behaving in a stand-offish way and you want to know why.
You-Message:

I-Message:
Situation: Your partner complains of stomach pains but refuses to see a doctor.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: Your teenager is in love and is spending half her life on the family phone.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: Your partner has taken to making snide remarks about your weight in public.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: The mechanic at the garage is trying to talk you into service you know your car doesn’t need.
You-Message:

I-Message:

Situation: Your boss has asked you to work late again for the 5th time in two weeks.
You-Message:

I-Message:
# Session 2 Homework

**Assertiveness Logbook Worksheet**

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<th>My I-Statements</th>
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SESSION EVALUATION

Time Out! For Men

Session 2

INSTRUCTIONS: Please take a minute to give us some feedback about how you liked this session.

1. Use one word to describe your reaction to today’s class. ___________________

2. What is the most important thing you learned today?

3. How will using I-Statements more often improve your relationships?

4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you rate today’s class? (Circle your rating)

    01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10

    Poor          Pretty Good          Excellent

5. Do you have any suggestions to help make this class better?