

THE PASSIVE - ASSERTIVE - AGGRESSIVE CONTINUUM

“People who fight fire with fire usually end up with ashes.”

—
Abigail Van Buren

People tend to relate to communication based on one of **three styles**.

Passive communicators tend to put the rights of others before his or her own. Passive communicators tend to be apologetic or sound tentative when they speak. They do not speak up if they feel like they are being wronged.

Assertive communicators respect their rights and the rights of others when communicating. This person tends to be direct but not insulting or offensive. The assertive communicator stands up for his or her own rights but makes sure the rights of others aren't affected.

Aggressive communicators, on the other hand, will come across as standing up for his or her rights while possibly violating the rights of others. This person tends to communicate in a way that tells others they don't matter or their feelings don't matter.



Most of us tend to have a preferred style to how we communicate. Most of us tend to favour a more passive (avoidant and accommodating) or aggressive (competitive) style with much fewer people regularly being assertive (collaborative). That being said, regardless of where you typically land on the passive – assertive – aggressive continuum, everyone can learn to take a more assertive position in our communication and style.

Here are some descriptors that can help you to recognise what passive, assertive or aggressive behaviour looks and sounds like.

	PASSIVE	ASSERTIVE	AGGRESSIVE
Definition	Communication style in which you put the rights of others before your own, minimizing your own self-worth	Communication style in which you stand up for your rights while maintaining respect for the rights of others	Communication style in which you stand up for your rights but you don't recognise or regard the rights of others
Implications to others	My feelings are not important I don't matter I think I'm inferior	We are both important We both matter I think we are equal	Your feelings are not important You don't matter I think I'm superior
Verbal styles	Apologetic Overly soft or tentative voice	I statements Firm voice	You statements Loud voice
Nonverbal styles	Looking down or away Stooped posture, excessive head nodding	Looking direct Relaxed posture, smooth and relaxed movements	Staring, narrow eyes Tense, clenched fists, rigid posture, pointing fingers
Potential consequences	Lowered self-esteem Anger at self False feelings of inferiority Disrespect from others Pitied by others	High self-esteem Self-respect Respect from others Respect of others	Anger from others Lowered self-esteem Disrespect from others Feared by others