

Doing What Helps: Strategies for Appropriate Action

First and foremost, remember to be assertive. We have two definitions for assertiveness; one based on what it is not and one on what it is.

Assertiveness **is not** denying responsibility for the choices that are ours to make, nor is it taking responsibility for the choices of others. It is not trying to get what we need by getting others to change, nor is it changing ourselves to be who they want us to be. It **is** being clear about the event that is central to the conflict by describing it in such a way that everyone involved can agree to what happened; describing the effect that the event had on you in a clear and complete manner, and clearly describing what you need (in a way that is not dependent on others changing).

1. **Remain centered in yourself.**

Remember that what you are doing is changing yourself in the context of your relationship with the person with whom you are experiencing conflict. You are not trying to get them to meet your needs and you are not trying to meet theirs. This does not mean that you should not be sensitive to what they need; just that meeting their needs is not going to resolve your conflict with them.

2. **Know what you need.**

If you are not very clear about what you need, there is very little chance that you will get it. Rather than focusing on a strategy, focus on what you need. That way, if your plans don't pan out, you can still stay focused. Be specific. If you just need *peace of mind*, how would peace of mind be different from what you have now.

3. **Speak the obvious.**

Sometimes we stop ourselves from talking about what is happening by saying, "Everyone knows that." They may or they may not. Even if they do, talking about it changes it. Once you talk about it, it is no longer something that no one talks about.

4. **Name the events in such a way that everyone can recognize them.**

Resolution and reconciliation depend on everyone in the conflict coming to a common position. It is not erasing differences, but it is coming to commonality. If we are going to end up together, we have to start together. Begin by naming the event that is the heart of the matter (or an example of the issue) in such a way that everyone agrees, "this event happened" or "that issue is important."

5. **Identify shared needs.**

Remember, *power with* is stronger than *power over*. We come to *power with* by agreeing on what we both need. Work to clarify where we come together rather than focusing on the differences. It may be necessary to acknowledge the differences first, but don't get stuck there. Move on to everyone's shared needs.

6. **Commit to action and carry through.**

Be clear about where your own limits are and what you are committed to doing. Be specific and clear and don't make commitments that you are not willing and able to

follow through on. No threats. Threats are manipulation. Just let others know where you stand.

7. Don't try to change the other.

Sometimes our actions are designed to get what we need by getting others to give it to us. This is abuse. Sometimes we don't even know that we are being manipulative. Ask yourself, "Is there anything the other can do that will keep me from having what I need?" If so, then you are still depending on the other changing. Even the position, "I just need the other to understand me," is a manipulation if the other is not interested in understanding you.

8. Don't tell the other what he or she needs.

Usually telling another what they need is a guise for telling them what to do. If they don't know what they need, you may want to support them figuring it out. But if you already know what they need and are just trying to point it out to them, you are manipulating them.

9. Don't ask questions; particularly ones that the other doesn't know the answer to; especially don't ask, "why?"

None of us is very skilled at addressing conflicts. We get scared and defensive. The more defensive we are, the less likely it is that we are going to come to a creative solution to the issue. We do better if we avoid defensiveness. People get defensive when they believe they are being attacked. When others ask us questions, particularly ones we don't know the answer to, we naturally get defensive. The worst are "why" questions. Any parent of a four year old can tell you how irritating it can be to hear the question "why?" Make statements instead.

10. Don't slice to the heart of a complicated conflict. Work into it a layer at a time. [the principle of onions]

Sometimes the emotion around a particular topic is so intense that any mention of the issue simply sends the combatants to their corners. Rather than cut to the heart of the matter, find the edges or the outer layer of the conflict. Look for that part of the issue that is the least contentious without ignoring the issue all together.



For example: John is worried about family finances and is afraid that Mary will be spending too much money on the holidays. In the past he has gotten so out of control with his anger that he has thrown things and called her names when she ran up charges on the credit card. He is tempted to just cut up the credit card but he knows they need it sometimes and, besides, new ones keep coming in the mail.

John is afraid that anything he does to address the issue is going to just start a fight. He has considered taking a second job and holding back the money he makes so that it doesn't get spent as 'family' money. Then he would have the option of paying off holiday bills or get that new bass boat he has been wanting. But he knows that Mary would be upset about him spending more time away from the family and he doesn't like the idea

of them separating even further. He feels like there is nothing he can do.

One evening when he gets home from work, he finds a catalogue on the dining room table. It is a Christmas catalogue and it is open to a page on which several items are marked with a high lighter. He feels his temper start to rise and realizes he is close to going off. He decides to go out to his shop in the garage to sort out his thoughts.

Pacing around the garage he hears in his head the conversation with Mary. "You are going to bankrupt us," he charges. "You're always trying to control me," she counters. "Now you don't even want me to look at a catalogue."

He hears to conversation and knows that he doesn't want to do that again. He considers just letting it go and not saying anything about it, but he knows that he will continue to stew about it and he wants to get it settled. He and Mary have been able to have some conversations about difficult topics that have gone better, and he thinks maybe they could make some progress with this one. But he is scared that it could get into their old rut of hurling accusations at each other. He decides to start with that fear when he brings it up with her. [10]

John returns to the house and finds Mary. She is starting dinner. He swallows hard and says, "I have been thinking about my concerns about our finances with the holidays coming up and would like to talk with you about those sometime this evening. Would you be willing to set aside some time to talk?"

Mary whirls around to face him still holding the paring knife she is using. "What is it?" she asks.

John feels the heat rising in his chest and he wants to attack and run all at the same time. He takes a couple of breaths and focuses on his wish that they be able to talk about what is going on with them. [1] He tries to keep his voice steady as he says, "I know this is a very difficult topic for us to talk about. [2] I hope we can find a time to listen to each other and come to some decisions that we can both support." [3]

Mary eyes him warily. She isn't used to him acting this way and she doesn't trust it. "Yeah, I guess we can talk," she offers. "But I've got to get the kids fed."

"Sure," John says, relieved that things didn't escalate. "I'll get the table set."

After the dishes are done, John suggests that they sit at the dining room table to talk. Mary sits across from him. "Look," John begins. "I know that I have been very hard to talk to about these things because I get so angry. I really like it when we can come to agreements and stick with them. I don't want us to be fighting." [5]

Mary nods in agreement and says, "I don't like the fights either."

"So," John continues, "can you just tell me why you won't keep to a budget?" [9]

Mary is on her feet before John even finishes his sentence. “I knew it! This is all about how I won’t do what you want.”

John keeps to his seat but raises his hands in apology. “I’m sorry, he says, “that didn’t come out the way I meant it. Let me try a different way to say that.” [1]

Mary raises an eyebrow as if to say, “well?”

“What I meant to say is that I know that our finances are tight [4], and I would like to know what you see are the problems. I want your help in figuring out what makes it hard to stay within our means.” [2]

Mary sits back down as John makes a list of the problem areas that Mary identifies. After she has slowed down, he begins to add some ideas of his own. Then they go to work on deciding what to do about each, and John makes a note of what he will be doing about each one. [6] He makes no notes about what Mary will do. [7]

As they finish, John repeats what they have stated are the problems and he reviews what he will be doing about each one. Mary offers her own statement of what she will do. John closes the conversation by thanking Mary for talking this through with him and letting her know his feelings about their ability to stay with it until they have an agreement.

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