

Communication skills – being more assertive

Carers have to interact with a wide variety of people in the context of their role which makes being able to communicate effectively very important. As well as the person they care for, carers will be communicating with a variety of health professionals, family and friends. Often this will involve asking for advice or support. Not everyone finds asking for help easy. Especially if in the past it has not been forthcoming or it seemed like a battle to be heard and understood.

Carers may need to be able to give clear instructions or relay information, say from their GP to other family members. You may also be required to make some difficult decisions and stick to them.

In all of these situations assertiveness is an important communication skill to have. Being assertive gives you the best chance of successfully delivering your message. If you communicate in a way that's too passive or too aggressive, your message may get lost because people are too busy reacting to your delivery.

SO WHAT DOES BEING ASSERTIVE MEAN?

Being assertive is about 'making sure your voice is heard' and being able to clearly explain how you feel about something, what you need, or why you feel something should be done a certain way. Assertive communication is based on mutual respect. As well as asserting your right to express your ideas, emotions and thoughts, you respect the other person's right to express their perspective and feelings. You also demonstrate that you are willing to work on resolving conflicts.

Some people seem to be naturally assertive. But if you're not one of them, it is a skill or communication style that you can learn.

HOW CAN YOU BE MORE ASSERTIVE?

The best place to start is to examine how you currently communicate with other people. Do you voice your opinions or remain silent? Do you have trouble saying no to people? These are both indicators you have a passive communication style. Are you quick to judge or blame? Do people seem to dread or fear talking to you? These are signs you tend towards being aggressive. Understand your style before you begin making changes.

When making changes look to your body language. Your body language makes a big impact on the way other people perceive and treat you. Act confident even if you aren't feeling it. Keep an upright but relaxed posture. Make regular eye contact and avoid dramatic hand gestures. Maintain a positive or neutral expression.

Use 'I' statements to let the other person know what you are thinking or feeling without sounding accusatory. Say 'I disagree' rather than 'you are wrong'. Remember that you have choices, so say 'I could' or 'I might' instead of 'I must' or 'I should'.

Keep conversations clear and specific. Know, as much as possible, before the start of the conversation what you want to say and/or

what you want to achieve. Stick to the specific topic and the present situation.

Practice saying 'no'. Many people feel bad about saying no to others. But agreeing to something you don't really agree with or don't actually have time for just to keep the peace is not good for you or your relationships in the long run. You are allowed to say 'no' and in most situations you do not have to apologise or justify yourself for doing so. Be clear and direct. If an explanation is required, keep it brief.

Keep your emotions in check. Conflict is difficult for most people. It can make you feel angry, frustrated or teary. While this is natural, it can get in the way of resolving the situation. If possible wait until you are feeling more centred before starting difficult conversations. If not, work on keeping calm. Breathe slowly and try to keep your voice even and firm.

Becoming more assertive takes time and practice. Start out small and in low risk situations. Practice with a friend who you trust to give you honest feedback. Once you have identified ways to be more assertive, your confidence will improve.

More information: there are many books and resources available on assertiveness, including some specifically for carers, e.g. on carewelluk.org. Training on assertiveness is also available, and may be offered by your local school or community centre.



If you or someone you know would like to raise funds for Parkinson's New Zealand, please contact Louise on **04 472 2796** or **0800 473 4636** or getgoing@parkinsons.org.nz.

The possibility of events you could undertake are endless and we are always here to help you with your fundraising efforts.