



## Evaluating the Effectiveness of Assertiveness Training on Communication Styles and Wellbeing in University Students

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### Abstract

Communication is imperative to developing and maintaining good interpersonal relationships (Horan et al., 2021, Griggio et al., 2019; Chandra, Mohammadnezhad, & Ward, 2018). This literature review tends to explore the impact of assertiveness training on communication styles and wellbeing. Databases like Google Scholar, Science Direct, Academia and Research gate were utilized to extract relevant articles from 2015-2024. The most common communication styles to be found were Assertiveness, Passive-Aggressive, Aggressive and Passive communication style; where assertiveness stands out to be the healthiest and with positive outcomes like better wellbeing and improved interpersonal relationships. This reinforces the idea of Assertiveness training programs and its impact and efficacy was established through a plethora of research.

**Keywords:** Literature Review, Assertive communication, Training Efficacy, Psychological Wellbeing, Interpersonal Skills

### Introduction

Everywhere, everyday people are communicating with each other. Even the mutes are communicating through sign language (Bocar, 2017). Communication styles are people's preferred way of interacting with others, verbally and non-verbally (Dhillon & Kaur, 2021). Interpersonal communication is imperative to social life (Lianasari & Edy, 2016), as a lot of conflicts can be handled through good communication which further asserts how important it is to know and develop an effective communication style. Even academic performance tends to be associated with effective communication (Blegur et al., 2023). Different communication styles are prevalent in the culture where one style has a different impact than the other one. For example, communication style of passivity involves indirect communication, which is the reason they are misunderstood and victimized mostly (Mohammed et al, 2023). People usually use this type of communication style to avoid criticism and conflicts (Agarwal, 2019), so they don't have to express their emotions because they lack this capacity (Shrivastava, 2021). On the other hand, aggressive people inappropriately express their thoughts and emotions, demeaning the rights or respect of other people (Sims, 2017). In another style of communication which is termed as Assertiveness, people are direct in their emotional expression (Dasgupta et al., 2012); voice their rights as well and respect the rights of other people and that too without any fear or anxiety. No

human behavior occurs in a vacuum. There are a lot of variables affecting the behavior, positively or negatively and vice versa. Similarly, communication styles are also related to a lot of other variables like relationship satisfaction etc. Among such variables, emotional dysregulation is an important one to consider. This refers to a state of being unable to comprehend, accept and appropriately react to any disturbing emotion (Kaufman et al., 2016). Research indicates that this is caused whenever stress is experienced leading to a maladaptive communication style and a stressor for the majority of students. Moreover, self-esteem is also strongly related to communication styles; for example, a meta-analysis revealed that many researchers found self-esteem to be negatively correlated with unassertiveness; the higher the unassertiveness, the lower the self-esteem. This is because a lack of assertiveness shapes a person's self-worth negatively, especially socially, enhancing the worth of adequate communication style. Furthermore, wellbeing and mental health is also closely tied to communication pattern as researches show that unassertiveness or maladaptive communication style is associated with depression, social anxiety and neuroticism (Speed et al., 2018; Bagherian & Mojambari, 2016).

This is the era of interventions as intervention studies remarkably increased in the past few years and provided rich insights into this area. In the field of clinical psychology, a lot of training with different schools of thought is demonstrated. For example, Assertiveness training is getting more popular (Sodikin et al., 2021; Ramadhan et al., 2019; Omura et al., 2017). A lot of school of thoughts originated assertive training where the recent one is CBT-oriented. In this approach, the cognition are tapped along with the behavioral practice of verbal and nonverbal communication (Speed et al., 2017). For this reason, this research aims to explore the efficacy of this training with rigorous literature review from the past 10 years.

## **Materials and Methods**

A number of databases and search engines were utilized to collect maximum number of relevant articles. The databases included Google Scholar, Science Direct, Academia and Research Gate. Only articles that were in English language, had an open-access and dated from 2015-2024 were included in the review. Initially, abstracts were screened, followed by reading full articles with extraction of relevant literature from the articles.

## **Results**

### **Cultural factors affecting communication styles**

Culture shapes the communication styles of people (Bashir et al., 2023). For example, a behavior can be seen as aggressive in a culture, which may be accounted for as a highly assertive behavior in another community (Mitamura, 2018).

### **Most common Communication Styles**

According to the findings of the research, four basic communication styles were found. These are aggressive, passive-aggressive, assertive and passive communication. Let's look into the details of these styles.

#### **Aggressive communication style**

In this style, the person is close-minded, doesn't respect other people's viewpoints, interrupts and is not a good listener. This person usually goes into isolation due to poor relationships. This is also a way of emotional expression but comes with damaging objects or attacks on people,

whether physical or verbal. It also involves an intention to do so and is usually done after they are unsuccessful at something (Yuliani et al., 2020). It is also termed as one of the most important social skill that fosters good interpersonal relationships by adaptation of communication (Montezeli, Almeida et al., 2018).

### **Passive communication style**

In this style, the person is timid, unable to take a stand, always agrees and goes for indirect ways of communication. Moreover, researchers show that even academic achievement is affected negatively by non-assertiveness (Hasibuan et al., 2018).

### **Passive-aggressive communication style**

It is a type of communication where anger is expressed nonverbally by just exhibiting a negative behavior. These people would not outwardly express their anger rather try to block the communication and making obvious changes in behavior. So, they may appear kind and polite but they may have ulterior or manipulative motives expressing the underlying hostility (Corcaci, 2022). Even when some English plays were analyzed to see the passive-aggressive communication, it was manifested by indirectly expressing hostility. They avoided confrontations and hurt the other person in a subtle way where hurt was clearly intended (Bobin, 2023).

### **Assertive communication style**

According to research, among all the three communication styles, the healthiest communication style is assertiveness. In this style, communication is done in a way that is a win-win situation for everyone (Adesokan et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2023). In this style, the person is direct, honest, clearly states needs and wants, openly draws boundaries, is non-judgmental, has a good expression of emotions as well as is a good listener. Assertive communication doesn't guarantee success every time but it increases the capacity of the person to tackle difficult situations effectively and make people able to raise their concerns in respectful boundaries (Bocar, 2017; Omura et al., 2016). Assertive communication style is considered to be on a continuum; where on one side there is extreme aggression and hostility and on the other end are excessive passivity, submissiveness and agreeableness (Speed et al., 2018). Moreover, assertiveness is not only the right choice of words but also the well-modulated tone and volume, complimenting facial expressions, body language and adequate gestures are equally important (Larsen & Jordan, 2017; Hasibuan et al., 2018). In researches it has been found to be associated with a lot of positive variables like academic achievement motivation of students (Sitota, 2018).

### **Relationship with Wellbeing**

Wellbeing is a multi-faceted concept and communication styles are related to a lot of variables that contribute to wellbeing. For example, lack of assertiveness is found to be related to anxiety, stress and depression (Baker & Jeske, 2015); emotional instability, poor self-esteem, poor relationships (Speed et al., 2018). Moreover, few researchers found mental distress to be negatively correlated to assertiveness as well (Vagos & Pereira, 2019). Even in individuals who have a high EQ, assertiveness helps prevent emotional dysregulation (Machado et al., 2022). So, being able to communicate healthily is crucial to interaction as emotional dysregulation leads to maladaptive coping strategies which further results in mental and physical issues (Espeleta et al., 2020). According to Machado and colleagues (2022), better interpersonal relationships are reported by people who use assertiveness to resolve their conflicts as it doesn't involve imposing opinions on others rather thoughts and feelings are shared appropriately. It is also seen in

research that assertiveness is also strongly correlated to self-esteem so people who have low self-esteem tend to be aggressive or passive communicators (Darjan et al., 2020; Maheshwari & Gill, 2015). This in turn affects their wellbeing as it is also associated with unassertiveness. In a study, improved general well-being was reported in an intervention study that combined both CBT and assertiveness approaches (Hagberg et al., 2023). This indicates the importance of having an adequate and productive communication style.

### **Assertive Training**

Assertive training programs dates back to 1949 but it was in the 1970s when they got more popular and getting delivered in multiple universities or counseling centers (DiFabio, 2023; SAMFIRA, 2020). Assertive training is a form of social skills training, aiming at people to be more efficient in handling social situations and reduce any inhibitions due to anxiety. The goal is to make people express openly what they want while equally respecting needs and wants of both parties (Speed et al., 2018; Larsen & Jordan, 2017). Moreover, rehearsals and experimenting with what is learned increases people's confidence because of the opportunity for immediate feedback (Sinclair et al., 2017; Kennerly, 2016). Role-playing of the learnt skill is also an integral part of these training programs (Raemer et al., 2016).

### **Efficacy of Assertive training**

The effectiveness of assertiveness training programs is established in a variety of settings, mostly using pre-test and post-test designs to see the improvement. For example, in a pre-post intervention study by Eslami and his colleagues (2016), reduced stress, depression and anxiety levels were reported in the participants of the study. However, the effects subsided rather early like after two months; thus proving efficacy mostly in the times of need and might require booster sessions. This fact doesn't discounts its utmost need for people as in a study on nurses, it was revealed that lack of assertiveness was found to be associated with higher burnout rates; with either being unresponsive or aggressive with people (Suzuki et al., 2021). In another study, assertiveness training improved communication styles of nurses when compared with a control group (Gultekin et al., 2018). In another research that also involved nurses who were victims of mobbing- which is the psychological violence faced at workplace, assertiveness was found to be fruitful for decreasing this behavior (Karakas & Okanli, 2015). Even a modified brief training program that just included two 90-min training sessions yielded favorable results and improved assertiveness (Nakamura et al., 2017). Apart from students, assertive training programs are known to benefit intimate relationships too (Farooq et al, 2023). For example, in a quasi-experimental study, assertiveness training was provided in a group setting to improve the quality of marriage. Results reinforced the positive impact of the training program and improved marital quality was reported by the participants (Dastyar et al., 2019).

### **Discussion**

Aim of this review was to explore and summarized findings of research papers from last ten years regarding prevalent communication styles, their connection with wellbeing and role of assertive training in improving mental health. Findings indicate that different communication styles have different effect on wellbeing as well as on interpersonal relationships as communication is a two-way process, affecting both parties- sender as well as receiver. Among them, assertiveness stands out as the healthiest communication style and has positive relations with good mental health, emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning. Moreover, as shown by the findings of research papers, assertiveness training programs have proven to be impactful in helping people deal with socio-emotional conflicts, interpersonal communication

and overall reduce the stress levels of people. Over the years, these programs have become popular and frequent in universities as well as mental health clinics.

### **Future Directions**

The present research summarized the literature of past 10 years on communication styles and efficacy of assertiveness training on wellbeing. Future researchers can expand the the research area by exploring the mediating and moderating variables in the assertiveness-mental health connection and broaden the scope of the research. Moreover, other research methods can be incorporated like longitudinal to assess the long-term effects co-relating with related variables too. This would help to determine if positive effects of the training is sustained for long; how it is evolved and whether there is a need for booster or follow-up sessions. Other comparative studies could also be included that also facilitate communication to determine which intervention works best.

### **Ethical Compliance Section:**

The authors have no funding to disclose.

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