

## Coping with College Series

### Stressed and Overwhelmed? Being Direct May Help!

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As we reach the later part of the semester or the academic year, it can sometimes feel as if the demands are ever increasing. There are terms papers due, exams and quizzes to take, preparations for the quickly approaching final exams to make, trying to line up summer plans, and a growing awareness that there are too few hours left to get everything done. The quest for quiet space within which to work becomes as important as the "Holy Grail" was to the knights of old.

The differing styles of coping with these demands become more clear. Roommates and friends who have spent the whole year in joyful coexistence, are now growling at each other. Turning on the stereo or the TV takes on new meaning. Just showing up in your room or apartment at a time different than usual can spark a fight. As the stress increases, the way each of us chooses to communicate with others takes on greater significance. We can work well together, or absolutely ruin all the great plans we have made.

It is during these times that our skills in effective communication are most necessary. These skills often are not taught in school or in our families, where instead we may have learned to avoid the situations/issues or angrily to demand what we want. Neither of these works well. What can work better is direct, assertive communication.

However, what is "assertive communication?" Many of us confuse assertive behavior with demanding that we should be given what we want immediately. This actually falls into the class of behavior considered aggressive, along with blaming, threatening, and putting down another with a personal attack. Behaving aggressively usually results in barriers between people. If we feel attacked or threatened, we usually defend ourselves in some way. When we are feeling defensive, it is hard to want to work together.

On the other hand, when we operate as if we are doormats, not asking that our needs and desires be recognized, we rarely get what we want. Behavior that is non-assertive includes giving in, making excuses, not saying anything, and being indirect. Too often the result of being non-assertive is being angry and frustrated. We become so sure that the other person is doing what they do just to get us angry. If we could just ask, we might find that they are surprised there even was a problem. They just weren't aware.

When we are assertive, we are being direct, respectful, honest and clear. We take the risk to state clearly what we would like to happen, and listen to the response we receive. Rather than demand that our needs be met, we work together to reach an agreement that works well for both. While the term "compromise" sometimes is seen as giving in to another, coming to a jointly agreeable decision is respectful to everyone involved. Usually, when we feel we are being heard and acknowledged, we are more willing to work together. The key to responsible assertive behavior is giving each other mutual respect.

There are many ways to develop assertive communication skills. There are books on the market and in the library that can be very helpful. A book that is highly recommended is titled *Your Perfect Right: A Guide to Assertive Behavior* by R. Alberti and M. Emmons, published by Impact. This book directly presents our personal rights, and our responsibilities to others. The authors walk you through the development of effective, assertive communication skills.

A program on campus incorporates these ideas of expressing yourself, and perhaps more important, listening to others. The *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is an intensive workshop offered to students, faculty and staff here on campus. For many participants, learning how to listen, and taking responsibility for your own needs, are among the more important skills they develop. The University's Wellness Office, 438-8311, can give you more information about workshop availability.

You can also come to the Student Counseling Services, 320 Student Services Building, to learn more about effective communication skills. Among the resources at the SCS are brochures that give some specific ways to present yourself assertively. We also have counselors who can help you brainstorm new ways to master challenging situations. So before you have a major blow out with your roommates, try a different way of getting your needs met!