Journaling Techniques for Increasing Client Assertiveness
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Introduction

Assertiveness – the ability to stand up for one’s self while respecting others - is a trait that many clients struggle to achieve. Many confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness or fear that speaking assertively will appear rude and make others mad. A lack of assertiveness can result in poor relationships, unresolved conflict, stress, anxiety, and depression.

Teaching clients the skills of assertiveness requires that they change their internal dialogue and expectations as much as they change their outward behavior. Journaling can serve as a helpful tool to help clients think more deeply about their communication style and goals. By expressing their feelings first on paper, then sharing them in session, the client is able to practice and gain confidence communicating assertively in a practical way.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Define assertive behavior and communication
2. Introduce journaling techniques to challenge passive thought patterns
3. Encourage practical behavior changes with an action plan

Let’s Get Started!
Defining Assertive Behavior

There are four behavior styles that can be thought of on a continuum:

Passive Assertive Aggressive

(hidden: Passive-Aggressive)

It’s helpful to explain each style to clients, provide specific behavioral examples of each, and then ask clients to identify where they see themselves on the continuum. Where do they want to be? What would need to change? Below are definitions for each style.

When behaving passively, you stifle your feelings and opinions to please others. If disrespected, you remain silent to avoid conflict. Passive body language and vocal delivery appears meek using little to no eye contact, poor posture, and a soft speaking voice. A person using a passive style may appear shy on the outside but feel angry and resentful on the inside, as he or she is waiting for others to notice.
At the opposite end of the continuum is aggressive behavior which is self-serving and controlling. Tactics include yelling, name-calling, sarcasm, and intimidating body language. A combination of both styles is passive-aggressive behavior which is when someone appears friendly to your face and then attacks you behind your back, or uses the silent treatment to manipulate. Gossip and social media are common ways passive-aggressive communicators express aggressive attacks rather than resolve an issue in person.

Assertive behavior honors your rights and the rights of others. This means sharing your feelings without attacking others for theirs. Assertive body language appears confident and comfortable, using direct eye contact and a firm voice. Journaling exercises can help clients raise awareness of their communication style and increase assertiveness.

What is Journaling?

People who have never tried journaling before may find the thought of it intimidating. It helps to be able to explain what this special type of writing is and is not. First, journaling is not the same as keeping a diary. Nor is it a recounting of what you did that day or a list of goals. It is not necessary to be a “good” writer. What is written is for the writer’s eyes only, so spelling, grammar, and punctuation don’t count. This is far from a graded exercise. It’s also not limited to exploring uncomfortable or stressful events. It’s just as useful to write about positive experiences, personal strengths, successes, gratitude, and joy!

Journaling helps clients to explore feelings about certain issues, revealing deeper and more complex truths. A passive communication style is often based on fears such as: rejection, abandonment, and conflicts. The individual seeking to increase assertiveness will need to process each of these. Increased assertiveness will impact relationships too, making some bonds stronger and possibly ending others. Many clients know this deep down, but have yet to voice this concern. Pouring it out on paper is a good start.

As helpful as journaling can be, it’s not for everyone. Sometimes the resistance is just an aversion to writing. It’s not enjoyable or easy for everyone. Even though there are no rules, many clients will associate it with past negative academic experiences. Another reason for resistance is that clients know a truth deep down, but may not be ready to acknowledge it in writing. Still others will decline because they perceive journaling as “reliving” bad memories and it would be too painful. (The goal is to resolve uncomfortable feelings and find new meaning.) If journaling is met with resistance, don’t push it – just explain what it is and how it can be helpful, and then let the client decide.

How to Journal?

There are many ways to get started journaling. Some clients are able to “free write” meaning they can just start writing without any prompts or direction. Most likely, these clients have used journaling in the past and feel comfortable doing so. Other clients will need more direction and encouragement. The journaling exercises in this course are specifically designed to help clients
recognize and apply assertive behavior. The exercises can be used in groups or individually. Writing prompts are just a place to start. If the journaling ends up going in an entirely different direction – that’s exactly what the client needed to explore. So, there are no rules and no wrong answers.

The actual writing can be done free hand in a notebook or typing on a computer, whichever the client prefers. Clients who are concerned about someone else discovering and reading their journal should consider what form of writing would feel the most secure. Writing on a shared computer may leave them feeling exposed. In the same vein, an expensive leather-bound book that says “My Private Journal” on the front is also not the best choice for privacy. An affordable and convenient choice is a spiral-bound notebook. This option is portable and readily accessible whenever a client feels like journaling.

There’s no specific amount of time or frequency that needs to be spent journaling, just whatever it takes to fully explore a prompt. Sometimes a client will stay on the surface of a topic and not write enough. In these cases, the exercise can be changed to writing for 15-minutes without stopping – forcing a client to keep writing about anything, just as long as the writing is continuous. Or, the exercise could be to write 1-3 full pages on one subject. This can encourage a breakthrough to deeper thoughts and emotions.

Scheduling time to journal first thing in the morning ensures it will get done and allows the client to consider any insights throughout the day. Some clients prefer journaling before bed to release their thoughts from the day. As long as the journaling doesn’t stir emotions that prevent rest, this is also a viable option. What matters most is that the client chooses a time free of interruptions and distractions.

It’s important to discuss the process of journaling with clients, explaining these phases:

**Before You Begin**
- Choose a location and time of day free of interruptions and distractions
- Quiet yourself by taking a few deep, cleansing breaths
- Date every entry at the top of the page (this helps to track progress and monitor patterns)

**During**
- Write quickly, without censoring
- Keep writing – don’t stop to think or edit
- Tell the truth

**Ending**
- STOP if you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed
- Close your journal and put it in a safe place
- Take a few deep, cleansing breaths
- Move in some way by stretching, walking, or changing environments
Benefits of Journaling

There are multiple benefits to journaling. By teaching clients to journal, you are offering a life-long, affordable, and healthy way to cope. Clients who struggle sharing their feelings can find solace by writing them down first. There’s great power in putting things down on paper. In addition, taking time to journal means the client is taking time for personal care. Many times, this is the first step necessary for increasing assertiveness.

How to Use the Journaling Exercises in Session

The following journaling exercises will help clients raise awareness of their current communication style and replace passive behavior with assertive behavior. The subject of each exercise is listed first. Choose the best journaling prompt or prompts to address your client’s needs.

The discussion/reflection portion can be used one of two ways. The first option is to discuss the topic with an individual or group, then assign the journaling prompt. The second option is to give the client the reflection to process privately before journaling. Each exercise concludes with an action step designed to support healthier choices in the subject area.

Journaling exercises and action steps can be assigned to complete between sessions so that insights can be processed at the next session. Note: clients don’t have to share their personal writing, just talk about what they gained or realized from the experience. They may want to read portions of their writing out loud, but it’s not necessary. They may ask the clinician to read their writing, but it’s more powerful to ask the client to read it out loud.

Journaling Exercises for Increasing Assertiveness

Know Your Rights

Discussion/Reflection: You deserve to be respected, but if you don’t believe that you’re worthy of it, then others won’t either. Respect means that you have the right to express your thoughts, feelings, and opinions. You’re allowed to make mistakes and you accept full responsibility for your choices. You can make decisions for yourself without having to explain or justify them. You can change your mind without gaining the approval of others first. You deserve to have healthy relationships founded on mutual respect and to alter or end those relationships that are not. Most importantly, these rights are inherently yours and do not have to be earned.

Journaling Prompt: What individual rights have you either given up or never claimed?

Action Step: Look into a mirror and repeat this affirmation out loud: “I have the same rights as everyone else and I deserve to be treated with respect.”

Change Self-Talk
Discussion/Reflection: Your inner dialogue guides your behavior. Therefore, the first step in becoming more assertive is eliminating passive thoughts. Here are four examples of self-talk that need editing: I want to be nice to everyone, I want people to like me, I don’t want to make anyone mad, and I hate conflict. Replace these passive thoughts with more assertive thoughts such as: I want to show respect to everyone, I want people to respect me, the only feelings I control are my own, and it’s okay for people to have differing viewpoints. Changing the way you talk to yourself will influence the way you speak to others.

Journaling Prompt: Identify your most common passive thoughts. What caused you to start speaking to yourself this way?

Action Step: Re-write one of your passive thoughts into a more assertive one.

Address Your Fears

Discussion/Reflection: If you’re worried about how others will respond to your assertiveness, address your fears. Realistically, what’s the worst that could happen? Will they be mad, yell, call you “selfish,” reject you, or stop talking to you? Pretend all these things happen. Then what? Just stating your fears without going further, is paralyzing. Instead, continue the story by imagining the next several steps. How will you respond to their reaction, and then what would happen? Eventually, you’ll boil down a big fear to something more manageable and find that while it may be uncomfortable, it won’t be the end of the world.

Journaling Prompt: When you think of becoming more assertive, whose reaction do you fear the most? How do you imagine the person will respond?

Action Step: Choose one reaction that you fear and extend the scenario by asking what would happen next? Continue the story until you’ve reached a point that you know you can survive despite feeling uncomfortable.

List Your Benefits

Discussion/Reflection: There are many benefits to becoming more assertive. First, you’ll experience less stress when you stop trying to make everyone else happy. (Since that’s an unattainable goal, your failure rate will drop, too!) By allowing others to be responsible for their own happiness you can release the burden of guilt. You’ll gain more energy because you won’t be spending it trying to avoid certain people, conflicts, or situations. Therefore, your life will expand rather than be limited by fear or guilt. Relationships will grow healthier since they’ll be based on honesty and mutual respect. Finally, assertive people are more likely to experience more professional satisfaction and financial success.

Journaling Prompt: How would your life improve by becoming more assertive?
Action Step: Choose one benefit of assertiveness that you find the most motivating. Write it on a sticky-note and place it in a location that you will see daily as a reminder.

Find a Role Model

Discussion/Reflection: It’s easier to change your behavior if you have an example to follow. Think of someone you know who behaves in a confident, calm, assertive manner. It could be a personal contact, media personality, or a character in a book, movie, or TV show. If you inserted that person into your situation, how would he or she behave? The goal of becoming more assertive is to be more authentic, but in the meantime, it’s okay to copy the way your role model acts. The more you practice, the more comfortable you’ll feel being the real you.

Journaling Prompt: What does your role model do or say that conveys assertiveness? How does it compare to how you act?

Action: Pretend you are your role model for at least one personal interaction today. Behave exactly the way you imagine he or she would.

Make No Assumptions

Discussion/Reflection: When you start speaking up for yourself, you’re able to clarify situations instead of acting on false assumptions. For example, if someone appears upset, do you assume you did something to cause it or that it’s your responsibility to fix it? Do you apologize even if you didn’t do anything wrong, assuming it will resolve conflict? Do you assume that if you’re nice enough, people will eventually treat you the same way? Making these types of assumptions will keep you in a passive role. The only safe assumption is that you won’t know the truth unless you ask.

Journaling Prompt: In which situations do you find yourself automatically apologizing, fixing other people’s problems, or assuming blame?

Action Step: Think of a past or current incident where you assumed guilt for someone becoming upset. Come up with two other possible explanations for the person’s behavior that have nothing to do with you.

Save Yourself

Discussion/Reflection: When a person or situation frustrates you, it’s common to vent to others. But, be careful of using your complaints as a veiled request to be rescued. For instance, you might tell a particular person how someone else has wronged you knowing that he or she will say something to the offending party on your behalf. In addition to blowing off a little steam, healthy venting should also include your solutions for managing the situation. Relying on others to defend you perpetuates a perception that you’re incapable and weak. Resist allowing others to do things for you that you should be doing for yourself.
**Journaling Prompt:** Who is the person you normally vent to and why? Have you ever shared with this person secretly hoping he or she will speak up on your behalf?

**Action Step:** Thank the person you described above for his or her past help and state that in the future you will be limiting your venting to two minutes before sharing how you plan to solve your own issue.

*End the Silence*

**Discussion/Reflection:** How do you let others know that you’re hurt, angry, or upset? If your response is to stop talking to the person in order to “punish” him or her, you’ve been relying on a passive-aggressive style. You may also have the irrational expectation that by giving the silent treatment, your offender will understand how you feel, be remorseful, and then apologize. How many times has that happened? If the same pattern keeps occurring, then it’s proof enough that the silent treatment doesn’t work. While sharing your feelings might seem more difficult than saying nothing, it’s a far more effective way to end treatment that you find hurtful.

**Journal Prompt:** When do you notice that you rely on the silent treatment in response to feeling hurt, angry, or upset? What’s the most common outcome in these situations?

**Action Step:** Prepare today to have a future conversation with someone you have historically given the silent treatment. Write down the most common behaviors that have upset you in the past and how each one makes you feel. The next time the behavior occurs, share your feelings using the format described in the next reflection.

*Express Your Feelings*

**Discussion/Reflection:** Depending on how you express your feelings, you can either gain respect or lose it. To share responsibly, determine the reason you want someone to know how you feel. If you’re seeking a solution or a change, it’s important to speak up and make it clear. If you’re blaming someone for how you feel, you’ll get anger or defensiveness in return. Blaming sounds like, “You made me feel ____.” Assertive speakers say, “I feel ____.” Assertive speakers identify what happened, explain how it impacted them, and request change. Success is not measured on whether or not others change based on your feelings, but in having the confidence to express your feelings.

**Journaling Prompt:** Describe a time when you wanted to speak up for yourself and share your feelings, but didn’t. What did you really want to say?

**Action Step:** Review your journal entry and re-phrase what you wanted to say in this format: “When ______ (circumstances or behavior) happens, I feel _______ (impact on you). What I’m asking for is ________ (change requested).”
Ask for What You Need

Discussion/Reflection: It would be wonderful if people were automatically able to know and meet your needs without you having to ask. But, no matter how close the relationship or how long you’ve known someone, no one can read your mind. If you’ve waited for that day of recognition, which still hasn’t come, you’ve probably felt deeply hurt. But, it’s unfair to expect others to guess or assume what you need without you making it clear. Some may not even know your needs are being ignored if you’ve never said anything. Stating what you need allows others to understand you better and gives them a chance to share their needs too.

Journaling Prompt: What needs do you want met that you’ve never shared? What’s kept you from asking?

Action Step: Ask for one of your needs to be met by saying, “In the past, I’ve never shared my needs with you, and that hurts our relationship. I want to tell you what’s important to me and find out what’s important to you.”

Establish Healthy Boundaries

Discussion/Reflection: A relationship boundary is the line where you end and another person begins. Like fences dividing property, some boundaries are sturdy with gates, others are brick walls, and some are broken with gaping holes. Healthy boundaries are firm, yet flexible based on need. They’re built on honest communication, reciprocity, and an understanding that each person is responsible for fulfilling his or her own needs. In contrast, unhealthy boundaries are either too distant with little communication (brick walls) or overly dependent and needy (broken). Establishing healthy boundaries requires communicating expectations and respectfully informing those who cross the line. What you allow, you teach.

Journaling Prompt: What type of boundaries have you established in your closest personal and professional relationships? How might they change if you were more assertive?

Action Step: Communicate your boundaries with someone who has crossed them, but you have yet to let them know.

Learn to Say No

Discussion/Reflection: If you’re accustomed to saying “yes” to everybody else, you already have tons of practice saying “no” - to yourself. When appeasing others leaves you feeling drained, resentful, or bitter, you’re doing it for the wrong reasons. Start by creating what author, Cheryl Richardson calls your “Absolute Yes List.” Do this by noting people and activities that energize and fill you up, which may include helping others. Clarifying your “Yes List” makes saying no that much easier. Personal self-care is a valid reason to say no to other demands. There’s no need to over-explain or defend your choices. It’s your prerogative to graciously state, “Thank you for asking; I’m already booked.”
**Journaling Prompt:** If you could say no to someone or something, knowing that there would be absolutely no hard feelings or negative consequences, who or what would you say no to? Is there a project you would give up? A relationship you would end? A date you might break?

**Action Step:** Write your Absolute Yes List. Use it as a reminder of the commitments you’ve made to yourself and consult it before automatically agreeing to outside requests.

**Stop Over-Apologizing**

**Discussion/Reflection:** Everybody makes mistakes that sometimes require an apology. However, repeatedly apologizing (whether or not it’s your fault) comes across as insincere and passive. A sincere apology has three steps: 1) Acknowledge your behavior without explaining, justifying, or minimizing it. 2) Acknowledge how your actions impacted the other person. 3) Commit to changing your future behavior so as not to repeat your mistake. Speaking sincerely the first time makes it unnecessary to say you’re sorry over and over. If you’re not responsible for any offense, don’t apologize just to make people feel better. You can validate someone’s feelings without automatically accepting blame for them.

**Journaling Prompt:** Describe a time when you apologized for something that was not your fault. What do you imagine would have happened if you had not taken the blame?

**Action Step:** Using a 3 x 5 card, write the following brief, sincere apology script: “I’m sorry for (your actions). I understand what I did affected you by (impact of your actions). In the future, I will (what you will do differently) so this doesn’t happen again.” Use this script the next time you need to make a sincere apology, stating it only once.

**Resolve Conflicts**

**Discussion/Reflection:** The more you try to avoid conflict, the more you’ll prolong it because the issue that’s causing the conflict never gets resolved, just ignored. Conflict is inevitable simply because people are different. Believe it or not, conflict can be a good thing! When handled well, it can promote understanding, strengthen relationships, and inspire creativity. It’s important to address conflict as soon as possible, while the issue is small. Separate the issue or behavior from the person. Attacking the person is like an aggressive battle, but confronting an issue can be a joint effort. Ironically, the more energy you put into resolving conflict, the less you will experience it.

**Journaling Prompt:** Describe a conflict you’ve tried to ignore that keeps resurfacing. How would it feel to have it finally resolved?

**Action Step:** Use a current or recent conflict to practice separating the issue from the person. State exactly what the issue is without using the person’s name.
In Conclusion

Helping clients understand and increase their assertiveness skills offers many benefits. Being able to honestly express feelings, needs, and set healthy boundaries will positively impact a client’s relationships, both personal and professional. Assertiveness skills can also result in a decrease in stress. Changing outward behavior requires changing internal cognitions. Journaling can be a helpful tool to help clients explore current beliefs and attitudes about their assertiveness and begin to practice new skills.
TEST

Journaling Techniques for Increasing Client Assertiveness

Complete the test below and follow the instructions provided on page 1 to receive your certificate. Remember to include the Payment Method form when you mail the test in. Please complete the information below to serve as the sign in form. Please PRINT clearly.

Name: __________________________________________________________

Phone: ( ) _________________________________________________________

E-mail Address: ____________________________________________________

Circle the correct answer:

1. Assertive communication is:
   a) Rude
   b) Selfish
   c) Standing up for your own rights while respecting others

2. Changing outward behavior requires changing:
   a) Clothes
   b) Cognitions
   c) Friends

3. Journaling aids assertiveness training by helping clients:
   a) Express their feelings
   b) Practice writing skills
   c) Remain silent

4. Signs of passive communication include:
   a) Increased volume, large body motions, name-calling
   b) Honestly expressing feelings, firm handshake, eye contact
   c) Poor posture, unexpressed feelings, conflict avoidance

5. A clinician should always read their client’s journal entries:
   a) T
   b) F

I read and completed the test questions for 1 hour of credit.

Signature ______________________________________ Date ______________
Payment Method

Payments

1 CEU is $15.00
- If paying by check, please make checks payable to Lakeshore. Mail in check with this test.
- If paying by credit card, please check the box that applies. If you are calling the office with credit card information, please call the office AFTER you have mailed in the test.

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