



Taddle Creek
Family Health Team

Tools for Assertive Communication

Taddle Creek Family Health Team
Sarah Wash & Alyna Walji

Introductions

Sarah Wash, MSW, RSW
& Alyna Walji, MSW, RSW

Alyna and Sarah are both Registered Social Workers in the Mental Health Program with Taddle Creek Family Health Team. We provide individual therapy and co-facilitate the very popular Assertiveness Workshops at TC.

Although we will be presenting this content today, we are also humans who experience our own challenges with assertive communication and don't claim to have all the knowledge. We hope that you can find this content helpful and apply your own knowledge and experience when engaging with this content.



Housekeeping and Outline for Today

Housekeeping

- This educational webinar will run from 5PM-7PM
- The webinar will be recorded (just of Sarah and Alynna)
- Q&A Function is open; we will compile a list of answers after the webinar
- The recording, relevant handouts and questions document will be posted on the website
- There will be an evaluation sent out after the webinar

Outline

1. Communication Styles
2. The Window of Tolerance
3. Tips for assertive communication & D.E.A.R M.A.N
4. Personal Rights & Affirming Statements
5. Skills for coping with undesired outcomes of assertive communication



Land Acknowledgement

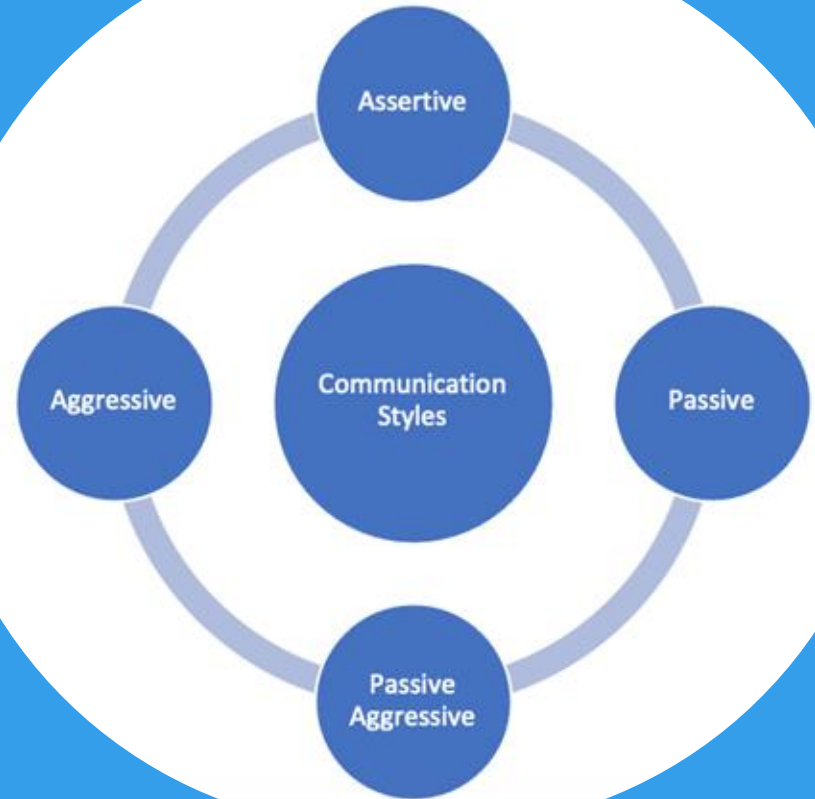
We recognize that as Torontonians, we are living on, and broadcasting from, land that is the traditional lands of the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Huron-Wendat peoples, and the Seneca Nation - Toronto being the traditional home of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and covered by the Williams Treaty of 1923.

We acknowledge that as active members of settler colonial Canadian society, we have a role to play in reckoning with the truth of the historical and ongoing violence of colonialism, and in making authentic reconciliation with Indigenous people of this land.

We recognize that Indigenous peoples and their stories have been silenced, and that they may not have had the power or freedom to assertively communicate.

Four Styles of Communication

- We use all of these communication styles, but may have a tendency towards one
- Self-awareness is important so that we can be intentional in our communication



Passive Communication

Lose-Win → I'm not OK, you're OK

During passive communication, a person prioritizes the needs, wants, and feelings of others even at their own expense.

The person does not express their own needs, wants and feelings.

Beliefs & Narratives

- “My needs and wants aren’t important/are less important than others”
- “If I share my feelings, something bad will happen”
- “People don’t care about what I have to say”
- “Don’t rock the boat”

Expressions

- Soft-spoken, quiet
- Little to no eye contact
- Appears unconfident or self-conscious
- Apologizes unnecessarily
- Defers to others for decision making
- Presents as resigned

Aggressive Communication

Win-Lose → I'm OK, you're not OK

When someone is communicating aggressively, they are prioritizing their needs, wants, and feelings over those of the other person, contributing to potential conflict and escalation or withdrawal of the other person.

Beliefs & Narratives

- "My opinions matter more"
- "My feelings are more important"
- "I have to fight to be heard and taken seriously"
- "Being dominant is the only way to get what I need or want"

Expressions

- Easily frustrated
- Speaks loudly or in an overbearing way
- Interrupts others or does not listen
- Unwilling to compromise
- May use criticism, humiliation, and domination
- Disrespectful of others

Passive-Aggressive Communication

Lose-Lose → I'm not OK, you're not OK

During passive-aggressive communication, there is a mismatch between a person's words, tone, actions, and underlying feelings. Feelings are often expressed subtly or indirectly.

Beliefs & Narratives

- "It's difficult for me to express my true feelings"
- "Expressing my feelings directly won't help me meet my needs"
- "Other people should be able to interpret my true feelings"
- "I would like for other people to understand how I feel without needing to communicate it"

Expressions

- Mutter to themselves instead of confronting person or issue
- Use facial expressions that don't match. How they feel – i.e., smiling when angry
- Deny there is a problem, even when asked directly
- Appear cooperative when purposely doing things to annoy or disrupt
- Experience difficulty with acknowledging anger

Assertive Communication

Win-Win → I'm OK, you're OK

Emphasizes the importance of *both* peoples' needs. During assertive communication, a person stands up for their own needs, wants, and feelings, but also listens to and respects the needs of others.

Beliefs & Narratives

- "I have rights and so do others"
- "Expressing my needs will help me get them met"
- "I care about what others have to say and hope that they will care about what I have to say"
- "I won't always 'win' in conversation and that's okay"

Expressions

- Stands up for own rights
- Clearly states wants and needs
- Willing to compromise
- Listens without interruption
- Confident tone/body language, good eye contact

Example

Mary goes to work each day and enjoys the time to herself when she gets home. Nearly every afternoon her neighbour, who stays home all day, pops in for a cup of tea. Mary does not want this to continue. How can she tell her neighbour?

Passive: “I’ll put the kettle on”

Aggressive: “Look, you’ve got to stop coming over every afternoon. I’ve got to have some time to myself”

Passive-aggressive: Says, “I’ll put the kettle on”, but uses an annoyed tone, rolls her eyes

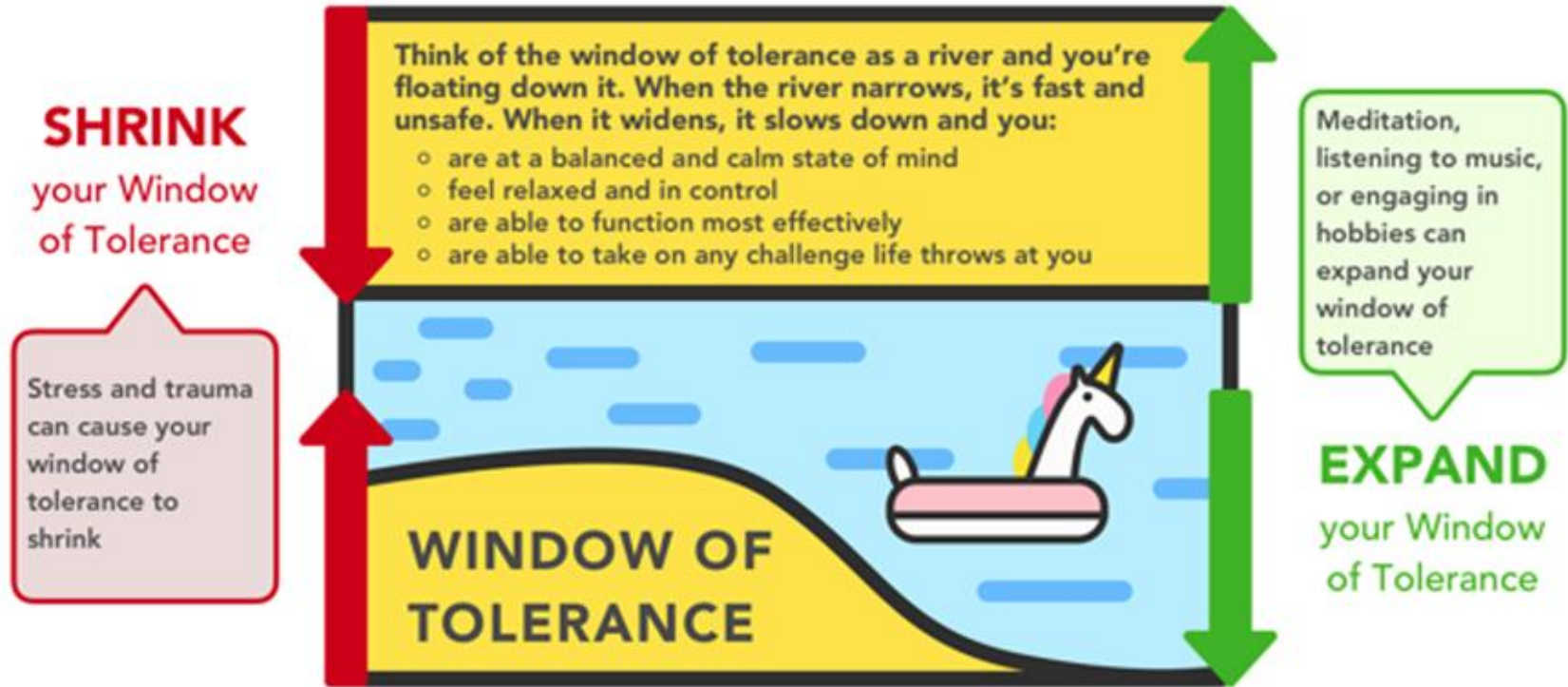
Assertive: “I often enjoy having tea in the afternoon, but I need a bit of time to myself these days when I get home from work. How about making Wednesday afternoon the time when we get together?”

At Home Reflection

How do you think you would have responded in these situations? To get a better idea of how comfortable you are being assertive in a variety of situations, try doing an assertiveness quiz:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/tests/personality/assertiveness-test>

The Window of Tolerance (WoT)





HYPERAROUSAL

- Abnormal state of increased responsiveness
- Feeling anxious, angry and out of control
- You may experience wanting to fight or run away



DYSREGULATION

- When you start to deviate outside your window of tolerance you start to feel agitated, anxious, or angry
- You do not feel comfortable but you are not out of control yet

SHRINK your Window of Tolerance

Stress and trauma
can cause your
window of
tolerance to
shrink

Think of the window of tolerance as a river and you're floating down it. When the river narrows, it's fast and unsafe. When it widens, it slows down and you:

- are at a balanced and calm state of mind
- feel relaxed and in control
- are able to function most effectively
- are able to take on any challenge life throws at you

**WINDOW OF
TOLERANCE**

Meditation,
listening to music,
or engaging in
hobbies can
expand your
window of
tolerance

EXPAND
your Window
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EXPAND your Window of Tolerance



DYSREGULATION

- You start to feel overwhelmed, your body might start shutting down and you could lose track of time
- You don't feel comfortable but you are not out of control yet



HYPOAROUSAL

- Abnormal state of decreased responsiveness
- Feeling emotional numbness, exhaustion, and depression
- You may experience your body shutting down or freeze

Communication Outside the WoT

When a person is outside their Window of Tolerance:

- Their ability to communicate effectively is compromised
- They do not feel safe and regulated and they are in a survival/defensive response
- They may be prone to aggressive communication (hyperarousal, “fight” response) or passive communication/non-communicative (hypoarousal, “collapse” and withdrawal response)

**In this webinar and in this section about communication, we’re specifically talking about when someone is outside their window of tolerance and there is no imminent or present threat to their safety/well-being.*

Communication within the WoT

When in the Window of Tolerance, a person:

- Can learn, integrate information, and actively listen
- Has access to their “noticing mind” which allows them to be self-reflective, curious, and intentional about the way they are communicating with others.
- Is more able to be thoughtful, goal-directed, and also flexible in their thinking
- Can access their working memory, which is the part of the brain that holds our factual knowledge or information (i.e., what we’re learning in this workshop!).
 - This part of the brain is the one that knows/remembers “what are the tips to assertive communication again?”

Getting Back into your WoT

Finding strategies that work for you will take trial and error and lots of practice. Some examples of skills are:

- **Name It to Tame It** - the act of noticing our body sensations and emotions, finding a word to describe them, and then saying the word helps bring online our “thinking, noticing brain” (which goes ‘offline’ when we’re out of our window) and reduces the intensity of the experience
 - *“I’m feeling a lot of anger” or “I notice my heart racing; this is a stress response”*
- **Breathing Exercises** - Breathing is a direct way to access our autonomic nervous system that starts and stops the stress response
 - 4-7-8 Breathing, box breathing, paced breathing
- **Grounding Exercises** - bring your mind into the here-and-now and detach from emotional pain and/or ruminative thoughts by focusing outward on the external world
 - Feet on the floor, 5-4-3-2-1 grounding, creating friction

Getting Back into your WoT

- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation** - a process of tensing and then releasing muscles/muscle groups one-by-one from the tip of the head to the toes. Helps to release relax the body, again reducing stress response
- **Self soothe** - Try to offer comfort and compassion to yourself to help reduce distress
 - Give yourself a hug for 10 seconds or longer, placed a hand on your heart/chest and belly and rub your arms, say something kind to yourself like *"this will pass"*
- **Intense Exercise/Movement/Releasing** - Sometimes the best way to come down from hyperarousal (or come up from hypoarousal) is to move through it
 - Taking a walk or jog, doing jumping jacks or push-ups, shaking the arms, hands, and legs, pressing your arms against a wall, or punching a pillow
 - You might also choose to do something more calming, like gentle stretching, yoga, tai chi, or laying on the floor with your legs up a wall

Tips for Assertive Communication

Dos and Don'ts and D.E.A.R M.A.N

Assertive Communication Dos and Don'ts

Don't: Communicate if you notice emotions taking over

This might look like swearing, put-downs, name-calling, character attacks, yelling, stonewalling, criticising, defensiveness, or zoning out.

Do: Regulate emotions and stay in your WoT

Emotions will come up. If you leave your Window, it's OK to take a break from the communication to validate your emotions, and re-regulate.

Don't: Blame others or use "You" statements

"You" statements are much easier for others to argue against or take offense to, as it can lead to feelings of blame. E.g., "You're wrong" or "You made me feel X"

Do: Use "I" Statements

Frame your sentences based on your opinion or your feelings. "I feel X, when you Y", or "I disagree with that"

Don't: Forget the non-verbals

Eye contact, volume and tone of voice, over-apologizing, dominating the conversation, interrupting, fists clenched, arms crossed, brows furrowing, or being incongruent with the content of your message

Do: Be congruent and appear confident

Consider tone, body language, and eye contact. Speak clearly and directly. Position your body with dignity and confidence.



Assertive Communication Dos and Don'ts

Don't: Let things get too heated, or concede easily

If a conversation gets personal or heated, take a step back. Notice when you are putting your needs/wants on the back burner.

Do: Buy yourself time

It's OK if we don't immediately know what we want or need, have an answer or solution - "I need time to think about that - I'll get back to you by X". Consider planning, practicing and rehearsing.

Don't: Be vague or go off-topic

Discussions that get off-topic are more likely to get heated. Vague or tentative statements, overexplaining or over-justification can lead to misinterpretations.

Do: Be specific, clear, and concise

Choose one topic and stick to it. Be clear about what you're asking for, with a timeline, reason for your request, and benefits of meeting request. Sometimes less is more.

Don't: Listen to respond

Try not to listen while formulating a response/defense in your mind, interrupt, dominate the conversation or bring up other topics

Do: Be an active listener

Hear and honour others' perspectives, thoughts, and feelings. Be open, curious, and non-judgmental. Reflect back: "What I'm understanding is... did I get that right?"

D.E.A.R M.A.N

D.E.A.R M.A.N is an acronym to guide how we approach an interaction when the goal is to communicate what we want/need from another person

Describe

Express

Assert

Reinforce

Mindful

Appear Confident

Negotiate



Describe

Describe the situation. Stick to the facts.

Express

Express your feelings using “I” statements. Do not assume the other person knows how you feel. Stay away from “you” statements.

Assert

Ask for what you want, or say “no” clearly. Remember, the other person cannot read your mind. It’s our responsibility in any given interaction to express ourselves clearly.

Reinforce

Reinforce why this is important to you, or provide context to explain the positive effects of getting what you want. Reinforcing may also mean repeating yourself if needed.



Mindful

Keep your focus on what you want, avoiding distractions. Come back to your assertion over and over, being mindful if the interaction is being drawn in a different direction- come back.

Appear

Confident

Make and maintain eye contact. Use a confident tone of voice – do not whisper, mumble, or give up and say “whatever”.

Negotiate

Be willing to give and get. Ask for the other person’s input. Offer alternative solutions to the problem. Know when to agree, disagree and walk away.



D.E.A.R M.A.N Example

A married couple, Alex and Jordan, have an agreement that when one of them goes out with friends after work they'll be home around 6pm for dinner. One evening, Jordan goes out after work and tells Alex, "I'll be home by 6pm." Alex cooks dinner and waits.

6:30 passes... no message.

7:30... still nothing.

By 9:00, Alex is worried something bad may have happened.

Jordan finally walks in the door at 11:00 p.m. without having called or texted.

Alex feels anxious, hurt, and frustrated - not because Jordan went out, but because there was no communication. In the past, this kind of situation has caused big arguments, yelling, or silent treatment.



D.E.A.R M.A.N Example

D – “We had an agreement that when of us goes out after work, we would text each about timing. Last night, I didn’t hear from you until you came home at 11PM”

E – “I worry about you when I expect you home at a certain time and you’re much later”

A – “I would really appreciate it if from now on, you call me when you are going to be late.”

R – “That way, I would be relieved and wouldn’t worry so much. I wouldn’t be angry that you didn’t communicate with me”

M – “I hear what you’re saying. I would still appreciate a call as this is important to me”

A – Eye contact, head up, clear and firm tone of voice

N – “How about you text me if you think you might be late?” OR “What do you think we should do?”



D.E.A.R M.A.N Example #2

Shelley has decided their relationship with substances is not healthy, and has made the choice to try to stop using substances.

They began attending a recovery group and are making new connections. They also want to remain friends with the existing people in their life.

While making changes over the last month, most of their friends have been very supportive. However, one close friend continues to tease them, put pressure on them to “have fun like they used to”, and encourages them to use substances. The friend has made comments about the person being “boring” and the friend continues to actively use in front of them.

Shelley has come to the decision that they need to address the situation with this friend, as they feel it is not sustainable for this to be the dynamic of their friendship.



D.E.A.R M.A.N Example #2

D – “I’ve told you that I’m trying to reduce my substance use and notice that you continue to tease and push me when we spend time together”

E – “I want to better my health and am feeling unsupported and distracted from my goals by these behaviours. I’m really hurt”

A – “It would feel supportive to me if you could stop commenting on my lack of drinking and substance use. Can I count on your support?” OR “I would like to continue spending time with you, but would prefer if you stopped using while with me. Is that something you feel you can do?”

R – “If this isn’t something you can do, then we can no longer spend time together.” OR “It would be really helpful for our relationship if you could support my efforts instead of undermining them”

M – “I hear that you may not have intended to hurt me, but I was hurt by your actions”

A – Eye contact, head up, clear and firm voice tone

N – “My sobriety is extremely important to me and I’m not willing to negotiate on this”

D.E.A.R M.A.N

We encourage you to reflect on how you might apply this framework to a low to moderate stakes situation in your own life:

Describe

Express

Assert

Reinforce

Mindful

Appear Confident

Negotiate

Personal Rights and Affirming Statements

- The next slide is a list of personal rights is relevant to you and to everyone else
- Being assertive means asserting these rights for yourself but also acknowledging that others also have these rights
- Practise repeating your personal rights, especially those rights that seem hardest to accept
- Remember this list is not exhaustive, it is just designed to give you an idea of your rights.

Personal Rights & Affirming Statements

1. I have a right to ask for what I want and need.
2. I have a right to say no to requests for demands that I cannot meet.
3. I have a right to express all of my feelings—positive and negative.
4. I have a right to change my mind.
5. I have a right to make mistakes and do not have to be perfect.
6. I have a right to follow my own values and beliefs.
7. I have the right to say no to anything if I feel that I am not ready, if it is unsafe, or if it conflicts with my values.
8. I have the right to determine my own priorities.
9. I have the right not to be responsible for the actions, feelings or behavior of others.
10. I have the right to expect honesty from others.
11. I have the right to be angry at someone I love.

Personal Rights & Affirming Statements

12. I have the right to be myself. To be unique.
13. I have the right to say, "I don't know."
14. I have the right not to give excuses or reasons for my behaviour.
15. I have the right to make decisions based on my feelings.
16. I have the right to my own personal space and time.
17. I have the right to be playful.
18. I have the right to feel safe, and be in a non-abusive environment.
19. I have the right to make friends and be comfortable around people.
20. I have the right to change and grow.
21. I have the right to have my wants and needs respected by others.
22. I have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.
23. I have the right to be happy.

Personal Rights & Affirming Statements

- If you are not familiar with your personal rights then take the time to read this daily until you are aware of your rights and begin to assert them
- And remember...everyone else has these rights too!

Skills for Coping with Undesired Outcomes of Assertive Communication

- Assertiveness skills increase the chance of having our needs heard, met and respected
- However, communication is a two-way street
- Sometimes those we are communicating with respond positively, but not always

Next are some tips and considerations for navigating undesired responses



Skills for Coping with Undesired Outcomes

1. Repeat and Revisit

People in our lives may have trouble adjusting to new assertive communication styles. We may need to repeat and re-assert our needs. We may have to ask ourselves “Am I willing to try again?”

2. Accept what is outside our control

We don't have control over others' thoughts, feelings, behaviours responses, or reactions. Remember, the power is in asserting the boundary itself, not in how or if other people respond to it.

3. Accept when other people say No

We want other people to hear us when we say no, therefore we must hear them when they say no. This can sometimes be difficult to tolerate and there is value in exploring why that might be.



Skills for Coping with Undesired Outcomes

4. Practice self-compassion

Painful feelings may arise when people don't respond to us the way we wish they would. Respond to yourself with kindness, warmth, and compassion. This looks like caring for ourselves in the way we would care for someone we love.

5. Consider your negotiables and non-negotiables

Consider what is most important to you in the situation - getting what I want/need, maintaining the relationship, or self-respect/safety. Often safety, and self-respect are non-negotiables.

6. Be open to letting go of relationships

This is complex and nuanced. If needs are frequently not being met or you may need to explore whether this relationship is worth maintaining. Use pros and cons list to decide. It is okay to let go of relationships that are not serving you.

Overview

- **The four styles of communication**
 - Aggressive, Passive, Passive Aggressive, Assertive
- **The Window of Tolerance (WoT)**
 - What is the WoT, how to know if you are in or outside of it
 - Communication within vs. outside of the WoT
 - How to get back into your WoT
- **Tips for assertive communication**
 - Dos and don'ts
 - D.E.A.R M.A.N
- **Personal Rights & Affirming Statements**
- **Skills for coping with undesired outcomes of assertive communication**

Final Thoughts

- We discussed a lot of content tonight, please remember to practice self-compassion when reflecting on this information and the ways to apply it in your life
- Please submit any final questions. We will answer these questions in a written document and post our answers on the Taddle Creek website
- The webinar recording and valuable resources will also be posted on the Taddle Creek website
- We thank you for attending the webinar, for your questions, and any feedback that you provide in the evaluation that we will send out

Thank you!