By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Determine your temperament and communication styles
- Recognize the importance of communicating effectively to manage potential conflicts with roommates, professors, family members and others.
- Implement assertive communication strategies and techniques
- Establish your “person-environment” preferences and what you can do to minimize environment-related stress

Image 1: Ilker @sxc.hu
People are a fabulous, enriching, wonderful part of life. They bring us joy, support, a sense of belonging and community, and even love. However, people can also drive us crazy! In fact, along with time and money, people are one of the greatest sources of stress for most of us. Sometimes, the first step in reducing interpersonal stress is simply recognizing the fact that while we do not have control over others, we have control over our own perceptions, reactions, and behaviors. In the end, we can only try to influence others. It can be very liberating to realize that we can't control other people's behavior, nor are we responsible for their behavior!
Temperament is an individual’s preferred “style of operation.” There are nine temperamental traits. They include: Activity, Regularity, Initial Reaction, Adaptability, Intensity, Mood, Distractibility, Sensitivity, and Persistence and Attention Span. An individual’s temperament within each of these traits can be placed on a continuum from mild to strong. There is no perfect temperament. Each trait has positive and not-so-positive aspects. One helpful exercise in addressing interpersonal stress is to compare your temperament to the temperaments of those around you. While this is not a scientific or clinical assessment, it can be eye opening!

All relationships have a commonality in that they rely on effective communication. In fact, "Good communication is mandatory. It means being open and honest with your feelings; it means being assertive enough to get your needs met; it means not being so afraid of conflict that you always give in; it means being able to compromise; and, finally, it means knowing how to disagree respectfully and criticize constructively." In other words, good communication is the foundation of good relationships, whether they are professional, social, familial, or intimate relationships.

At the heart of effective communication is assertiveness. Assertiveness is being able to say what is liked or disliked about someone or something without using degradation - getting what is wanted, but not at the expense of someone else. Being assertive does not mean that you are selfish or aggressive. In fact, aggressive communication is typically not a good idea. People who communicate in an aggressive manner can be viewed as demanding, bossy, patronizing, and often demeaning. Aggressive people often insist that others obey their wishes. This is not a productive way to relate to others.

It’s also not effective or healthy to be a “passive placater.” This is someone who does not express their likes and dislikes, but instead tries to manipulate others (often with guilt) to get what they want. This behavior only leads to distrust and unmet needs. We also should mention that behaving like a doormat and letting others walk all over you is not a good strategy either. In this case, your needs are hardly ever met, you lose respect for yourself, and, in the end, others do too.

In general, each of these communication options - aggression, placation, and non-expression - will not reduce your stress. In fact, they will most likely increase your perceptions and experience of stress. Assertive communication is a much better option.

Assertiveness is demonstrated in not only what you say, but also how you say it. In fact, body language is a huge part of assertiveness. There are some "body language basics" that can help convey assertiveness:

- Stand up straight and tall.
- Remain steady; do not shift your weight from side to side.
- Directly face the person with whom you're speaking.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard.
- Maintain a steady voice.
- Speak without hesitation.

While you don’t want to appear timid and unsure, you also don’t want to be perceived as aggressive. Don't stand too close; maintain reasonable space between yourself and the other person. Avoid glaring or pointing at them. Definitely don't yell or shout, and try not to clench your jaw or fists. Each of these behaviors can be interpreted as aggressive. Messages delivered in an aggressive manner often get ignored or are misunderstood.


- Image 1: Member #245895 @ sxc.hu
For many of us, though, assertiveness does not necessarily come naturally. People often have to learn the nuances of assertive communication. Assertiveness is based on the assumption that every person has certain basic rights. For example, you have the right to:

- say "no" without feeling guilty.
- put yourself first, sometimes.
- make mistakes.
- change your mind.
- take your time in planning an answer or an action.
- ask for instructions or directions.
- demand respect.
- do less than you possibly can.
- ask for what you want.
- be the final judge of your feelings and accept them as legitimate.
- have your own opinions and convictions.
- express your feelings.
- feel good about yourself, no matter what.

But, here's the problem: we are often taught that acting in accordance with these basic rights is somehow unethical or selfish. However, this is certainly not the case. Being assertive simply means that you are attempting to achieve your needs while maintaining effective interpersonal relationships. Of course, before you can communicate assertively, you have to believe that you are worthy of having your rights met. You need to regard yourself as capable of making good decisions and being worthy of being treated with respect and dignity. These beliefs are obviously directly tied to self-esteem, which is how you regard yourself.

A major factor in effective communication and assertiveness is how things are said. Consider these two sentences:

- You never show up for your shift on time!
- I feel frustrated when others don’t come to work on time because it often leads me to leave work later and miss the bus.

If you were to use the first statement, your coworker would most likely feel attacked. The second statement communicates your personal needs and explains why and how your coworker’s actions affect you.

An I statement is just that, a statement that begins with "I" and is formulated in a way that prevents the listener from immediately taking the defensive.

When properly constructed, I statements are free of put-downs, blaming, criticizing, judging, shaming and name-calling. Try to avoid forming You statements disguised as I statements. This would start with something like, "I feel that you..." Use the following template to help create I statements:

"I feel blank when blank because blank."

"I" statements are much more effective in initiating a productive conversation.
Usually, when you communicate effectively, you'll find that your needs are more often met. And, while you might not always get everything you want, you'll probably discover that it will be easier to compromise and reach resolutions with others via assertive, effective communication. The DESC Form of Assertive Communication is one tool designed to draw attention to 4 very important parts of effectively communicating. DESC stands for describe, express, specify and consequence.

First, describe or explain what you are trying to convey. What message do you want the other person to receive? Are you reacting to a situation, a behavior, or something else? Describe the situation in very clear, understandable language.

Second, in detail, express how you feel about the situation. Use I statements and keep your comments limited to your feelings.

Third, clearly specify several options for the desired change. Again, use I language. Such as, “I would like . . . I would prefer . . .”

Last, carefully consider consequences prior to the conversation. What will be the outcome or consequence if the situation or behavior does not change? Here, use if - then and I language. For example, “If this happens, I will . . .” or “If you do or don't, then I will . . .” Do not state this as a threat, but instead, calmly present your likely reaction to various outcomes.

Much of what we've discussed regarding assertive communication can be used in virtually any relationship or conversation, but we'll discuss a few situations in detail.


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* Image 1: Thorarinn Stefansson @ sxc.hu
Getting to know a new roommate can be challenging during the whirlwind of the first days of college. The following questions might be helpful: review them with your roommate and answer them together.

- Where are you from? What do you like to do?
- How do you feel about guests dropping by? How often? How late? Is it ok to have weekend visitors?
- What time do you go to sleep? What time do you get up? Are you a heavy or a light sleeper? Do you snore?
- How much do you study? When do you study? How quiet does the room have to be for you to be able to study?
- At what temperature do you like to keep the room?
- What kind of music do you prefer? How loud? Can you use headphones?
- How clean and neat do you want the room? How do we decide who cleans what and when?
- Which items of your property are OK to borrow? Which are off-limits?
- How do you feel about sharing food?
- How do you think we should handle misunderstandings or disagreements?

Going through these questions will no doubt help you learn some interesting things about each other.

Another thing that some students find helpful is to draft an informal “roommate contract.” At the very least, discussing these issues with your roommate will lead to better understanding of each other!

As we've mentioned before, college presents some interesting situations that you might not encounter in quite the same way throughout the rest of your life. One of these interesting situations is the typical college living arrangement. No matter where you live, you'll no doubt be confronted with potential stressors related to privacy (or lack thereof), noise, and even temperature. If these and other aspects of your environment don't match your needs and preferences, stress can result. This concept is called "person-environment fit." Ideally, we'd all love for our environments at school, work, and where we live to match our preferences exactly. In the real world, though, this doesn't always happen, especially in college housing!

So, what do you do when your "person-environment fit" isn't balanced? On some things, of course, you can and should learn to compromise. As we discussed earlier, in other situations, it's wise - and even necessary - for you to assertively advocate for what you need. And, it's always good to have some back-up strategies as well.
Let's say you are a person who really needs some alone time every day - but your current living situation doesn't really provide many opportunities for that. Maybe you can work some "quiet time" into each day by going to the library or another quite place to study for an hour or so each day. If noise bothers you - especially when you’re trying to sleep or study - maybe investing in a pair of noise-canceling headphones (or earplugs!) is a good idea. Or, maybe you’re someone who is always cold - but you don't have complete control over the temperature in your room. You could dress in layers, sleep in warm PJ's, or even try an electric blanket to create the warmth you need. In other words, create your own environment as much as you can. It’s amazing how significant these "little environmental stressors" can actually be. They are important to consider - and definitely worth the effort to address them!

* Image 1: Junior Gomes @ sxc.hu
We’ve already covered some of this, but we can’t stress enough how effective communication with professors, instructors, teaching assistants and counselors is an important aspect of academic success. We want to provide you with some basic, but critical things to remember when it comes to this.

- Whenever in doubt, ask questions! Remember, no question is ever “dumb!” All professors, instructors, and counselors would rather have you ask questions to yield full comprehension, than leave you wondering how to do something – and then encountering problems. Everyone associated with the college experience expects students to ask questions – and they’re usually more than happy to answer them! It is always a good policy to seek clarification of expectations, processes, or assignments.

- Further, don’t be afraid to ask for help. One thing that happens in college is that you become very aware of your academic interests, strengths, and weaknesses. Some students are very adept at math, while others excel in creative writing, yet others prefer psychology or science. But, no matter where your interests and abilities lie, you no doubt have to take courses in all of these subjects - and others, too! If you find yourself in a class that’s just “not your thing” and you’re struggling to understand some of the concepts, ask for help. Often, your TA, instructor, or professor will provide advice and insight, and they probably would be able to recommend tutoring services, if warranted. Contrary to popular opinion, asking for help is NOT a sign of weakness; rather, it’s a sign of strength, dedication, and perseverance.

- When issues arise, address them as soon as possible. If you have a question, or if something comes up which will cause you to miss a class, assignment, or exam, talk with your professor or instructor right away. If you talk with him or her ahead of time, he or she can problem-solve with you and usually work out an alternative. If you wait until you’ve missed some classes or homework, however, many professors will be less likely to allow make-ups or extensions.

- When necessary, calmly, but persuasively defend your position or argue your point when needed. Here’s another situation in which it’s imperative that you communicate effectively and assertively – and also respectfully. If you truly feel that you have a valid point to make about an assignment or exam, calmly approach your instructor, professor, or TA with confidence. Most professors love to engage in lively debates with their students – and will appreciate your dedication. If you encounter an instructor with whom communication is difficult, use your best judgment and prepare your comments ahead of time. We all encounter people with whom you just don’t “click.”

But remember, no class lasts forever. This, too, shall pass.
All interactions with other people have the potential for conflict - some more than others! No matter what type of relationship it is, following tried and true conflict management advice will help you navigate any disagreement more successfully.

Perhaps one of the first issues to acknowledge is that there are times when we have a choice to engage in or avoid a conflict. Some issues are worth it, while others simply are better left alone. The following six variables should be considered to help you decide whether or not to engage in a conflict:

1. First, determine your investment in the relationship. The importance of the working or personal relationship often dictates whether you will engage in a conflict. If you value the person and/or the relationship, going through the process of conflict resolution is important.
2. Next, consider the importance of the issue. Even if the relationship is not of great value to you, engaging in conflict is likely necessary if the issue is a belief, value, or regulation that you believe in or are hired to enforce. If the relationship and the issue are both important to you, there is an even more compelling reason to engage in the conflict.
3. Then, assess whether you have the energy for the conflict. Many of us say, "There is not time to do all that I want to do in a day." Often the issue is not how much time is available but how much energy we have for what we need to do. Even in a track meet, runners are given recovery time before they have to run another race. Energy, not time, is being managed in these situations.
4. Next, make sure you are aware of the potential consequences. Prior to engaging in a conflict, think about anticipated consequences. For example, there may be a risk for your safety, a risk for job loss, or an opportunity for a better working relationship. Many times people will engage in conflict and then be shocked by the outcome or consequence. Thoughtful reflection about the consequences, both positive and negative, is useful before engaging in or avoiding a conflict.
5. After this, determine if you are ready for the consequences. After analyzing potential consequences of engaging in a conflict, determine whether or not you are prepared for those consequences. If the issue is important to you and you're prepared for the potential outcome, then go for it. If not, don't!
6. Similarly, consider the consequences of inaction. Most people have core values, ideas, beliefs, or morals. Sometimes people must engage in conflict to avoid losing a sense of self. You may decide that the consequences of inaction outweigh the discomfort of engaging in conflict.

If you do decide that an issue is worth your effort and that engaging in potential conflict is necessary, follow a set of steps that can help you manage that conflict in a reasonable manner. Since conflict is an inevitable situation in interpersonal relationships, we’ve included some steps that we’ve developed to manage conflicts within groups. However, they can also be used in personal disputes:


- Image 1: carl_dwyer@sxc.hu
These steps will help you organize your thoughts and actions when involved in conflict:\footnote{Smith, S.N., & Fairman, D. (2004, Summer), "Normalizing effective conflict management through academic curriculum integration: The example of workable peace", *New Directions for Youth Development* 2004(102):46-68.}

**Step 1** - Diagnose the situation. Determine the conflict’s content and history. Evaluate personalities and positions. Think about these issues carefully; you’ll be more prepared to handle the conflict constructively. Remember, it is impossible to reach a solution if you can’t first agree on what the conflict is about and unless you each understand the other’s intended outcome.

**Step 2** - Involve all parties. Be a skillful questioner by asking open-ended questions. These begin with what, how, when, where and who. Use processes that solicit discussion, opinions, information, and priorities from all relevant people. Efforts made to understand the other party’s perspective through dialogue can break down stereotypes, highlight things that you share, and initiate the process of negotiation.

**Step 3** - Collect all information. Gather information and facts about the situation. Do this in an objective manner. Remember, people’s feelings are just as real to them as facts. What is their goal? How does the other group view the conflict? What does the other group hope to achieve? Keep in mind, however, a resolution cannot be reached through understanding alone. It also requires negotiation and compromise, but we’ll get to that!
Step 4 - Be a good listener. It's hard to manage conflict effectively if you don't carefully listen to the concerns of each party. Listening is so much more than simply hearing. It also involves the way someone stands or sits, focus, and eye contact. Consider the following: if you were speaking to a professor about an exam grade and found that she had turned away from you and began typing on her computer, how would you feel? She might hear what you're saying, but she certainly isn't listening. A good listener sits slightly forward toward the speaker, their hands are still, and they look directly at them. They affirm, reflect and summarize what the speaker says. They do not interrupt or react with excessive emotion. When dealing with a good listener, a speaker will feel more comfortable exploring difficult issues.
**Step 5** - Reinforce agreements. People who disagree often share some common goals and values. Discover these common concerns and reinforce the agreements. Write these agreements down so that everyone can see them. These will be important during negotiation.

**Step 6** - Negotiate disagreements. Disagreements are not negotiated until everyone understands the facts and feelings that caused the conflict. Review steps 1 through 5; list important disagreements; have everyone rank order their disagreements; begin with the smallest issue and work toward the largest. A negotiation is a discussion intended to produce a settlement or agreement. In other words, there will be a give and take or compromise. An individual may adjust or modify their demands to reach a resolution for the sake of ending the conflict.

**Step 7** - Solidify agreements. Identify agreed upon solutions and offer compromises for unresolved issues. If a compromise cannot be reached, table the issue and move to the next one. Review any proposed agreements carefully so you are sure that everyone understands them.

Conflict is inevitable in most relationships. Hopefully we have given you some tools for effective communication and conflict management. Practice some of these strategies in lighter situations as a means to prepare for when you really need them, and you will need them! Remember, effective communication is a skill to use both during and after college.
Congratulations!
You've reached the end of Lesson 7: Interpersonal and Environmental Stress.

Please review the resource links below from this lesson for more information about lesson-related topics.

Next Lesson:
Why not continue with Lesson 8: Coping with Loss, Grief & Trauma

It's 21 pages long and will take about 31 minutes

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