Healthy Self-Assertion

What is healthy about assertion? Assertiveness has often been equated with opposition. To assertively declare something or speak out could be compared to disagreeableness. And depending on our family backgrounds, hearing those who speak out strongly might feel like reminders of authoritarian parents, mentors or even bullies we encountered. Yet, aggression is remarkably different in that it pinpoints an object for its energy and assertiveness' energy is internalized.

Typically in families, we often drop the civil norms of “please”, “thank you”, “you're welcome”, “may I”. In fact, requests frequently emerge as demands to those with whom we are familiar. The difference between healthy assertion and aggression is the ability to create either respect, integrity and acceptance ***or*** *doubt,* destruction and disdain.

When faced with a potential conflict of wills, choices or full-blown opposition, we can either be aggressive or withdraw or remain to disagree agreeably. Often one feels the only choice is to withdraw or flee because we do not like the strong ***emotions*** coming from the other. There is *the choice of an appropriate response* in communication. To better understand, let us look at an example of one of the most difficult: an intimate one!

John and Mary are married. John wants to leave for the weekend with his buddies to go fishing in a site 200 miles away. It is Mary's mother's birthday and she wants John to be with her as they celebrate Mom's 85th birthday. John tells his wife this trip has been planned long in advance. He has this trip with his buds only once per year and Mary seems selfish to not allow him to go. John tells Mary he is going anyway and she “always does this to (him)”! He begins using “you” messages at her as he labels her “selfish & self-centered”. Mary returns his comments in like fashion. She pouts saying John “*never* cares about anyone but (himself) and neglects his family”. Even if you have not experienced this type of dialogue in your home, the outcome is probably expected. John stomps off on his trip thinking Mary is so controlling and misunderstands him. Meanwhile Mary's tears of hurt and anger harden her heart to question how she can live with such a man!

How can this situation be assisted? Go to counseling!! Yes, that is helpful but there are behavioral / attitudinal methods to practice at home which can transform relationships. Healthy Self-Assertion is owning and stating ones own thoughts and feelings with the possibility of transforming an adversarial encounter into one that promotes reciprocity. Let's look at John and Mary's situation in a different way.

John informs Mary he is going on his yearly fishing trip with his buddies and hears Mary's news re: Mom's birthday. She says, “John, I feel disappointed you planned your trip when we will be celebrating Mom's 85th birthday. I would really appreciate it if you could schedule it for another time”. John replies he feels conflicted because he wants “to share in the birthday event but only has this ONE time with these guys”. He further states he thinks “the other guys can only go on that scheduled week-end and (he) would like to change the date if possible because (he) knows how much it means to Mary and her mom to have family there”. Mary shares her “gratitude for his understanding”, her “deep desire to have (him) there” and encourages John “to do his best to shift the date”. If he “cannot, (she) will understand”. John acknowledges he “will see what he can do to accommodate both events”.

Perhaps that is not the outcome you favor, depending on which side you choose. Regardless the communication was respectful to each person, accepting of their differing needs and filled with integrity for the autonomy of each partner. Healthy Self-Assertion provides the opportunity to disagree agreeably. Rather than “you” messages finger-pointing the disliked things about the other person's ideas, this way creates a sense of self-responsibility with the use of “I” statements. Because we own our communication with “I think” or “I feel”, AND ask for what we would like (“I would appreciate if you would consider”), the other person is not put in a defensive mode. In turn we feel good about our healthy way of handling the situation remaining calm and loving. Regardless whether our wishes come about or theirs, we have been able to manage an amenable connection.

Besides couples' counseling, Suzanne is available to give workshops/training in Healthy Communication Skills to businesses, groups or individuals.