**Minding Mendocino**

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**Assertiveness**

“Forgive me for all the things I said while Mercury was in Retrograde” was an amusing post recently on Facebook.com. Communication, indeed, can be extremely difficult with or without the influence of large rotating planets. We are complicated creatures, and oftentimes we feel we are “right”. The dilemma begins whenever emotions rise, and we say something we later regret. The opposite is equally as difficult: when we do not say anything, only to wish later we had. How does one go about finding this delicate balance of communication so as to avoid future guilt and regret?

One of the largest challenges is that we are only in control of one side of the conversation. Even if we do it by the book, there is nothing that requires the other person to respond in the same way. In turn, someone can approach us quite inappropriately and we have the choice to remain diplomatic. Some of the interesting aspects of conversations, particularly tough ones, are the many different directions they can go. There are some ways, however, to increase the likelihood that the outcome will be positive.

* **Try not to blame**

If someone believes we are blaming them, off the bat they will become defensive. Instead of saying, “You make me angry”, try saying instead “I feel angry when you \_\_\_\_\_”. This is a simple change that can make a big difference. “I feel” statements contain a personal responsibility for our own reactions and feelings, perhaps making it less likely the other person will be defensive.

* **Try not to ask “Why?”**

When we begin a statement with “Why did you do \_\_\_\_\_?” it immediately creates a blaming, defensive environment. Instead try using another question word if at all possible: “When did you get home last night?” instead of “Why were you out so late?”; “Where did you place the scissors?” instead of “Why can I never find my scissors after you use them?”

* **Try to watch your posture and tone**

If it will not be possible to have the conversation right now, without tensing up the body and voice (due to anger), then perhaps it is a better idea to take a walk first and sort out the emotion. “This is important to me, let me take a break and I will be back to continue this conversation in a little while” may be a good statement to use before leaving. It is usually fine to come back later and open up the conversation again. “I am still feeling upset about what happened earlier, and now that I am calmer is it alright with you to talk about it now?”

Assertiveness is about being true to ourselves while also being aware and respectful of the boundaries and needs of others. It takes practice and patience on all accounts, so keep trying and learning. The more this type of conversation is practiced in our important relationships, the better we get at it in all of our communications. We can be proud of ourselves, even if we are the only one in the communication being assertive. When both sides are able to be so, this is the essence of growth and the birth of understanding.

For more information visit: <http://psychcentral.com/lib/5-tips-to-increase-your-assertiveness/>

Thanks for reading, and remember you can write in with a question of your own to Long Valley Health Center, PO Box 870, Laytonville, CA 95454, ATTN: Jessi Maness.