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### How to contact us:



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**[www.nbt.nhs.uk](http://www.nbt.nhs.uk)**

If you or the individual you are caring for need support reading this leaflet please ask a member of staff for advice.



Core Clinical Services

North Bristol **NHS**  
NHS Trust

# The Pain Management Programme: Communication



*Exceptional healthcare, personally delivered*

# Communication

## Why improve communication?

Many of the symptoms of long-term conditions can vary over time and are invisible to our family, friends and colleagues. We need to find a way to communicate to the people around us, what it feels like and what we can do and cannot do. By stating more clearly what our needs and abilities are, we increase the chances that these will be respected. If we try and hide the fact that we are having difficulties with pain/fatigue from people who know us well, they often realise that something is wrong and will come to their own conclusions, which may be wrong.

Poor communication can cause misunderstandings, hurt feelings, anger, stress, resentment and frustration, for all concerned. Being able to communicate your needs and abilities clearly and honestly, while being aware of the needs of others, is an important aspect of managing your condition.

## Ways of communicating

We communicate with our whole body as well as the words we use. Communication involves actively listening, body language, such as eye contact, use of our hands and posture, as well as the tone and content of what we say.

## Styles of communicating

There are three common 'styles' of communication that are well known: assertive, passive and aggressive communication. The table of communication styles on page 6/7 of this handout shows these three basic styles. It can be helpful to recognise these different styles of communication and when we might use them. Also, it helps to be more aware of the consequences for us and those around us when we use these styles of interacting with others.

## Assertiveness

The word assertiveness is used to describe a style of communicating where open and honest communication is achieved. This is considered the most effective and desirable communication style. It is a skill that requires awareness and practice. Trying to change our communication requires us to think about how we currently communicate in certain situations and what we would like to change.

So what is assertiveness? The box outlines some ideas:-

- Having and appropriately expressing your own feelings and opinions while listening to and respecting other peoples.
- Asking for what you want and setting your own priorities.
- Saying “no” without feeling guilty.
- Making your own decisions and dealing with the consequences.
- Sometimes changing your mind.

## Things to think about when communicating with others

**1. Recognise that it is OK to express your thoughts and opinions** and that this can lead to more open and honest discussions with others.

**2. Be aware of your feelings, needs and wants.**

In order to be assertive you need to understand what you are feeling about a situation, and what you would like to happen. You cannot assume that people know how you are feeling and what it is that you want.

**3. Overcome mental obstacles.** Often we talk ourselves out of asserting ourselves because we feel that we should not be assertive or we may be fearful of the consequences. It may be useful to identify any unhelpful thoughts and beliefs and see if there are any more helpful and supportive ways of looking at the situation (see the handout on thoughts and feelings for more information).

**4. Manage anxiety**

It helps to be as calm as possible before and during communication by using diaphragmatic breathing, relaxing your jaw and by using helpful self-talk.

**5. Consider your body language**

The way that you hold yourself has an impact on how you feel as well as how you are perceived and treated. Assertive people generally stand upright in a confident way with a relaxed manner, looking people calmly in the eyes, with open hands, the tone of voice is calm and speech is clear. It is also worth knowing that we can feel more confident simply by adjusting our posture and sitting or standing more upright. It's helpful to be aware of this when you communicate with others.

The next time you talk to someone, you could be aware of:

- Where you are looking?
- How would you describe your body position?
- Consider your tone of voice.

## **6. Knowing what to say when being assertive**

It is helpful to think through the different options that can be taken in a particular situation and talk these through with somebody to help you to prepare what to say.

Communication Style	Description	Language
<p><b>Passive</b></p>	<p><b>Avoid conflict at all times and please others.</b>            Not expressing your feelings, needs, rights and opinions.            Over consideration for others feelings and rights.            May be frightened to say what you think in case your beliefs are ridiculed.</p>	<p><b>Body</b>            Passive body language the classic "victim" posture of hunched shoulders and avoidance of eye contact.</p> <p><b>Verbal</b>            Moaning, quiet, apologetic, indecisive, helpless.</p>
<p><b>Aggressive</b></p>	<p><b>The aim is to win, if necessary at the expense of others.</b>            Expressing own wants, needs and opinions with no respect for others.            Standing up for your rights in a way that violates others.            Your opinions are more valid than others.</p>	<p><b>Body</b>            An aggressive stance one with clenched fists, glaring eyes and body language.</p> <p><b>Verbal</b>            Bossy, arrogant, domineering, inconsiderate.</p>
<p><b>Assertive</b></p>	<p><b>Expressing own feelings, needs, rights and opinions while respecting other people's feelings, needs and rights.</b>            Taking responsibility for own actions.</p>	<p><b>Body</b>            Relaxed, grounded posture, eye contact.</p> <p><b>Verbal</b>            Calm, direct, polite, honest, use of "I" statements (e.g. "I feel...")</p>

	Effects on you	Effects on others
<p>y language is "victim" stance shoulders and eye contact.</p> <p>quiet, indecisive,</p>	<p><b>Short term</b> Reduction in anxiety, avoidance of guilt, martyrdom.</p> <p><b>Long term</b> Loss of self esteem increasing internal tensions leading to stress, anger and depression.</p>	<p><b>Short term</b> Pleased because they get what they want. Guilt.</p> <p><b>Long term</b> Irritated and develop a lack of respect.</p>
<p>ve stance is clenched fists, and intrusive age.</p> <p>ant, g, intolerant.</p>	<p><b>Short term</b> Release of tension, person feels powerful.</p> <p><b>Long term</b> Feelings of guilt and shame. Place responsibility on others. Decreased self confidence and self esteem.</p>	<p><b>Short term</b> Fear, anger and aggression.</p> <p><b>Long term</b> Resentment and avoidance.</p>
<p>ounded, open e contact.</p> <p>t, positive, of "I" (e.g. I feel).</p>	<p><b>Short term</b> Increased ability to tackle difficult issues. Don't expect others to magically know what you want.</p> <p><b>Long term</b> Improved self confidence, respect from others.</p>	<p><b>Short term</b> Know where they stand with you, will listen to you and will feel understood by you.</p> <p><b>Long term</b> Improved relationships.</p>



## Dealing with a problem using assertive communication skills

- **Arrange a time and place.** Try to find a mutually agreed time and setting to discuss the problem with the other person.
- **State the problem in terms of consequences to you.** Many people are wrapped up in their own thoughts and problems and may have little idea about what you think and feel. Express your feelings – this lets the other person know how their behaviour affects you. Even if they disagree with you, they cannot dispute that you have experienced these feelings. This can be expressed through “I...” rather than “You...” statements eg: “I feel you do most of the talking when we are together. I would like to tell you my thoughts and feelings too.”
- **Make a request.**
  - **Keep it simple.** Avoid asking for more than one thing at a time.
  - **Be specific.** When asking someone to help you, try to be clear about what it is that you would like them to do.
  - Use “I .....” statements.
  - Do not apologise.
  - Remember, if you are objecting to their behaviour (what they are doing) you are not objecting to their personality.
- **State consequences of gaining (or not gaining) co-operation.** Stating the positive consequences of co-operation can be an honest offer of give and take. Ensure both you and the other person understand the consequences and be specific and realistic about these, eg: “If you cannot leave on time, I will have to go without you”, rather than “If you cannot leave on time, I am never going anywhere with you again”.

## Summary of good communication

- Be honest with yourself about your own feelings and keep calm (use relaxation techniques, eg: diaphragmatic breathing).
- Be clear, specific, and direct.
- Use appropriate body language – upright, open, calm posture.
- If you meet objections, listen to the other person's point of view whilst ensuring that your message is clear. Try to offer alternative solutions if you can.
- Ask, if you are unsure about something. If the other person tries to create a diversion, point this out calmly and repeat your message.
- Own your messages by using "I" eg: it's more constructive to say "I do not agree with you" than "you are wrong".
- Remember, you have the right to make mistakes and so does everyone else.



NHS Constitution. Information on your rights and responsibilities.  
Available at [www.nhs.uk/aboutnhs/constitution](http://www.nhs.uk/aboutnhs/constitution)  
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