

Anne Dickson

ASSERTIVENESS AND SEXUALITY

The experience of leading many women's sexuality groups during the past three years has underlined the importance of two particular themes: if a woman takes charge of her sexuality and her body, there is often an effect which far exceeds the boundaries of specific sexual situations; secondly for a woman, assertiveness, that is a claim for **herself**, an ability to define limits and to express appropriate anger when those limits are infringed, is a vital part of her ability to accept the importance of pleasure, including sexual pleasure in her life.

I have long been intrigued by the interwoven nature of these two themes. After completing a ten week assertiveness training course last year, I sent question sheets to the 24 participants. The answers gave me a lot of insight and particularly clarified the issue of powerlessness in women's experience of themselves. The following brief outline of content and method will give the reader an idea of the process.

We met for two hours a week for ten weeks. Initially we spent time defining assertiveness and distinguishing it from aggression. The introduction of four imaginary women who served as models of passive, aggressive, manipulative and assertive behaviour proved to be useful reference points for the participants to describe their own behaviour and increase their awareness of others' responses. A lot of written material was distributed at the beginning to endorse the concepts we discussed and to enable the women to construct hierarchies of situations in which they found it difficult to be assertive.

We started with the least anxiety provoking and gaining confidence through success, ascended the hierarchy. Two traditional assertiveness techniques were used - broken record and fogging - which helped maintain an unwavering stance and clear direction in the face of confrontation. The content and method were really a synthesis of previous assertiveness training classes, plus role play in small groups of six, plus work in co-counselling pairs. We looked at self-esteem and how to retain it in the face of put-downs and rejections. We looked at non-verbal communication and helped participants to breakdown their reaction into specific components so as to cope with them in difficult situations. We focused on anger, - the positive aspects of anger as energy, on permission to feel anger and express it on skills involved in expressing anger without compulsively invalidating the other person. We learned how to communicate personal needs and limitations in a direct way.

It became obvious that the expression of anger has become a universal difficulty: anger and frustration through fear of violence or loss of control or fear of over-reaction or being labelled bitchy or aggressive. The anger would seep out frequently in indirect criticism or sarcasm. Another focus was manipulation. I used the concept of "the compassion trap" (I) which describes the feeling of many women that they exist primarily to serve others, so that they should be tender and compassionate at all times, and that fulfilment is to be found through meeting the needs of others, a complete antithesis to the concept of the assertive woman. Participants were able to begin to separate from their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and discover their own qualities and to compare these with the feminine stereotype.

Ages ranged from 27 to 55 and they represented a cross-section of class, background and education. Of those who replied 8 were married, 3 single, 2 divorced, one separated and one widowed.

My description of the course was as follows:

Assertiveness is not aggression - an assertive woman can communicate freely and directly; she can take charge of her life and act in a way she respects, accepting her limitations and her strengths. The aim of the group is to help women to become clear about what they want and to achieve it without resorting to aggressive or submissive behaviour or games".

My first question was:

Why did you decide to attend the assertiveness course?

The important theme seemed to be the need for more successful communication.

"I knew I lacked directness in my dealings with people, I also encountered many social situations where I felt uncomfortable."

Others wished to be more aggressive at work and still others wished to discover their identity. Three women mentioned curiosity, "I had read about assertiveness training and I specifically wished to be more assertive in sexual situations".

What was the initial reaction of those close to you? Did that change during the course?

Six noticed a reaction of amusement. A picture of suspicion anxiety and need for reassurance emerged. Three other women described a successful resolution of the conflict which arose as a result of change. The general response indicated either initial lack of objection changing to hostility or

hostility and wariness changing to indifference or encouragement. One woman met both patterns in two people close to her.

The feedback confirmed that it is common to confuse aggression with assertion.

Was there anything on the course that you were surprised to learn?

Most of the surprises occurred in learning about behaviour. They were able to understand and recognize behaviour patterns in themselves and others.

"I didn't realise I was being used so much or that people were playing games with me."

There was surprise that a very simple technique could work

By just taking a breath, that is sometimes sufficient to change posture, voice, phrase or question, to get straightforward communication and result."

There was surprise that women had so many rights or even that they had any rights at all.

What did you gain from the course? Can you identify the most important thing?

There was an overwhelming indication of the power of sharing experience with other women, nine women mentioned the specific support and help of the group.

The ability to manage behaviour in a difficult situation and maintaining steady ground in the face of criticism and conflict were important features. They discovered three important rights: the right to choose, to take responsibility for behaviour and the right to like or dislike others.

The third includes being informed about her body so that she can now accept trust and enjoy it.

Only from such a base i.e. from a position of individuality and self esteem, can a woman become aware of her sexual personality and establish her own sexual preferences, her turnons, dislikes, limits. Only then can she learn to accept and enjoy her eroticism as her own - not just as an extra dimension which springs into being only in the presence of a partner. Then she can choose to share and enjoy her eroticism with a partner. Then she can learn about her bodies responses, how to lose herself in her body, how to let go without fearing for her relationship or her reputation. She has to take time for herself, to be able to make herself a priority at times, to communicate her needs and allow these to be met before she can enjoy the sex in sex without using it as an extension of or a substitute for the inequalities in her relationships.

It is difficult for a woman to positively celebrate her sexuality without a fundamental belief in her self, her worth and a sense of autonomy. If a woman's chronic dependance - personal, sexual financial, - can be replaced by these same dimensions in all her relationships, then the potential for effective change is immeasurable.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Vivian,

I deeply value the substantial contributions to our understanding of Gestalt and Co-Counselling which Gaie Houston, Rose Evison, John Heron, Richard Horobin and John Rowan have given to us in recent special issues of **Self and Society**.

As a long-life member of self-help groups, who is also a trained counsellor, I feel that many of the ambivalences towards professionalism which are expressed to me might be reconciled if such groups had experience of Co-Counselling. How far is the Co-Counselling movement making itself available to the Befriending movement in all its manifestations? One group which I know well has always opposed using counsellors, voluntary or paid, professional or self-taught, within their own activities (although prepared to refer members to outside medical or other specialized agencies), because their members' council has each year considered that their own peer group befriending is adequate and should not be replaced. Yet could not Co-Counselling be conceptualized as an intensive/extensive form of befriending, and might not **some** befrienders be helped by being enabled to use its techniques, even if on a non-ideological basis?

Another response which John Heron's article catalysed concerns the discharge of past hurts and his view that Co-Counselling has the potential for "the generation of new rituals that deepen the meaning found in and given to human existence..." May it not be in the area of the discharge of hurts connected with bereavement that such developments will be most needed? For we are increasingly suffering from bereavement experiences through rising redundancy and unemployment, home eviction, loss of status and retirement, abortion, separation and divorce, accident and failure, as well as death. Here I would tentatively suggest that bereavement is an experience which is generally most safely discharged by a slow work-through which includes past half-buried or smothered loss experiences: here, perhaps the bereavement befrienders could teach Co-Counsellors something! For Co-Counselling seems, classically, to have aimed at discharge of the more immediately resurrective kind, whilst the renewal and regeneration which the bereaved find in befriending groups tends to develop far more slowly, and necessarily, occurs in the surrounding context of the family.

Love and Gratitude,

Yvonne Craig
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