

ASSERT YOURSELF!



Module One

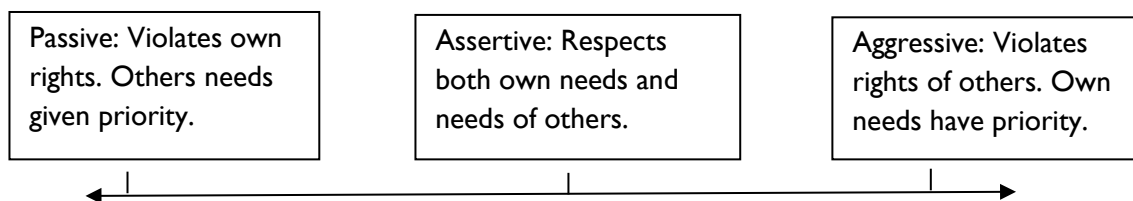
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What is Assertiveness?

We have all heard people say “You need to be more assertive!” But what exactly is assertiveness? Assertiveness is a communication style. It is being able to express your feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and opinions in an open manner that doesn’t violate the rights of others. Other communication styles you may have heard of include being aggressive, which is a style that violates the rights of others, and being passive where we violate our own rights. You have probably also heard of passive-aggressive. This is where someone is essentially being aggressive but in a passive or indirect way. For example, someone may be angry but they don’t act in an overtly aggressive way by yelling or hitting, instead they may sulk or slam a door.



Myths about Assertiveness

There are a number of myths about assertiveness. Some people use these as support for why they shouldn’t try and be more assertive. It is worth having a look at these in more detail. In Module 3, “Thinking in a more assertive way”, we will be taking a further look at ways of thinking that stop us from being assertive, and then look at how we can go about changing this thinking.

Myth 1: “Assertiveness is basically the same as being aggressive”.

Debunking the myth: Some people who are aggressive think they are being assertive because they are stating what their needs are. It is true that both assertive and aggressive communication involves stating your needs; however there are very important differences between stating your needs assertively and stating them aggressively. There are differences in the words used, the tone taken, and the body language used. We will discuss these differences in more detail in the section on the verbal and non-verbal characteristics of each of the communication styles.

Myth 2: *“If I am assertive I will get what I want”.*

Debunking the myth: Being assertive does not mean that you always get what you want. In fact being assertive is not a guarantee of any outcome at all. Being assertive is about expressing yourself in a way that respects both your needs and the needs of others. Sometimes this means you get what you want, sometimes you won't get what you want at all and sometimes you will come to a mutually satisfactory compromise.

Myth 3: *“If I am assertive I have to be assertive in every situation”*

Debunking the myth: Understanding how to be assertive provides you with the choice of when to be assertive. It does not mean you have to be assertive in every situation. You may come to the realisation in certain situations that being assertive is not the most helpful way to behave. For example, if you are in a bar and someone begins to be very aggressive or violent, then being assertive may place you at risk as the other person is not being rational. In this case you may make the decision that a passive approach is the most beneficial. Learning to be assertive is about providing yourself with a choice!

The Effects of Being Unassertive

The main effect of not being assertive is that it can lead to low self esteem. If we communicate in a passive manner we are not saying what we really feel or think. This means we can end up agreeing with and fulfilling other people's needs or wants rather than our own. This can result in a lack of purpose, and a feeling of not being in control of our own lives.

If we never express ourselves openly and conceal our thoughts and feelings this can make us feel tense, stressed, anxious or resentful. It can also lead to unhealthy and uncomfortable relationships. We will feel like the people closest to us don't really know us.

Lack of assertiveness is very common in social phobia. People with social phobia tend to think that other people are being judgmental and critical about them and will avoid social situations because of this. If you think you have social phobia please have a look at our social phobia modules (“Shy no more”) on the website.

If we constantly communicate in an aggressive manner we will eventually lose friends and people will lose respect for us. Again this can lead to low self esteem.

There is a large amount of research examining the negative impact of lacking assertiveness – that is, being either passive or aggressive. People who are more assertive tend to be less depressed and have better health outcomes. Less assertive people have a greater likelihood of substance abuse.

How do we Become Unassertive?

Assertiveness is a learned behaviour and thinking style. We are all born assertive. Think of a baby. Babies cry when they want something, they express emotion freely. Then gradually they adapt their behaviour to fit in with responses they receive from the environment, that is, responses they receive from family, peers, work mates, authority figures etc. For example, if your family or peer group dealt with conflict by yelling and arguing, then you may have learned to deal with conflict in that way. Or if your family taught you that you should always please others before yourself, then you may find it hard to be assertive about your needs. Or if your family or peer group believe that you shouldn't express negative emotion, and ignore or ridicule you if you do, then you will quickly learn not to express negative emotion.

Some questions that can be useful to ask yourself when you are thinking about how you may have learned to become unassertive are:

- How did your family handle conflict?
- What did they do when they disagreed with somebody or were upset with people?
- How did your parents teach you to deal with conflict?
- What were their messages?
- In what ways did you learn to get what you wanted without asking for it directly? (e.g., crying, yelling, making threats etc.)
- Do you still use these ways to get what you want today?

As you can see from the examples above, there are often good and valid reasons why we become unassertive. As children and teenagers we learn to behave in a way that works for

us at the time. If we were assertive to aggressive parents or friends it may have got us into trouble, so we learned to stay under the radar. Or we may have learned to be aggressive to survive. And it is likely that the family members and friends that we learned this from also learned their behaviour from someone else.

It is important that you don't blame yourself or your family for your lack of assertiveness. It can be more helpful to think of it as a vicious cycle that you and your family have been caught in. Now you have decided to break the cycle and learn a new assertive way of thinking and behaving. This means that you will not pass on these unhelpful ways of behaving to your family and friends.

What stops us from being assertive?

A number of factors can stop us from being assertive:

Self-defeating beliefs. We might have unrealistic beliefs and negative self statements about being assertive, our ability to be assertive, or the things that might happen if we are assertive. This is often a major cause of acting non-assertively. Examples of such beliefs are:

- It is uncaring, rude and selfish to say what you want.
- If I assert myself I will upset the other person and ruin our relationship
- It will be terribly embarrassing if I say what I think.

Module 3 “Thinking in a more assertive way” has more examples of these unhelpful beliefs, and teaches us how to think in a more assertive manner.

Skills deficit: It may be that we just don't have the verbal and nonverbal skills to be assertive. We may watch other people being assertive and admire their behaviour but have no real idea how to be like that ourselves. We will be examining specific assertiveness techniques in Module 4 “Behaving in a more assertive way”.

Anxiety and stress: It may be that we know how to be assertive but we get so anxious that we find we can't carry out the behaviour. We may be so stressed that it becomes difficult to think and act clearly. We need to learn how to manage our anxiety and reduce

the physical stress in our bodies. Module 5 in these assertiveness modules is called “Reducing physical tension” and will introduce some exercises to lower the physical tension in your body.

If you tend to worry a lot you can tackle this with the modules on worry and anxiety (“What? Me worry!?”) on the website. If you have anxiety that is extreme enough to result in panic attacks please look at our modules on panic (“Panic Stations”).

Situation Evaluation: It may be that we can’t really tell which behaviours to use in which situations. There are three main mistakes people can make with evaluating situations. We might mistake firm assertion for aggression; we might mistake nonassertion for politeness; or we might mistake nonassertion for being helpful. You will learn some techniques for dealing with these mistakes in Module 3 “Thinking in a more assertive way”.

Cultural and Generational Influences: There can also be strong cultural and generational influences on our behaviour. For example, in some cultures assertiveness is not as valued as in Western society. If you are from one of these cultures it is important to weight up the pros and cons about being assertive in particular situations. You may find that the pros of living by your cultural values outweigh the pros of being assertive. Older generations may also find it difficult to be assertive. Men were once taught that it was weak to express their emotions and women were taught that it was aggressive to state their needs or opinions. Lifelong beliefs such as these can be difficult to change but they can change!

How assertive are you?

It can be difficult to know how assertive we are. In some situations we may feel very capable of being assertive but in other situations we may find ourselves not really expressing how we felt or thought, and feeling upset or frustrated with ourselves. This next exercise can help you determine how assertive you are and help you work out in which situations you would like to be more assertive. Down the left side we have a list of different situations that require assertiveness. Across the top are different groups of people. You work across cell by cell and rate each combination of situations and groups of people. For example, someone

may find giving compliments to strangers relatively easy and rate themselves at 0 in this cell, but have a lot of difficulty giving compliments to authority figures such as their boss and so rate this cell at 4.

Exercise. Rating your assertiveness in different situations

Fill in each cell using a scale from 0 to 5. A rating of “0” means you can assert yourself with no problem. A rating of 5 means that you cannot assert yourself at all in this situation.

	Friends of the same gender	Friends of different gender	Authority figures	Strangers	Work colleagues	Intimate relations or spouse	Shop assistants
Saying No							
Giving compliments							
Expressing your opinion							
Asking for help							
Expressing anger							
Expressing affection							
Stating your right and needs							
Giving criticism							
Being criticised							
Starting and keeping a conversation going							

Keep a copy of your responses to this exercise as you will use it in Module 10 when you create your own assertiveness plan. You will also be able to complete it again once you have finished all the modules to see if you have improved your assertiveness.

Module Summary

- Assertiveness is a way of communicating that expresses your needs, opinions and emotions while respecting the rights of others. It is different to aggressive behaviour which violates the rights of others and passive behaviour where we violate our own rights.
- Even if we are assertive in most situations there can still be certain situations in which we find it difficult to be assertive.
- Unassertive behaviour can lead to low self esteem.
- We are all born assertive but as we grow we learn different patterns of communication.
- Our environment can make it difficult for us to be assertive.
- Sometimes we hold unhelpful beliefs and assumptions about ourselves, other people and the world that can make it difficult for us to be assertive.

**Coming
Coming
up!**

The next module introduces the characteristics of aggressive, assertive and passive communication. Each style has its own benefits and costs.

ABOUT THIS MODULE

CONTRIBUTORS

Fiona Michel (MPsych¹ PhD²).

Centre for Clinical Interventions

¹Master of Psychology (Clinical Psychology) ²Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology)

Dr Anthea Fursland (PhD²)

Centre for Clinical Interventions

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

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