

ASSERT YOURSELF!



Module Four

How to Behave More Assertively

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Assertiveness Techniques

In this module we introduce some general assertiveness techniques. These techniques can be used across a wide range of situations. Module 7 has some assertiveness techniques specifically for with dealing with criticism.

When you practice these techniques it can be useful to begin practising them in a neutral situation. By this we mean one where your emotions aren't too strong. Then as you become more skilled you can begin using them in more difficult or emotional situations. Remember, as with any new skill you learn, the first time you try these techniques they may not go the way you planned. It is important you don't beat yourself up about this but look at what went wrong and how you might do it differently next time. And then have another go! Over time you will find that they get easier.

Warning! Remember the Nonverbal

With each of the techniques it is important to remember the nonverbal communication as well as the verbal. You may think you are being assertive because you are using a particular assertiveness technique; however it is possible to use all of these in an aggressive or a passive way if you are not careful with your nonverbal communication. To make sure you are using assertive nonverbal communication keep your voice calm, the volume normal, the pace even, keep good eye contact, and try and keep your physical tension low. If you can't remember all the ways you can be assertive nonverbally, reread Module 2.

Basic Assertion

Basic assertion is when we make a statement that expresses clearly our needs, wants, beliefs, opinions or feelings. This type of assertion can be used every day to make our needs known. Typically basic assertion uses "I" statements. Examples of an "I" statement are:

- "I need to be away by 5 o'clock"
- "I feel pleased with the way the issue has been resolved"

You can also use basic assertion to give praise or compliments, information or facts, or when raising an issue with someone for the first time. For example:

- "I haven't thought about that before, I'd like time to think about your idea."
- "I thought your presentation was really good".
- "The cost will be \$2,000"
- "I like it when you help me".

It is important to remember to be specific when making your statement. Decide what it is you want or feel, and say so specifically or directly. Avoid unnecessary padding and keep your statement simple and brief. This skill will help you to be clear about what exactly it is you want to communicate.

Basic assertion also includes what some people refer to as the **self disclosure** technique which essentially means disclosing your feelings with a simple statement. For example:

- "I feel nervous"
- "I feel guilty".
- "I feel angry"

The immediate effect of the self disclosure is to reduce your anxiety, enabling you to relax and take charge of yourself and your feelings. Using "I" statements to express your feelings in this way also shows you are taking responsibility for your own feelings.

Empathic Assertion

Empathy means that we try to understand another person's feelings, needs or wants. So this type of assertion contains an element of recognition of the other person's feelings, needs or wants, as well as a statement of your needs and wants.

This type of assertion can be used when the other person is involved in a situation that may not fit with your needs, and you want to indicate that you are aware of and sensitive to their position.

Examples of Empathetic assertion:

- "I appreciate that you don't like the new procedure, however, until it's changed, I'd like you to keep working on it."

- "I know you're busy at the moment, John, but I'd like to make a request of you."
- "I recognise that it's difficult to be precise on costs, however, I need a rough estimate."

Empathetic assertion is useful in holding you back from over-reacting with aggression as it causes you to give yourself time to imagine the other person's position and therefore slow down your response.

It is possible to over-use certain phrases in empathic assertion and it can start to sound insincere. It can also be used to mask aggression. For example, if someone says "*I appreciate your feelings, but...*" then the empathic statement "I appreciate your feelings" is devalued by the word "but" and the phrase becomes aggression masked as assertion.

Consequence assertion

This is the strongest form of assertion and is seen as a last resort behaviour. It is usually used in a situation where someone has not been considering the rights of others and you want to get their behaviour to change without becoming aggressive yourself. In a work situation it may be used when standard procedures or guidelines are not being followed. When you use consequence assertion you inform the other person of the consequences for them of not changing their behaviour. It can easily be seen as threatening and therefore aggressive. Only use this form of assertion when you have sanctions to apply, and only when you are prepared to apply them.

As this type of assertion can easily be seen as aggressive you need to be very careful of the non-verbal signals you use. Keep your voice calm and at an even pitch and volume, keep good eye contact, and try and keep your body and face relaxed.

Examples of Consequence assertion:

- "If you continue to withhold the information, I am left with no option, but to bring in the production director. I'd prefer not to."
- "I'm not prepared, John, to let any of my staff cooperate with yours on the project, unless you give them access to the same facilities that your people have."

- "If this occurs again, I'm left with no alternative, but to apply the formal disciplinary procedure. I'd prefer not to."

Discrepancy Assertion

Discrepancy assertion works by pointing out a discrepancy between what has previously been agreed and what is actually happening. This is useful for clarifying whether there is a misunderstanding or a contradiction, and when a person's behaviour does not match their words.

Examples of Discrepancy assertion:

- "As I understand it, we agreed that Project A was top priority. Now you're asking me to give more time to Project B. I'd like to clarify which is now the priority."
- "Paul, on the one hand you are saying that you want to improve cooperation between our departments, but on the other hand you make statements about us that make it difficult for us to cooperate. I agree that we can improve the situation, so I'd like to talk about that."

Negative feelings assertion

Negative feelings assertion is used when you are experiencing very negative feelings towards another person - anger, resentment, hurt and so on. In a controlled and calm way you draw attention to the undesirable affect another person's behaviour is having on you. This allows you to deal with the feelings without making an uncontrolled outburst, and alerts the other person to the effects of their actions on you.

There are four steps to negative feeling assertion:

Step	Example
1. Describe the other person's behaviour objectively. Be careful to do this without interpreting or judging.	<i>When you leave it this late to produce your report...</i>
2. Describe the impact of the person's behaviour on you. Be specific and clear. Don't	<i>...it involves my working over the weekend...</i>

overgeneralise.	
3. Describe your feelings	<i>...I feel annoyed about this,...</i>
4. State how you would prefer the behaviour to be in the future.	<i>... so in future I'd like to receive it by Friday lunch time</i>

Examples of negative feeling assertion:

“When you come home late, without telling me before, I worry that something is wrong and I feel angry. I would really appreciate it if you could ring and let me know beforehand.”

“When you continually interrupt me when I'm working on the balance sheets, it means I have to start all over again. I'm feeling irritated by this, so I would prefer you to wait until I have finished.”

Broken Record

Children are experts at the broken record technique. This skill involves preparing what you are going to say and repeating it exactly as often as necessary, in a calm relaxed manner. This skill can apply in most situations. It is a good skill to use when you are dealing with clever articulate people as all you have to do is stick to your prepared lines. It helps keep you relaxed because you know what you are going to say and you can maintain a steady comment, avoiding irrelevant logic or argumentative bait. It is a particularly good technique good for saying no (this will be explained in more detail in Module 6).

Example of the Broken Record technique:

Kate: Can I borrow \$20 from you?

Dave: I can't lend you any money. I've run out.

Kate: I'll pay you back as soon as I can. I need it desperately. You are my friend aren't you?

Dave: I can't lend you any money.

Kate: I would do the same for you. You won't miss \$20.

Dave: I am your friend but I can't lend you any money. I've run out.

This broken record technique can be combined with the other assertiveness techniques you have just learned. Always begin with the mildest stance, getting more and more assertive as you see fit. Avoid jumping in first with the heaviest consequences stance; it will be a threat and aggressive behaviour, NOT assertive behaviour.

The following example of the broken record technique uses all levels of assertiveness beginning with basic assertion then moving through to empathic assertion and then consequence assertion.

Basic

- "I bought this clock here yesterday. The button for moving the hands isn't working properly so I'd like to exchange it please"
- At this point the assistant will either agree or:
- "The clock should have been checked before it left the shop"

Empathetic

- "I realise that would have made things easier, however, I would still like to replace it."
- At this point the assistant will either agree or:
- "I don't have the authority to exchange things"
- Response "I would still like it to be replaced."
- After a few exchanges the level could be raised to:

Consequence

- "I would like the item changed. If you are not prepared to do that I will take the matter up with your Head Office. I would prefer to resolve it now."

The one situation in which this technique can be a disadvantage is when you are making a request from someone who does not want to do what you are asking. When they continue to resist, your requests lose power every time you have to repeat them. If the requests are repeated too often it can backfire on the authority of your words. In these cases it is necessary to have some consequences on hand.

Practising the Techniques

All of these techniques require practice. Start with basic assertion and practice this for a week or two before you begin trying the others. Pick one technique at a time and use it whenever appropriate. It can be helpful to keep a little log book or diary of the ways you have been able to use these assertive techniques. Then you can see how often you are using assertiveness and which techniques are the most useful ones for you. We have an example log sheet below. You can use this or make up one for yourself.

Practice Sheet for Assertiveness Techniques

Date / Time	Technique Used	Situation and how used	Things to remember for next time
<i>Example: Tuesday 10am</i>	<i>Basic assertion</i>	<i>At work. Complimented Mary on her report.</i>	<i>My voice was probably too soft and I didn't look at her much. Next time speak more loudly and make good eye contact.</i>
<i>Example: Wednesday 2pm</i>	<i>Discrepancy assertion</i>	<i>At work. My boss told me to do one thing then told me another 5 minutes later</i>	<i>I think I got a bit angry and might have sounded annoyed. I need to keep calmer.</i>

Module summary

- There are a number of assertiveness techniques. These include basic assertion, empathic assertion, consequence assertion, discrepancy assertion, the broken record technique, and negative feeling assertion.
- It is important to remember your non-verbal communication when using these techniques.

**Coming
up:**

The next module introduces techniques for reducing your physical tension.

ABOUT THIS MODULE

CONTRIBUTORS

Fiona Michel (MPsych¹ PhD²).
Centre for Clinical Interventions
Master of Psychology (Clinical Psychology)

Dr Anthea Fursland (PhD²)
Centre for Clinical Interventions
Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology)

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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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