

# THE POWER OF ASSERTIVENESS

*A Mindful Communication Toolkit*



# Introduction

You may be surprised to learn that being passive or getting aggressive / angry at yourself, others, or the world are two factors that can maintain low mood or anxiety. Alternatively, you may have included these factors on your own vicious cycles, and wondered how you might alter these.

## The Effects of Being Unassertive

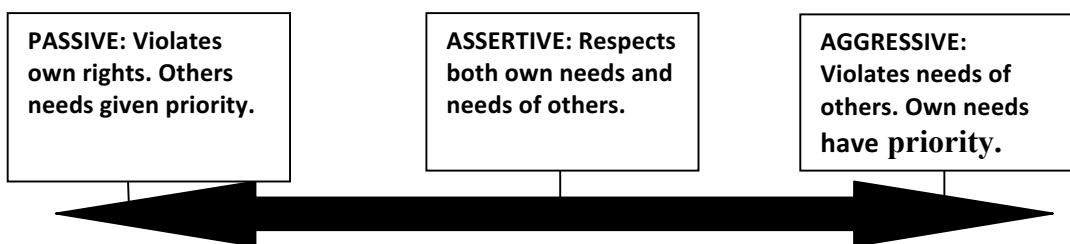
The main effect of not being assertive is that it can lead to low self esteem. If we communicate in a passive manner we are not saying what we really feel or think. This means we can end up agreeing with and fulfilling other people's needs or wants rather than our own. This can result in a lack of purpose,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

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.

## What 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.



## 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							

**Remember – being assertive does not mean being aggressive!**



## Recognising the Difference between Passive, Assertive and Aggressive Communication Styles.

It is important that you learn how to recognise the verbal and non-verbal characteristics of the different communication styles. Once we know these we will be able to recognise passive, assertive or aggressive behaviour in ourselves and others. The first step to changing behaviour is recognising which bits we need to change. It may be that you are able to speak assertively, i.e. your verbal skills are assertive, but your nonverbal communication may be quite passive and contradicting your verbal communication. For example, if you say "I don't like it when you do that", which is an assertive statement, but you do it in a very quiet voice with no eye contact and shuffling your feet, then your nonverbal behaviour will undermine your verbal and your message will probably not be taken seriously.

	COMMUNICATION STYLE		
	PASSIVE	AGGRESSIVE	ASSERTIVE
<b>DEFINITION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not expressing honest feelings, thoughts and beliefs. Therefore, allowing others to violate your rights. Can also mean expressing thoughts and feelings in an apologetic, self-effacing way – so that others easily disregard them.</li> <li>Violating your own rights.</li> <li>Also sometimes showing a subtle lack of respect for the other person's ability to take disappointments, shoulder some responsibility, or handle their own problems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You stand up for your personal rights and express your thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a way which is usually inappropriate and always violates the rights of the other person.</li> <li>People often feel devastated by an encounter with an aggressive person</li> <li>Superiority is maintained by putting others down.</li> <li>When threatened you attack.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A way of communicating our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs in an open, honest manner without violating the rights of others.</li> <li>It is an alternative to being aggressive where we abuse other people's rights and passive where we abuse our own rights.</li> </ul>
<b>VERBAL CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>long rambling sentences</li> <li>beat-around-the-bush</li> <li>hesitant, filled with pauses</li> <li>frequent throat clearing</li> <li>apologise inappropriately in a soft unsteady voice</li> <li>using phrases such as "if it wouldn't be too much trouble..."</li> <li>fill in words, e.g., "maybe", "er", "um", "sort of"</li> <li>voice often dull and monotonous</li> <li>tone may be sing-song or whining</li> <li>over-soft or over-warm</li> <li>quiet often dropping away</li> <li>frequent justifications, e.g., "I wouldn't normally say anything"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strident, sarcastic or condescending voice</li> <li>Fluent, few hesitations</li> <li>Often abrupt, clipped</li> <li>Often fast</li> <li>Emphasising blaming words</li> <li>Firm voice</li> <li>Tone sarcastic, cold, harsh</li> <li>Voice can be strident, often shouting, rising at end</li> <li>Use of threats, e.g., "You'd better watch out" or "If you don't..."</li> <li>Put downs, e.g., "You've got to be kidding..." or "Don't be so stupid"</li> <li>Evaluative comments, emphasising concepts such as: should", "bad", "ought"</li> <li>Sexual / racist remarks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Firm, relaxed voice</li> <li>Fluent, few hesitations</li> <li>Steady even pace</li> <li>Tone is middle range, rich and warm</li> <li>Sincere and clear</li> <li>Not over-loud or quiet</li> <li>Voice appropriately loud for the situation</li> <li>"I" statements ("I like", "I want", "I don't like") that are brief and to the point</li> <li>Co-operative phrases, e.g., "What are your thoughts on this"</li> <li>Emphatic statements of interest, e.g., "I would like to"</li> <li>Distinction between fact and opinion, e.g., "My experience is different"</li> </ul>

## Overcoming Anxiety & Depression

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• apologies, e.g., "I'm terribly sorry to bother you."</li> <li>• qualifiers, e.g., "It's only my opinion" or "I might be wrong"</li> <li>• self-dismissal, e.g., "It's not important" or "It doesn't really matter"</li> <li>• self put-downs, e.g., "I'm useless...hopeless" or "You know me..."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boastfulness, e.g., "I haven't got problems like yours"</li> <li>• Opinions expressed as fact, e.g., "Nobody want to behave like that" or "That's a useless way to do it"</li> <li>• Threatening questions, e.g., "Haven't you finished that yet?" or "Why on earth did you do it like that?"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggestions without "shoulds" or "oughts" e.g., "How about..." or "Would you like to..."</li> <li>• Constructive criticism without blame, e.g., "I feel irritated when you interrupt me"</li> <li>• Seeking others opinions, e.g., "How does this fit in with your ideas"</li> <li>• Willingness to explore other solutions, e.g., "How can we get around this problem?"</li> </ul>
<b>NON-VERBAL CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• averting gaze</li> <li>• looking down</li> <li>• posture can be slouched</li> <li>• wringing hands</li> <li>• winking or laughing when expressing anger</li> <li>• covering mouth with hand</li> <li>• crossing arms for protection</li> <li>• smiling when expressing anger or being criticised</li> <li>• raising eyebrows in anticipation</li> <li>• jaw trembling</li> <li>• lip biting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intruding into the other person's space</li> <li>• Staring the other person out</li> <li>• Gestures such as pointing, fist clenching</li> <li>• Striding around impatiently</li> <li>• Leaning forward or over</li> <li>• Crossing arms (unapproachable)</li> <li>• Smiling may become sneering</li> <li>• Scowling when angry</li> <li>• Jaws set firm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receptive listening</li> <li>• Direct eye contact without staring</li> <li>• Erect, balanced, open body stance</li> <li>• Open hand movements</li> <li>• Smiling when pleased</li> <li>• Frowning when angry</li> <li>• Features steady</li> <li>• Jaw relaxed</li> </ul>
<b>THINKING STYLE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I don't count"</li> <li>• "My feelings, needs and thoughts are less important than yours"</li> <li>• "People will think badly of me or not like me"</li> <li>• "If I say no then I may upset someone, I will be responsible for upsetting them"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I'll get you before you have a chance of getting me"</li> <li>• "I'm out for number one"</li> <li>• "The world is a battle ground and I am out to win"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I won't allow you to take advantage of me and I won't attack you for being who you are"</li> </ul>

## How to Think More Assertively

One of the factors that can make it difficult for us to be assertive is our thinking. We all hold beliefs about ourselves, other people and how the world works. Usually these beliefs came from our experience in the world and made sense to us at the time. However even though we have moved on from these experiences we may not have updated our thinking. For example, as a child we may have been taught by our family that it is impolite to ask for things or make demands when other people are around. Hence, we may have developed a belief that it is rude and selfish to tell others our needs and desires, and that the right thing to do is to keep them to ourselves. As adults we may still have this belief even though we are no longer in the same situation. We continue to assume that the belief is true without checking it out. As a result, we may never express our needs and desires which could make us feel tense, stressed, anxious or resentful.

Below are listed a number of typical unassertive thoughts. See if any of them apply to you.

- I shouldn't say how I'm really feeling or thinking because I don't want to burden others with my problems.
- 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
- If someone says "no" to my request it is because they don't like or love me
- I shouldn't have to say what I need or how I feel: people close to me should already know
- It is uncaring, rude and selfish to say what you want
- I have no right to change my mind; neither has anyone else
- It will all work out in the end, and anyway it's not my fault
- People should keep their feelings to themselves
- If I express that I am feeling anxious people will think I am weak and ridicule me or take advantage of me.
- If I accept compliments from someone it will mean I am big headed.

### **Exercise: identify your own unassertive beliefs / thoughts**

Take a minute and see if you can identify any more unassertive beliefs that you have.

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## Changing your beliefs and thoughts

Identifying your unhelpful beliefs is the first step towards changing them. In fact, for some people just realising that they have been thinking this way can be enough to help them change, especially when they realise they have the right to change and think in a different way.

There are two other ways we can change our unhelpful thoughts;

- i) Challenge our thoughts
- ii) Set up behaviour experiments

### i) Challenging Thoughts

Use a Thought Diary (attached at the back of this workbook) to challenge your thoughts. Note the situation, the emotion, and the hot thoughts (i.e. those thoughts most strongly related to your emotion), and identify any thinking errors. Then use challenging questions to produce an alternative thought. You can use the following questions to help challenge unassertive thoughts:

- Am I thinking in a passive, assertive or aggressive way?
- Did I respond in a passive, assertive or aggressive way?
- What is the evidence for this thought?
- What is the evidence against this thought?
- How else could I view the situation?
- Are there any other interpretations of what happened?
- What would be a more assertive way of thinking and responding?

The following is an example of an unassertive thought that has been challenged using a Thought Diary.

Situation	Emotion	Thought (underline the 'hot thought')	Thinking Errors <i>(Am I thinking in a passive or aggressive way?)</i>	Alternative Thoughts (use the challenging questions)
I asked a friend to go shopping with me and she said "no".	Hurt Angry	<u>She is selfish for saying "No".</u>  Maybe she doesn't like me anymore.	Aggressive - that I think she should do what I want her to.	She has done lots of things with me and for me over the course of our friendship. She may be tired. She may have something else on. She has a right to say no and that doesn't mean she is selfish. I will suggest catching up another time doing something that we both like.

### **ii) Behaviour Experiments**

Doing a Thought Diary can help us change our beliefs about a situation. This is especially true when we write them down and practise our new thoughts over and over again. Sometimes however it is hard for us to shift our beliefs when all we are doing is writing down our thoughts. We might see that it makes sense logically but feel inside that nothing has really changed. Thought Diaries may also be difficult to use when there is no real evidence for or against a particular situation.

What may be more useful in this situation is to do a Behavioural Experiment. We are still trying to change our beliefs but whereas a Thought Diary helps us change beliefs by thinking differently about the belief, a Behavioural Experiment helps us change beliefs by actually giving us some evidence to support a new belief.

For example, someone may have the belief: "If I assert myself then I will upset the other person and ruin our relationship". This belief has meant that the person has always gone along with what others suggest even though it may be the complete opposite of what they really want to do. They believe it so much they have never considered trying to assert themselves. They have completed some Thought Diaries and realised that they don't really have any evidence to support their belief. However, neither do they have any evidence against it so they feel a bit stuck.

They decide that one way they can find out is to do an experiment where they actually test their prediction that the other person will be upset and the relationship will be ruined. This will be a challenge and can be quite anxiety provoking. When deciding to do an experiment it is important that you plan it carefully so that the results will be clear. Also you may need to start with an easier experiment and then build up to more difficult situations.

#### **Step One – Identify the prediction**

The first step is to identify the prediction that you have about the situation and how you will know if it has happened. This is an important step, as if you don't make it clear how you will know it has happened then you can easily shift the goal posts after the experiment.

#### **Step Two – Identify any unhelpful behaviours**

You also need to identify any unassertive or unhelpful behaviour that you would normally do so that you can make sure that you don't do these during the experiment. Then you need to make some more helpful predictions about what may happen.

#### **Step Three – Identify a more realistic prediction**

You may have produced this earlier in your thought diary in the alternative thoughts column.

## Step Four – Set up the experiment

You then set up the experiment. This involves being very clear about the steps you will take. Make it clear when, where and how you will do the experiment. This includes identifying some more helpful behaviours that you will do during the experiment.

## Step Five – Carry out the experiment and evaluate the results

You then do the experiment and evaluate the results. Ask yourself:

What happened?

Were your original predictions supported?

What did you learn from the experiment?

The following example is an experiment to test the belief: “If I assert myself then I will upset the other person and ruin our relationship”.

### Step One – Identify the prediction

The Situation	Telling my friend I don't want to go shopping with her.
My Prediction	She will be upset and angry and not want to be my friend anymore.
How much do I believe it will happen (0-100%)?	70%
How will I know it has happened?	She will hang up on me and not return my calls or ring me.

### Step Two – Identify any unhelpful behaviours

What unhelpful behaviours would I normally engage in to cope (eg. avoidance, escape, safety behaviours)	Make up excuses, pretend to be sick, avoid her until it is too late.
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### Step Three – Identify a more realistic prediction

Make a more realistic prediction (can be from thought diary)	She has said no to me before and that was fine. She may be disappointed but if she is a good friend she won't be angry and our relationship will be fine.
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### Step Four – Set up the experiment

What will I do differently to test out the two predictions?	Instead of avoiding her I will ring her today first thing and explain why I don't want to go shopping at this particular time (i.e. I have a meeting I need to prepare for). I will organise another time to catch up with her.
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### Step Five – Carry out the experiment and evaluate the results

What actually happened?	She said it was fine and in fact suited her too. We made a time for a coffee next week.
How much did my original prediction come true? (0-100%)	0%
Which prediction was supported?	The more realistic one.
What was it like to behave differently?	Scary, difficult at first, got easier.
What did you learn from the experiment?	I tend to expect the worse and this has kept me behaving in a passive way. It felt good to be honest and direct. Being assertive doesn't mean that people will be upset with you and if they are then that is their problem to work on.

At the back of this workbook is a blank experiment sheet for you to use.

## Changing your behaviour

There are a number of techniques that can be used to help you become more assertive in your behaviour. We've identified 6 here:

- I) Basic Assertion;
- II) Empathic Assertion;
- III) Consequence Assertion;
- IV) Discrepancy Assertion;
- V) Negative Feelings Assertion;
- VI) Broken Record.

You may find these techniques rather strange initially, and it might be a good idea to begin practicing them in a neutral situation, i.e. 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! Don't forget to make sure that your verbal techniques are supported by your non-verbal body language. Make sure you're not appearing aggressive or passive.***



### i) 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.

### **ii) 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 Empathic 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.

### **iii) 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."

### **iv) 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."

### **v) 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 One - Describe the other person's behaviour objectively.**

Be careful to do this without interpreting or judging. For example: '*When you leave it this late to produce your report.....*'

**Step Two - Describe the impact of the person's behaviour on you.**

Be specific and clear. Don't over generalise. For example: '*...it involves my working over the weekend...*'

**Step Three - Describe your feelings**

Make sure you use the word 'I' to describe your feelings, so that you are taking responsibility for these. For example '*....I feel annoyed about this....*'

**Step Four - State how you would prefer the behaviour to be in the future.**

This is essential, it allows you to indicate in a clear and straightforward way what action or outcome you would like. If your needs are not known they will not be taken into consideration in any negotiations, as people cannot be expected to know what you want unless you tell them. For example '*... so in future I'd like to receive it by Friday lunch time*'

**vi) 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. 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 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 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.

### **Exercise: Practice being assertive and keep a log**

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 attached a log at the back of this workbook for you to use.

## Saying “No”

Many people have great difficulty saying “No” to others. Even people who are quite assertive in other situations may find themselves saying “Yes” to things that they really don’t want to do. For example, a friend may ask you to do something which is a real inconvenience for you and you say “Yes”, or you may find yourself volunteering for all sorts of jobs to the point that you are over-loaded.

### The effects of not being able to say “No”

If you say “Yes” when you really mean “No”, resentment and anger can build up towards the person you have said “Yes” to, even though they have done nothing wrong. You can also become increasingly frustrated and disappointed with yourself. And if you are taking on more than you can cope with, you can become over-worked and highly stressed. In the long term not being assertive in this way can decrease your self esteem and lead to depression and anxiety.

At the other end of the spectrum some people are able to say “No” but do so in an aggressive manner without consideration or respect for the other person. This may result in people disliking you or being angry and resentful. Neither of these situations is good assertive communication.

### Unhelpful beliefs: Why is it hard to say “No”

Anyone who has spent any time around a toddler knows that they have no trouble saying “No!” However as we grow older we learn from our environment and our experience that it is not always appropriate to say “no”. We can end up with a number of unhelpful beliefs about saying “no” that make it difficult for us to use this word. Some of these beliefs are listed below. See if any apply to you or whether you have your own beliefs about saying “no”.

#### UNHELPFUL BELIEFS

- Saying “no” is rude and aggressive.
- Saying “no” is unkind, uncaring and selfish.
- Saying “no” will hurt and upset others and make them feel rejected.
- If I say “no” to somebody they won’t like me anymore.
- Others’ needs are more important than mine.
- I should always try and please others and be helpful.
- Saying “no” over little things is small minded and petty.

The unhelpful thoughts are not facts. They are just thoughts or opinions that we have learned. Each of them can be replaced by a more helpful thought or opinion about saying “no”. Below we have listed some of these:

### **HELPFUL THOUGHTS**

- Other people have the right to ask and I have the right to refuse.
- When you say “no” you are refusing a request, not rejecting a person.
- When we say “yes” to one thing we are actually saying “no” to something else. We always have a choice and we are constantly making choices.
- People who have difficulty saying no usually overestimate the difficulty that the other person will have in accepting the refusal. We are not trusting that they can cope with hearing “no”. By expressing our feelings openly and honestly, it actually liberates the other person to express their feelings. By saying “no” to somebody it allows them to say “no” to your requests while still being able to ask for further requests.

## **Changing your behaviour: How to Say “no”.**

There are some basic principles you can apply when you want to say “no”. These are:

1. Be straightforward and honest but not rude so that you can make the point effectively.
2. As a rule keep it brief.
3. Tell the person if you are finding it difficult
4. Be polite – say something like “thank you for asking...”
5. Speak slowly with warmth otherwise “no” may sound abrupt.
6. Don’t apologise and give elaborate reasons for saying “no”. It is your right to say no if you don’t want to do things.
7. Remember that it is better in the long run to be truthful than breed resentment and bitterness within yourself.
8. When saying “no” take responsibility for it. Don’t blame or make excuses. Change “I can’t” to “I don’t want to”.

## **Ways of saying “No”**

There are also a number of ways you can say “no”. Some of these are more appropriate in particular situations:

### **1. The Direct ‘no’.**

When someone asks you to do something you don't want to do, just say 'no'. The aim is to say no without apologising. The other person has the problem but you do not have to allow him or her to pass it on to you. This technique can be quite forceful and can be effective with salespeople.

### **2. The reflecting ‘no’.**

This technique involves acknowledging the content and feeling of the request, then adding your assertive refusal at the end. For example, “I know you want to talk to me about organizing the annual department review, but I can't do lunch today”. Or “I know you're looking forward to a walk this afternoon but I can't come”.

### **3. The reasoned “no”.**

In this technique you give a very brief and genuine reason for why you are saying “No”. For example “I can't have lunch with you because I have a report that needs to be finished by tomorrow”.

### **4. The raincheck “no”.**

This is not a definite “no”. It is a way of saying “no” to the request at the present moment but leaves room for saying “Yes” in the future. Only use it if you genuinely want to meet the request. For example “I can't have lunch with you today, but I could make it sometime next week”.

### **5. The enquiring “no”.**

As with the raincheck “no” this is not a definite “no”. It is a way of opening up the request to see if there is another way it could be met. For example “Is there any other time you'd like to go?”

### **6. The broken record “no”.**

This can be used in a wide range of situations. You just repeat the simple statement of refusal over and over again. No explanation, just repeat it. It is particularly good for persistent requests. For example:

Dave: No, I can't have lunch with you.

Kate: Oh, please, it won't take long.

Dave: No, I can't have lunch with you.

Kate: Oh, go on, I'll pay.

Dave: No, I can't have lunch with you.

## Relaxation

When we are communicating in a passive or aggressive way we are often feeling anxious or angry and this can be reflected in our bodies. We can become tense in our shoulders, necks, jaw or through our entire body. Over time this tension can build up to the point where we can get headaches, backaches, stomach problems, in fact a whole range of physical problems. We also find it increasingly difficult to relax. To communicate assertively we must be able to control the arousal and tension that our bodies may feel when we are in difficult situations or situations in which we feel uncomfortable.

There are a number of techniques you can use to reduce physical tension. Some of these are listed below:

- Exercise
- Massage
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Yoga
- Meditation
- Guided Visualisation
- Controlled breathing
- Tai chi

Try out some of these techniques and pick one or two that you particularly like and / or find useful when you are feeling tense or anxious. You will find some relaxation scripts at the back of this workbook. Remember like most of the techniques taught on the course, relaxation takes practice; so don't be too despondent if it takes a while before you notice any effect!



# Worksheets ->

## Thought Diary

Situation	Emotion	Thought (underline the 'hot thought')	Thinking Errors <i>(Am I thinking in a passive or aggressive way?)</i>	Alternative Thoughts (use the challenging questions)
		.		

## Behaviour Experiment Sheet

### Step One – Identify the prediction

The Situation	
My Prediction	
How much do I believe it will happen (0-100%)?	
How will I know it has happened?	

### Step Two – Identify any unhelpful behaviours

What unhelpful behaviours would I normally engage in to cope (eg. avoidance, escape, safety behaviours)	
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### Step Three – Identify a more realistic prediction

Make a more realistic prediction (can be from thought diary)	
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### Step Four – Set up the experiment

What will I do differently to test out the two predictions?	
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### Step Five – Carry out the experiment and evaluate the results

What actually happened?	
How much did my original prediction come true? (0-100%)	
Which prediction was supported?	
What was it like to behave differently?	
What did you learn from the experiment?	

## Assertiveness Log Sheet

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>

# RELAXATION EXERCISES

## Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation reduces the pulse rate and blood pressure, as well as decreasing respiration rates and psychological tension. We often do not realise which of our muscles are chronically tense. Progressive muscle relaxation provides a way of identifying which muscle groups are tense and distinguishing between the sensation of relaxation as opposed to tension.

**Procedure** It is important to relax in a position in which you feel as little tension as possible.

### Lying down

It is best not to lie on something too squashy, otherwise you may be tensing muscles that you do not mean to. You may like to support your neck and knees for greater comfort. Have your palms down and your legs should be uncrossed.

### Sitting

If sitting in a chair you should ensure that:

- a) You sit well back in the chair so your back is well supported
- b) Both your feet are on the ground
- c) Your legs and ankles are uncrossed
- d) Your forearms supported by the chair or your hands resting on your legs

Four major areas of the body are covered:

1. Hands, forearms and upper arms
2. Head, face, throat, shoulders and neck
3. Chest, stomach and back
4. Thighs, buttocks, calves and feet

Progressive muscle relaxation can be practised lying down or sitting in a chair with your head supported. Each muscle group is tensed up tightly for five to seven seconds and then relaxed for twenty to thirty seconds. This procedure is repeated at least once for each muscle group. Any area that remains tense can be tensed up to five times. It is helpful to identify those muscle groups that tend to tense up when you get stressed so that you can pay special attention to those areas when relaxing. To familiarise yourself with the procedure you may find listening to a tape helpful.

## A list of muscles and how to tense them

After tensing and relaxing each muscle, take a deep diaphragmatic breath, melting away any remaining tension as you breathe out.

*If you suffer from neck or back problems – omit those exercises.*

**Hands and forearms** make a fist .... and then let go.

**Biceps** bend your arms at the elbows and try to touch your wrists to your shoulders .... then let go, allow your arms to return to a comfortable relaxed position.

**Triceps** (back of your arms) straighten your arms as hard as you can .... and then let go.

**Shoulders** shrug them as if trying to make them touch your ears .... and then let go.

**Neck** arch your head back .... turn your head to the right and then to the left .... then let go.

**Forehead** raise your eyebrows as if surprised .... then let go.

**Brow and eyelids** squeeze your eyes tightly shut .... then let go.

**Jaw** clench your teeth together ... then let go.

**Tongue and throat** push your tongue hard against the roof of your mouth .... and let go.

**Chest** take a really deep breath and hold it .... and then let go.

**Stomach** tense your stomach as if someone were going to punch it .... then let go.

**Hips and lower back** arch your back and clench your buttock muscles .... then let go.

**Legs** straighten your legs and point your toes away from you .... then let go....pull your toes

If you sense any remaining tension in a muscle, simply tense it further, relax it, take a deep breath and sigh as you breathe out.

## Autogenic Relaxation

Autogenic relaxation simply means focusing on two aspects of the relaxation response – increased blood flow and decreased muscular tension. It does this by concentrating on two things that we feel when relaxing: *warmth* – which is a sensation we experience when more blood reaches the extremities, such as the arms, legs, hands and feet and *heaviness* which is what we feel when the muscles are relaxed.

Autogenic relaxation does not require you to force anything. Just let yourself go. Become aware of how, when and where you are tense and allow the tension to melt away. Let any distracting thoughts go through and out of your mind.

Autogenic relaxation can be done lying down or sitting in a supportive armchair.

### What to do

When you are comfortable, lying or sitting, take a deep, diaphragmatic breath. Exhale gently and notice that first pleasant feeling of relaxation. There is no need to move during autogenics unless you want to make yourself more comfortable. Simply unwind, allowing yourself to focus on the sensations of relaxation. The following phrases help you to do this. Say them to yourself 3 times, pausing after each repetition. Take your time, keeping your breathing regular, calm and relaxed.

*I am at peace with myself and fully relaxed*

*My right arm is heavy (if left handed you may want to start with your left hand)*

*My left arm is heavy*

*My right leg is heavy*

*My left leg is heavy*

*My neck and shoulders are heavy*

### Take a deep, full breath and unwind even further

*My right arm is warm*

*My left arm is warm*

*My right leg is warm*

*My left leg is warm*

*My neck and shoulders are warm*

*My heartbeat is calm and regular*

*My breathing is calm and regular*

*My stomach is warm and calm*

*My forehead is cool and calm*

### Take some time to enjoy the sensations of relaxation; when you are ready say to yourself - I am refreshed and completely alert

## Relaxed Breathing

Good breathing is essential to our general health and for reducing stress. The way we breathe can reflect how stressed we are, in that when we are under pressure our breathing becomes rapid and shallow and we tend to use only our upper lungs. Relaxed breathing involves breathing slowly using the diaphragm. The diaphragm is the sheet of muscles below our lungs. This form of breathing uses the lower lungs and can be called stomach breathing. However, if the stomach is tense the diaphragm gets restricted and relaxed breathing becomes difficult. Poor breathing can thus set up a self-perpetuating cycle. However, by learning and practising diaphragmatic breathing this cycle can be broken.

Using only tense upper chest breathing can create several undesirable side effects:

- It causes the body to expel too much carbon dioxide
- The acidity in the blood becomes too alkaline
- This causes the blood vessels to narrow and the circulation of blood to the brain is restricted
- Palpitations, dizziness, feeling faint and chest pains can be a result
- Panic attacks may occur
- Panic attacks restrict breathing further and can lead to hyperventilation

## Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing, together with mental and physical relaxation, has been found to reduce high blood pressure and anxiety significantly.

Diaphragmatic breathing counteracts all the unfortunate effects of poor breathing and is one of the most useful tools in stress management. Diaphragmatic breathing is completely 'portable'. You can use it wherever and whenever you feel stressed and no one will know you are trying to relax as all you are doing is breathing correctly

## Breathing exercise

- Find a quiet warm place to sit where you will not be disturbed for 10 minutes or so.
- Sit on an upright chair with your back straight.
- First become aware of how you normally breathe. Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest. Breathe as you usually would and notice which hand moves, this will tell you if you are using your upper or lower lungs.
- Breathe in and out through your nose. If you can hear your breathing you are breathing too heavily.
- Then concentrate on breathing by using your diaphragm. In other words your stomach should be moving and not your upper chest.

- Now breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth slowly and calmly.
- Make sure your breathing is forward and back rather than up and down.
- Allow a pause before you inhale and another pause before you exhale.
- Silently say the word “relax” or “calm” to yourself each time you breathe out.

### Deep Diaphragmatic Breathing

**Please note that people suffering from chronic breathing problems such as asthma should only practice the breathing exercise described above and not the deep diaphragmatic breathing, as this may exacerbate the problem.** This is the same as the exercise above but is even slower and longer and uses the whole lung capacity.

- Take a deep slow breath, filling your lungs from the bottom and continuing to the top of your upper chest to the count of four.
- Hold the breath for the count of two.
- Exhale to the count of six without forcing anything, just allow the breath out naturally.

This breathing should only be done 4-5 times at one time, but is a very useful technique to use to calm down or reduce tension at times of stress

## VISUALISATION

### MOUNTAIN PATH

Settle back comfortably and close your eyes .... take a deep slow breath and slowly exhale ....repeat this twice more, as you breathe out – imagine you are breathing away all tension and stress .... mentally scan your body for tightness and tension .... and just let relaxation replace any tensions .... allow relaxation to take over.

Now imagine yourself leaving the area where you live .... leave the daily hassles and the fast pace behind .... imagine yourself going across a valley and moving closer and closer to a mountain range .... imagine yourself in the mountain range .... you are going up a winding road .... find a place on the road to stop .... you find a path to walk up .... start walking up the path .... find a comfortable place to stop on the path .... at this place take some time to examine all the tensions and stress in your life .... give the tension and stress shapes and colours .... look at them very carefully and after you have done this, put them down by the side of the path .... continue walking up the path until you come to the top of a hill .... look out over the hill .... what do you see? .... find an inviting, comfortable place and go there .... be aware of the sights, smells and sounds .... be aware of how you are feeling .... get settled and gradually start to relax .... you are now feeling totally relaxed .... experience being relaxed totally and completely .... (*pause for three to five minutes*) .... look around at your special place once more .... remember this is your special place to relax .... you can come here anytime you want to .... bring your attention back to this room and tell yourself that this visualisation is something you have created, and you can use it whenever you want to feel relaxed.

*This relaxation is best spoken with appropriate soft music playing in the background.*

*You may like to make your own relaxation tapes and record this for yourself.*