

ASSERT YOURSELF!



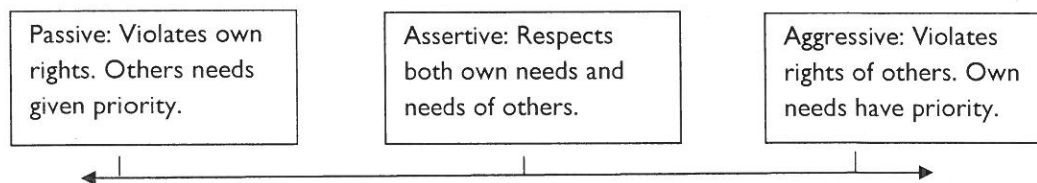
Module One

What is Assertiveness?

What is Assertiveness	2
Myths about Assertiveness	2
The effects of being unassertive	3
How do we become unassertive	3
What stops us from being assertive?	5
How assertive are you?	6
Module summary	8
About this module	9

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 8/27/15

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 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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Module Two

How to Recognise Assertive Behaviour

Recognising the difference between passive, aggressive and assertive communication styles	2
Characteristics of passive communication	2
Characteristics of aggressive communication	4
Characteristics of assertive communication	6
Module summary	9
About this module	10

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.

You will notice that each communication style has some payoffs or positive aspects and costs or negative aspects. It is important to acknowledge these as you may not have realised that there can be a cost to being assertive. For example, a cost of becoming assertive is that people around you may have been getting some benefit from your being unassertive. If they are typically aggressive and want things done their way, they may not want you to change. If you are aware of this possibility it will perhaps make it easier for you to change.

As you read the descriptions below take note of which behaviours you need to add your repertoire!

Characteristics of Passive Communication

Definition:

- 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.
- Violating your own rights.
- 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.

Verbal characteristics:

- long rambling sentences
- beat-around-the-bush
- hesitant, filled with pauses
- frequent throat clearing
- apologise inappropriately in a soft unsteady voice
- using phrases such as “if it wouldn’t be too much trouble...”
- fill in words, e.g., “maybe” , “er”, “um”, “sort of”
- voice often dull and monotonous
- tone may be sing-song or whining
- over-soft or over-warm
- quiet often dropping away
- frequent justifications, e.g., “I wouldn’t normally say anything”
- apologies, e.g., “I’m terribly sorry to bother you..”
- qualifiers, e.g., “Its only my opinion” or “I might be wrong”
- self-dismissal, e.g., “It’s not important” or “It doesn’t really matter”
- self put-downs, e.g., “I’m useless...hopeless” or “You know me...”

Non-verbal characteristics:

- averting gaze
- looking down
- posture can be slouched
- wringing hands
- winking or laughing when expressing anger
- covering mouth with hand
- crossing arms for protection
- ghost smiles when expressing anger or being criticised
- raising eyebrows in anticipation
- jaw trembling

- lip biting

Thinking style:

- “I don’t count”
- “My feelings, needs and thoughts are less important than yours”
- “People will think badly of me or not like me”
- “If I say no then I may upset someone, I will be responsible for upsetting them”

Payoff:

- Praised for being selfless, a good sport
- Rarely blamed if things go wrong because you haven’t usually shown initiative
- Others will protect and look after you
- Avoid, postpone or hide conflict so in short term can lead to reduction of anxiety

Cost:

- Sometimes prone to build up of stress and anger that can explode in a really aggressive manner
- Others often make unreasonable demands of you
- Can get stuck in relationships that aren’t healthy and find it very difficult to change
- Restrict self into other people’s image of a lovable good person
- When repressing anger and frustration this diminishes other more positive feelings in you
- Loss of self esteem

Aggressive Behaviour

Definition:

- 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.
- People often feel devastated by an encounter with an aggressive person.
- Superiority is maintained by putting others down.

- When threatened you attack.

Verbal characteristics:

- Strident, sarcastic or condescending voice
- Fluent, few hesitations
- Often abrupt, clipped
- Often fast
- Emphasising blaming words
- Firm voice
- Tone sarcastic, cold, harsh
- Voice can be strident, often shouting, rising at end
- Use of threats, e.g., “You’d better watch out” or “If you don’t...”
- Put downs, e.g., “You’ve got to be kidding...” or “Don’t be so stupid”
- Evaluative comments, emphasising concepts such as: should”, “bad”, “ought”
- Sexual / racist remarks
- Boastfulness, e.g., “I haven’t got problems like yours”
- Opinions expressed as fact, e.g., “Nobody want to behave like that” or “That’s a useless way to do it”
- Threatening questions, e.g., “Haven’t you finished that yet?” or “Why on earth did you do it like that?”

Non-verbal characteristics:

- Intruding into the other person’s space
- Staring the other person out
- Gestures such as pointing, fist clenching
- Striding around impatiently
- Leaning forward or over
- Crossing arms (unapproachable)
- Smiling may become sneering
- Scowling when angry
- Jaws set firm

Thinking style:

- “I’ll get you before you have a chance of getting me”
- “I’m out for number one”
- “The world is a battle ground and I am out to win”

Payoffs:

- You get others to do your bidding
- Things tend to go your way
- You are less vulnerable
- You like the feeling of being in control
- Release of tension
- You feel powerful

Price:

- Your behaviour will create enemies and resentment in those around you
- This can result in a sense of paranoia and fear
- If you are always trying to control others it can be difficult for you to relax
- Your relationships will tend to be based on negative emotions and are likely to be unstable
- Aggressive people tend to feel inferior deep down and try to compensate for that by putting others down
- Feelings of guilt and shame
- Decreasing self confidence and self esteem

Assertive Behaviour

Definition:

- A way of communicating our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs in an open, honest manner without violating the rights of others.
- It is an alternative to being aggressive where we abuse other people’s rights, and passive where we abuse our own rights.

Verbal characteristics:

- Firm, relaxed voice
- Fluent, few hesitations
- Steady even pace
- Tone is middle range, rich and warm
- Sincere and clear
- Not over-loud or quiet
- Voice appropriately loud for the situation
- “I” statements (“I like”, “I want”, “I don’t like”) that are brief and to the point
- Co-operative phrases, e.g., “What are your thoughts on this”
- Emphatic statements of interest, e.g., “I would like to”
- Distinction between fact and opinion, e.g., “My experience is different”
- Suggestions without “shoulds” or “oughts” e.g., “How about...” or “Would you like to...”
- Constructive criticism without blame, e.g., “I feel irritated when you interrupt me”
- Seeking others opinions, e.g., “How does this fit in with your ideas”
- Willingness to explore other solutions, e.g., “How can we get around this problem?”

Non-verbal characteristics:

- Receptive listening
- Direct eye contact without staring
- Erect, balanced, open body stance
- Open hand movements
- Smiling when pleased
- Frowning when angry
- Features steady
- Jaw relaxed

Thinking style:

- “I won’t allow you to take advantage of me and I won’t attack you for being who you are”

Payoffs:

- The more you stand up for yourself and act in a manner you respect, the higher your self esteem
- Your chances of getting what you want out of life improve greatly
- Expressing yourself directly at the time means that resentment doesn't build up
- If you are less driven by the needs of self-protection and less preoccupied with self consciousness then you can see, hear and love others more easily

Price:

- Friends / family may have benefited from you being passive and may sabotage your new assertiveness
- You are reshaping beliefs and values you have held since childhood and this can be frightening
- There is no guarantee of outcome
- There is often pain involved in being assertive

Module summary

- There are differences in the verbal and nonverbal characteristics of aggressive, assertive and passive communication. Each style has its own benefits and costs.

Coming up:
coming up

The next module introduces some of the unhelpful thinking patterns that stop us from being assertive and shows how to change these.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Fiona Michel (MPsych¹ PhD²).

Centre for Clinical Interventions

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

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Module Three

How to Think More Assertively

Unassertive Thinking	2
Our Assertive Rights	3
How to change your beliefs	4
Thought Diaries	5
Behavioural Experiments	10
Module summary	14
About this module	15

Unassertive thinking

As mentioned in Module 1, 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 not to express sadness because if we did we would be ridiculed. In that situation it would have made sense for us to have the belief: “expressing sadness is bad and if I do people will make fun of me”. As an adult however 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 sadness which may result in us being stressed, depressed and not connected with ourselves and the world. Or alternatively our sadness may be expressed as anger towards ourselves or other people.

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.

Take a minute and see if you can identify any more unassertive beliefs that you have. Modules 6, 7, 8, and 9 deal with and identify unassertive thoughts associated with saying “no”, coping with criticism, dealing with disappointment and giving and receiving criticism, so you may get some ideas from those modules.

Our Assertive Rights

Many of the ideas now associated with assertiveness training were first proposed in Manuel J. Smith’s book “When I say No I feel Guilty” published in 1975. This book outlined a ten-point “bill of assertive rights”. Assertive rights are the rights that we all have as human beings. Some of these rights are:

- You have the right to judge your own behaviour, thoughts, and emotions, and to take the responsibility for their initiation and consequences upon yourself.
- You have the right to say “no”.
- You have the right to offer no reasons or excuses for justifying your behaviour.
- You have the right to judge if you are responsible for finding solutions to other people's problems.
- You have the right to change your mind.
- You have the right to disagree with someone’s opinion.
- You have the right to make mistakes - and be responsible for them.
- You have the right to say, 'I don't know'.
- You have the right to be illogical in making decisions.
- You have the right to say, 'I don't understand'.
- You have the right to say, 'I don't care'.

An important part of these **rights** is that they come linked with **responsibilities**. You will notice the first point says that you have the right to your own thoughts, behaviour and emotions, but that you must then take responsibility for the consequences of these thoughts and behaviours. Often people think they are behaving assertively, but they are ignoring the consequences of their actions and the rights of others. This would be more typical of an aggressive style of communication.

See if you can think of any other rights, particularly ones that balance out any unhelpful beliefs you identified in the last section.

How to change your beliefs

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.

However, for most people just realising they have been thinking in an unhelpful way isn't enough to change the thinking. In Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) one way of addressing unhelpful thoughts is to challenge them head on. This is also called disputation. Challenging or disputation works on the principle that most of our thoughts and beliefs are learned opinions rather than facts. This means that they can be questioned rather than just accepted blindly, particularly if they are causing us distress.

To challenge or dispute your thoughts means that you examine the evidence for and against the thoughts. You evaluate them as if you were a detective or a lawyer. You are trying to get to the bottom of the truth of the thought.

There are two major strategies that can be used to help you challenge your thoughts. One is to use a Thought Diary. The other is to set up a Behavioural Experiment. We will take a look at each of these in turn.

Thought Diaries

It can be difficult to challenge your thoughts in your head as it is hard to remember all the information and it can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it all down. To help you through this process we have a Thought Diary for Unassertive Thoughts. We have worked through an example to show you the questions that you will need to ask yourself in order to come up with a more balanced thought. Then we provide a blank one for you to work through with an example of your own.

The thought diary will ask you to identify the unassertive thought that you are having. In order to do this you first need to **identify the situation** you are in. In the following example the situation could be described as: “I asked my friend to go shopping and she said “no”. In describing the situation think about what you would have seen if you had been filming the scene. It is important that you just stick to the facts and don’t start making interpretations about what this may mean at this stage. For example, you wouldn’t say “my friend was rude to me” as this is an assumption and an interpretation that we don’t have any evidence for yet.

Next you need to **identify your emotions** in the situation, that is, how you are feeling.

Ask yourself:

What emotion(s) am I feeling?

How intense are they? (rate the intensity from 0-100).

In the following example the person feels hurt and annoyed. The ratings are done individually for each emotion; they don’t need to add up to 100.

You then **identify your behaviour** and any physical symptoms that you felt. Ask yourself:

What did I do?

What did I feel in my body?

In the following example the person ignored a phone call from her friend and felt tense and sick whenever she thought about the situation.

Next you need to **identify your thoughts** in the situation. These thoughts can take the forms of assumptions, interpretations, beliefs, values and so on. Sometimes they could even take the form of images or pictures rather than words. Ask yourself:

What was I thinking?

What was running through my head?

In the example the person's thoughts were:

I said 'yes' to go shopping with her when I didn't want to.

So she should have said 'yes' to me

Saying 'No' is rude, uncaring and selfish.

Maybe she doesn't like me any more.

You then need to **rate the strength of your beliefs** in these thoughts at the time. A rating of 0 means you didn't believe them at all and a rating of 100 means you believed them 100%. Once you have completed this first part of the Thought Diary you move onto the disputation. The questions you ask yourself in the disputation are:

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?

Am I ignoring my rights or the rights of my friends?

How else could I view the situation?

Are there any other interpretations of what happened?

The idea behind asking yourself these questions is to **come up with a more balanced and assertive way of thinking and behaving**. You ask yourself:

What would be a more assertive way of thinking and responding?

The final step is to **re-rate the intensity of the original emotion and strength of the belief**. If you have worked through the entire thought diary it is likely that you will

experience a decrease in the intensity of the emotion and a decrease in the degree to which you believe your initial unhelpful thought. If you continue to practice this way of thinking you can find that you begin thinking and behaving in a more assertive manner.

Thought Diary: Part 1 Understanding your reaction.

Situation:	I asked a friend to go shopping with me and she said "no".
What emotions was I feeling? How strong were these? Rate (0-100)	Hurt 70 Angry 80
What physical response did I notice in my body?	Tense, tight chest, clenched jaw. Felt sick when I thought about her.
What did I do?	Cried, then ignored the next phone call I had from her.
Was this a passive, assertive or aggressive way of behaving?	Passive-aggressive
What thoughts were running through my head?	I said 'yes' to go shopping with her when I didn't want to. So she should have said 'yes' to me She is selfish to say "no". Maybe she doesn't like me anymore.
Which is the strongest thought?	She is selfish for saying "No".
How much do I believe this thought?	80
Are these passive, assertive or aggressive thoughts?	Passive because I thought I should do something I didn't want to do. Aggressive that I think she should do what I want her to.

Part 2: Disputing or challenging your unassertive thoughts

Is there any evidence that my thought is true?	None
Is there any evidence that my thought is not true?	She has done lots of things with me and for me over the course of our friendship.
Am I ignoring my rights or the rights of the other person? If so, what am I ignoring?	Yes, I ignored my rights by saying "yes" when I didn't want to go shopping. And I am ignoring her rights by acting as if she has to do what I want. The right I am ignoring is "everyone has the right to say "no"."
Are there any other ways of interpreting the situation?	She may be tired She may not want to go shopping She may have something else on I'm mind-reading what she is thinking. I've said no to her sometimes and that didn't mean that I didn't like her.
What would be a more assertive way to think about this?	She has a right to say no and that doesn't mean she is selfish. Nor does it say anything about what she may or may not think about me.
What would be a more assertive way to behave?	I will suggest catching up another time doing something that we both like.
Rerate my original emotion: Rerate my belief in the original thought:	Hurt 20 Angry 10 Belief: 10

Try using a Thought Diary for Unassertive Behaviour next time you notice that you are feeling hurt, angry or upset after an interaction with someone. It may be that you have thought and /or reacted in an unassertive manner. Continue to use a Thought Diary for these situations until it becomes second nature to you. You will then find that you can catch your unassertive thoughts before you act on them and dispute them in your head. This can take some time to happen, so for now continue to practice disputation in a Thought Diary.

Now try a Thought Diary of your own. There is a blank one on the next page:

Thought Diary: Part 1 Understanding your reaction.

Situation:	
What emotions was I feeling? How strong were these? Rate (0-100)	
What physical response did I notice in my body?	
What did I do?	
Was this a passive, assertive or aggressive way of behaving?	
What thoughts were running through my head?	
Which is the strongest thought?	
How much do I believe this thought?	
Are these passive, assertive or aggressive thoughts?	

Part 2: Disputing or challenging your unassertive thoughts

Is there any evidence that my thought is true?	
Is there any evidence that my thought is not true?	
Am I ignoring my rights or the rights of the other person? If so, what am I ignoring?	
Are there any other ways of interpreting the situation?	
What would be a more assertive way to think about this?	
What would be a more assertive way to behave?	
Rerate my original emotion: Rerate my belief in the original thought:	

Behavioural 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. For example, we may have the belief that if we don't always do what someone else wants us to do then they won't like us anymore. We are unlikely to put ourselves in this situation to test this out so doing a Thought Diary on its own is unlikely to really convince us simply because we have no real evidence either way.

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.

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".

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.

You also need to identify any unassertive or unhelpful behaviours 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. These can come from having done a Thought Diary beforehand or you may be able to identify them without having done a Thought Diary.

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.

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?

Example Behavioural experiment

Step 1. 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 2: Identify my unhelpful behaviours

What unhelpful behaviours would I normally engage in to cope (e.g. avoidance, escape, safety behaviours)	Make up excuses, pretend to be sick, avoid her until it is too late.
--	--

Step 3: Identify a more realistic prediction

Remind myself of the more realistic prediction I have made (can be from a 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 friendship will be fine.
--	---

Step 4: Identify my helpful behaviours and set up my 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 that I have a meeting I need to prepare for so don't want to go shopping. I will organise another time to catch up with her.
---	--

Step 5: carry out the experiment. Step 6: 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 worst 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.

Overleaf is a blank experiment sheet for you to work through with one of your unassertive predictions.

My Behavioural experiment

Step 1. 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 2: Identify my unhelpful behaviours

What unhelpful behaviours would I normally engage in to cope (e.g. avoidance, escape, safety behaviours)	
--	--

Step 3: Identify a more realistic prediction

Remind myself of the more realistic prediction I have made (can be from a Thought Diary)	
--	--

Step 4: Identify my helpful behaviours and set up my experiment

What will I do differently to test out the two predictions?	
---	--

Step 5: Carry out the experiment. Step 6: 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?	

Module summary

- Our thinking can sometimes stop us from behaving assertively.
- Being assertive involves a number of rights but also a number of responsibilities. We have a responsibility to ourselves and also to the people we are interacting with.
- We can change our non-assertive thinking by using Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Techniques include using a Thought Diary or doing a Behavioural Experiment.

Coming up:
COMING UP

The next module introduces
some assertiveness techniques.

ASSERT YOURSELF!



Module Four

How to Behave More Assertively

Assertiveness Techniques	2
Basic Assertion	2
Empathic Assertion	3
Consequence Assertion	4
Discrepancy Assertion	5
Negative Feeling Assertion	5
Broken record	6
Practising the techniques	8
Module summary	9
About this module	10

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:
coming up

The next module introduces techniques for reducing your physical tension.

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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ASSERT YOURSELF!



Module Five

Reducing Physical Tension

Physical tension	2
Identifying physical tension	2
Reducing physical tension	3
Progressive Muscle Relaxation	3
Mini relaxation 1	6
Mini relaxation 2	6
Slow breathing technique	7
Visualisation	7
Module summary	10
About this module	11

Physical Tension

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.

Identifying Physical Tension

The first step in reducing physical tension is to identify where you hold it in your body. Have a look at the following table. Put a tick against each area that you feel tension in right now.

Body Area	Tension (tick if yes)
Scalp	
Forehead	
Eyes	
Temples	
Jaw	
Neck	
Shoulders	
Chest	
Upper arms	
Lower arms	
Hands	
Stomach	
Lower back	
Buttocks	
Thighs	
Calves	
Feet	

See if you can notice any patterns in the areas of tension. Are you mostly tense in your stomach and lower back, in your arms and legs, or around your neck and shoulders? You may want to repeat this exercise when you are in a more stressful situation to see if you are tense in the same areas or different ones.

Reducing Physical Tension

Once people start to pay attention to their tension they are often surprised at how tense they really are. The good news is that there are a number of relaxation techniques that can be used to reduce physical tension. As with all the skills you are learning in these modules the more you practice them the more impact they will have for you.

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
- Slow breathing
- Tai chi

See if you can think of some activities that you know reduce your levels of tension and list them below. These may be the techniques or activities listed above or they may be more personal activities that you know reduce your tension such as listening to music or soaking in a bath. While you are working through the rest of the modules see if you can do one of these tension reducing activities and exercises daily!

In the rest of this module we will introduce you to some of the techniques that you may not have come across before.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation or PMR works through each of the muscle groups in progression. If we just try and relax muscles that have been tense for a while it can be difficult to get them to relax. Try it now. Try and just relax the muscles in your shoulders by

telling yourself to relax. Most people find this very difficult to do. PMR works by first tensing and then relaxing the muscles. Tensing the muscle first teaches you how to take control of the muscle and recognise the tension. Try it now with your shoulders. Lift your shoulders up as high as you can and try to touch your ears with them. Hold that for 10 seconds. Now let them drop and feel the sensation of relaxation. This tensing and relaxing is followed for each of the major muscle groups.

Follow each of the steps below for the different muscle groups. As we move through each body part you can use the same pattern of tensing and relaxing. When tensing a body part hold the tension for about 10 seconds. Then let the tension go and wait for another 10 seconds before you tense again. You may notice that you tend to breathe in as you tense and breathe out as you relax. This is the natural rhythm of the body and it is easiest if you keep following this. Breathe in as you tense, and breathe out as you relax. You may want to make a recording talking yourself through each muscle group so you can follow it without having to keep referring to the handout.

First, get into a comfortable position in a chair. It is better to do these exercises sitting up to prevent you from falling asleep. To work through the whole exercise should take about 15 to 20 minutes.

Put both your feet flat on the floor and rest your hands gently on your legs. Allow your eyes to gently close. Become aware of the weight of your body, of your head, your shoulders, your arms, and your legs.

Now clench your right fist tightly, noticing the tension as you do. Clench it tighter and notice the tension in your fist, hand and forearm. Now let go of the fist and relax your hand. Notice the contrast with the tension. Repeat this with your right fist. Then repeat with your left fist. Then tense both fists together.

Now tense your lower arm muscles by lowering your hand. Bend it down at the wrist as though trying to touch the underside of your arm. Then relax the muscles by straightening the wrist again. Repeat.

Now bend your elbows and tense your biceps. Tense them as hard as you can. Feel the tension. Then relax and straighten out your arms. Repeat.

Now move your attention to your shoulders. Tense your shoulders by lifting them up to try and touch your ears. Now relax by dropping them. Repeat. Now pull your shoulders forward while leaving your arms by your side. Hold and then relax by letting your shoulders go back to their normal position.

Now move your attention to your neck. If you have a sore neck or a neck injury, check with your doctor or physiotherapist before doing this exercise. Gently lean your head to the left until you feel the muscles tighten in the right side of your neck. Slowly roll your head forward around to the right and then slowly back to the left. This exercise should not cause any pain. If you feel pain you are stretching the muscles too tightly, and you need to be a little gentler. Repeat.

Now move your attention to your head. Wrinkle your forehead as tightly as you can. It can help to lift your eyebrows. Hold this for 10 seconds and then relax. Now squint your eyes and hold that tension for 10 seconds. Relax, and then repeat. Now clench your jaw by biting your teeth together. Then unclench them and relax. When your jaw is relaxed your lips will be slightly parted. Really notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. Repeat. Now press your tongue against the roof of your mouth. Then relax and let your tongue fall to the floor of your mouth. Repeat. Now press your lips together then purse them into an "O" shape. Relax your lips. Repeat. Make sure that the rest of your face is still relaxed.

Now move your attention to your chest. Breathe in and fill your lungs completely and tense your chest muscles. Hold and then let your breath go completely and your muscles relax. Make sure your lungs are empty before you take in the next breath. Repeat.

Now move your attention to your stomach. Tighten your stomach and hold. Note the tension then relax. Now place your hand on your stomach. Breathe deeply into your stomach so that your hand is pushed out. Hold and then relax. Repeat. Now arch your back while keeping your head tilted forward. Feel the tension in your lower back. Hold then relax

and sit up straight again. Repeat. Now tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. You should rise in the chair slightly. Hold and then relax. Repeat.

Now move your attention to your legs. Tense your thighs by pressing your heels into the floor as hard as you can. Hold and then relax. Repeat. Tense your calves by lifting your toes towards your shin. Hold and then relax. Repeat. Tense your feet by curling your toes into the floor. Hold and then relax. Repeat.

When you have finished it is a good idea to stay sitting for a few minutes to really appreciate the sensation of relaxation. Try not to stand up too quickly as you may tense up again. Also your blood pressure drops when you relax, so if you stand up too quickly you may get dizzy.

Mini Relaxation 1

The more you practise the full PMR the more you will get to know the areas in your body that become tense. However, you won't always have 15 to 20 minutes to practice the whole exercise. In this case you can modify the exercise by just choosing the muscle groups that you know are tense and relaxing these.

Mini Relaxation 2

Alternatively you could try this mini-relaxation exercise:

1. Stand up.
2. Lips closed, jaw relaxed, breathe slow and low down in your stomach
3. Breathe in for 2 seconds and out for 3 seconds. Be aware of your breathing for the whole exercise and keep it slow and deep.
4. Cross one of your legs over the other leg, keeping your feet firmly planted on the ground. Try to place your feet even with each other.
5. Put both your hands behind your back and grasp your hands. Now twist your hands so that your palms are now facing the floor.
6. Keeping your hands together and your arms straight, gently raise your arms toward your head.
7. Notice the increase in tension in ALL of your different muscles. Hold all this for a

count of 5.

8. Now uncross your legs and return your arms to your sides. Take two or three breaths to let go of all the tension.
9. Repeat steps '3' to '8' until you feel relaxed.

Slow Breathing Technique

Sit comfortably with your arms and legs uncrossed, your feet flat on the floor and your hands gently resting in your lap. You may find it easier to close your eyes while you are doing this exercise.

Use your nose rather than your mouth to breath. Start by just observing your breath. Note the quality of your breath as you inhale and exhale.

Now try to slowly lengthen each inhalation by drawing your breath down towards the abdominal area in a smooth and steady fashion. Have a brief pause before you observe the slow smooth and steady fashion in which your breath is released as you exhale.

Now that you are paying attention to your breath, you can begin the counting rhythm of breathing in for three seconds and out for three seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. (A normal breathing rate is 10-14 breaths per minute.)

Try to maintain this slow, even and controlled rhythm in your breathing by continuing to count in your head. Try not to speed up the count.

Keep breathing for 10 to 15 minutes using this rhythm. When you have finished gently open your eyes and take your time before you rise from the chair.

(If you suffer from panic attacks, slow breathing is particularly important to control overbreathing. In fact the breathing retraining for panic slows the breath down even further than in this exercise. Please have a look at the module on breathing and breathing physiology in the modules on panic called "Don't Panic!" on our website.)

Visualisation

Visualisation uses the power of our imagination to help reduce stress. There is a wide range of different types of visualisations. Many recordings are available if you want to try them. It is a matter of exploring until you find the one that suits and helps you. Visualisation is practiced and studied in cancer and pain centres throughout the world. Visualisation is

effective in treating many stress-related illnesses including headaches, muscle spasms, chronic pain, and anxiety. Sometimes the effects can be felt immediately and sometimes it takes several weeks of practice to feel any benefit.

Visualisation involves imagining a scene or an image as completely as you can. Sometimes people use them to help set goals. For example, athletes can use them as part of their training. They visualise the race or event they are going to be in, in minute detail. They visualise themselves in the event, imagining all the sights, tastes, sounds and smells. They imagine the difficult parts of the race and how they will overcome them. They will feel the exhaustion and imagine overcoming this.

You can use a more guided visualisation for relaxation. A common version of this is to imagine yourself in one of your favourite places or a beautiful imaginary scene. Again, imagine it in as much detail as you can - the sights, the colours, the temperature, the sounds, the smell, and the feel of your body. It is a place where you feel completely safe and relaxed. Imagine yourself completely relaxing in this place. Here there are no problems to be solved, no work to do, just relaxing.

There are no real limits as to what you can use visualisation for. However, there are some basic principles to follow. These are:

1. Loosen your clothing or wear comfortable clothing. Lie down in a quiet place and close your eyes gently.
2. Scan your body. Notice and tension and in which muscles. Relax those muscles as much as you can.
3. Begin creating mental sense impression. Involve all your senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. For example, imagine a beach. See the colours of the water, the sky, the sand. See any people around, what are they wearing, what do they look like? Smell the ocean, and the clean, fresh air. Feel the warmth of the sun on your body, feel the gentle breeze against your skin, feel the sand under your toes. Hear the waves, the sounds of the birds, other people. Taste the salt in the air.
4. Use self statements to aid your relaxation. Use the present tense and avoid negatives. For example, avoid saying: "I am not tense" which contains a negative. Try

instead: "I am letting go of tension".

5. Visualise three times a day. Visualisation is easiest in the morning and night while lying in bed. After you have practiced for a while you will be able to visualise in most situations to help you reduce tension.

Module summary

- In order to be assertive we need to have control over the physical tension and arousal that can occur in our bodies at difficult times. Having too much physical tension can increase our stress. In extreme cases it can lead to pain and stress related illness.
- There are a number of ways to reduce physical tension. These include meditation, exercise, tai chi, massage, visualisation, yoga, progressive muscle relaxation, and slow breathing techniques.
- To reduce our stress it is important that we practice relaxation techniques on a daily basis. To find the ones that suit you, you will need to explore and practice a range of techniques.
- Many of these exercises are available as recordings which some people find easier to use. You can also make your own recordings.

Coming up:
coming up

The next module looks at why we sometimes find it hard to say “no” and how we can become better at saying “no”.

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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ASSERT YOURSELF!



Module Six

How to Say “No” Assertively

Saying “No”	2
The effects of not being able to say “No”	2
Unhelpful beliefs: Why is it hard to say “No”	2
Changing Your Thinking: More helpful beliefs about saying “No”	3
Changing your Behaviour: How to say “No”	4
Ways of saying “No”	5
Module Summary	7
About this module	8

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. Now saying “Yes” to something you don’t really want to do can be appropriate in some situations. For example in a work situation if your boss asks you to do something and you don’t really want to it wouldn’t be appropriate to practise your assertiveness skills and say “No”. You may get the sack. What we are talking about here is if you find yourself saying “Yes” in other situations. For example, if a friend asks you to do something which is a real inconvenience for you and you say “Yes”, or if you 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”

As we saw in Module 1 we are all born assertive. 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:

Unhelpful Beliefs about Saying “No”

- 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.
- Other’s 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.

See if you can think of any others:

Changing your Thinking: More Helpful Beliefs about Saying “No”.

The unhelpful thoughts above 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:

- 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.

See if you can think of any others, try and come up with alternatives for your own unhelpful beliefs about saying “no”.

Remember that sometimes to come up with a new thought you will need to do a Thought Diary or a Behavioural Experiment. These techniques that you learned in Module 3 can be applied to your beliefs about saying “no” as they can to any unassertive belief. You may not immediately believe these new beliefs or thoughts. This is normal. You have been thinking the old thoughts probably for a long time so it will take some time for these new thoughts to become as automatic as the old ones were. Keep practising and you will get there.

Changing your behaviour: How to Say “no”.

So you have now worked through some of your unhelpful thoughts about saying “no” but you may still not be really sure how to go about it. 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. Trevor Powell describes 6 ways of saying "No". These are described below:

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.

Module summary

- Saying “no” can be difficult for a lot of people.
- As toddlers we don’t have any trouble saying “no” but as we learn from our environment and our experience we can start to have trouble with it.
- Saying “yes” when we really mean “no” can lead to stress, resentment and anger.
- If we have trouble saying “no” it is often because we hold a number of unhelpful beliefs about saying “no”. These can be changed by realising that they are just opinions and not facts. You can also use a Thought Diary or behavioural experiments (see Module 3) to change our unhelpful beliefs.
- There are some guidelines to saying “no”. These include keeping it brief, being clear, and being honest.
- There are some different ways to say “no”. These include the direct no, the enquiring no, the raincheck no, the reasoned no, and the broken record no.

Coming up:
coming up

The next module talks about how to deal with criticism assertively.

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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Module Seven

How to Deal Assertively with Criticism

Criticism	2
Types of criticism	2
Why do we respond the way we do?	2
How do you respond to criticism?	3
Passive responses to criticism	3
Aggressive response to criticism	4
Assertive responses to criticism	4
Unhelpful beliefs about criticism	4
Responding Assertively to Criticism:	
More helpful thinking about criticism	5
Dealing with constructive criticism	6
Dealing with destructive criticism	7
Additional tips for dealing with criticism	9
Giving Constructive Criticism	10
Module summary	13
About this module	14

Criticism

All of us have been criticised at some point in our lives. Being able to accept criticism assertively is one of the most important tasks we face on our journey to maturity. The word criticism comes from an Ancient Greek word describing a person who offers reasoned judgement or analysis, value judgement, interpretation or observation. So to accept criticism maturely we need to be able to accept feedback in the form of analysis, observation or interpretation from other people about our behaviour.

Types of Criticism

Criticism can be either constructive or destructive. Constructive criticism is designed to provide genuine feedback in a helpful and non-threatening way in order that the person being criticised may learn and grow in some way. The feedback is typically valid, that is, it is a true criticism. For example, "I really liked the way you wrote your report; I think it could be even better if you focused more on improving your spelling".

Destructive criticism is criticism that is either not valid or true or criticism that if valid is delivered in an extremely unhelpful way. It is often given by someone without much thought or can be designed to embarrass or hurt. For example, "This report is atrocious, your spelling is appalling".

Why do we respond the way we do?

How we accept criticism is largely based on our experiences with criticism as a child. If we did not experience any criticism as a child then when we first experience it as an adult we may be devastated. If we received very constructive criticism as a child we may cope well with criticism as an adult. If we were criticised harshly and punitively then we may see criticism as hurtful and rejecting.

This latter case often occurs when our whole person was criticised rather than just our behaviour. For example, if we made a mistake as a child and were told "you are stupid", this implied that it was us as a whole person who was stupid. The criticism feels like a rejection and we can feel hopeless about how to change. On the other hand if we were told "that

was a silly thing to do”, then our behaviour and us as a person, are seen as two separate things. It is the behaviour that is stupid not us. Therefore, we have the power to change that behaviour.

How Do You Respond to Criticism?

How do you respond to criticism? Some of the common non-assertive ways of responding to criticism are:

- Becoming confused
- Becoming defensive
- Acting silly
- Ignoring it and hurting inside
- Internalizing anger and stewing over it
- Retaliating with anger and blame
- Shutting down
- Withdrawing
- Running away

Take a minute and think of the last time you were criticized. Now jot down the situation and how you reacted.

The Situation: _____

How I reacted:

Now read the following descriptions and see if you can identify which one best describes how you reacted.

Passive Responses to Criticism

If we are predominantly passive it can be difficult to respond well to criticism. We may just run and hide and feel hurt and confused. We may tend to just agree with any criticism whether it is valid or not. Then we reproach ourselves for it. For example, “Yes you’re right

I am..., I'm useless, and I've got to stop". We can tend to see a criticism of our behaviour as a rejection of ourselves. This type of response can lead to depression, anxiety and low self esteem. We feel like the world is a critical place and we agree with all the criticisms!

Alternatively, we may laugh it off and criticize ourselves even more with the attitude "If I criticize myself more and make it a joke then no-one will know I am hurt". In the long run this has the same effect as agreeing openly with the criticism.

Aggressive Responses to Criticism

If we tend to respond aggressively then we will tend to hear criticism as a personal attack. Feeling attacked we will then become defensive and may go on the attack ourselves. For example, "How dare you, I'm not late. You're the one who is always late." This type of response can then lead to conflict and increased aggression, which in turn can lead to depression and low self esteem.

Assertive Responses to Criticism

When we respond assertively to criticism we can identify the difference between constructive and destructive criticism and respond appropriately (see the skills below describing how to respond to criticism assertively). We can see that criticism about our behaviour is not necessarily saying anything about us as a person. We don't get defensive, angry, blaming, hurt or run away. We stay calm and accept the criticism without negative emotions.

What Keeps us From Responding Assertively to Criticism? Unhelpful Beliefs about Criticism

As with other unassertive behaviours there is often some unhelpful thinking underlying the behaviour. Some of these are listed below:

- If I am criticised it means I am stupid.
- They criticised me, they mustn't like me anymore.
- They are right, I did get it wrong, I can't do anything right. I'm a failure.
- I can't criticise them because then they won't like me.

- How dare they tell me I've done something wrong. They have no right.
- They're an idiot anyway. I'm not going to listen to them.
- If I criticize myself more and make it a joke then no-one will know I am hurt

Can you identify any other unhelpful thoughts that may stop you from responding to criticism assertively? List them below.

Responding Assertively to Criticism: More Helpful Thinking

Here are some more helpful and assertive thoughts to challenge any unhelpful thoughts you may have. Remember you can also use Thought Diaries and Behavioural Experiments (see Module 3) to help you come up with more helpful and assertive thoughts.

- If there is something wrong with what I've done it doesn't mean anything about me as a person. I need to separate the behaviour from me.
- What can I learn from this criticism? Most criticism is probably based, at least in part, on some truths. Criticism may appear negative. But, through criticism we have the opportunity to learn and improve from their suggestions. Always ask yourself "What can I learn?"
- I have the right to let someone know if their behaviour has hurt, irritated or upset me.
- Giving direct feedback can be loving and helpful.

See if you can think of any other assertive thoughts about being criticised. If you identified your own unhelpful thoughts see if you can identify more helpful thoughts to challenge these.

Responding Assertively to Criticism: Dealing with Constructive Criticism

We all need to be able to accept constructive criticism. Depending on the way the criticism is presented to you, you can respond in a number of different ways.

1. Accept the criticism

If the criticism is valid then just accept it without expressing guilt or other negative emotions. Accept that you are not perfect and that the only way we can learn is to make mistakes, see what we need to change and move on. Thank the person for the feedback if appropriate. See the criticism as a gift.

2. Negative assertion.

This technique involves not only accepting the criticism but openly agreeing with the criticism. This is used when a true criticism is made to you. The skill involves calmly agreeing with the criticism of your negative qualities, and not apologising or letting yourself feel demolished. For example, someone may say:

Criticism: *"Your desk is very messy. You are very disorganised"*.

Response: *"Yes, it's true, I'm not very tidy"*.

The key to using negative assertion is self confidence and a belief that you have the ability to change yourself if you wish. By agreeing with and accepting criticism, if it is appropriate, you need not feel totally demolished. This type of response can also diffuse situations. If someone aggressive is making the criticism they may expect you to become defensive or aggressive back. By agreeing with them the tension in the situation is diffused.

Another way of using negative assertion is to own up to your mistakes before they are pointed out. For example, if you arrive late say: "Hi, I'm late."

3. **Negative inquiry.**

Negative inquiry consists of requesting further, more specific criticism. If someone criticises you but you are not sure if the criticism is valid or constructive you ask for more details. For example:

Criticism: *“You’ll find that difficult won’t you, because you are shy?”*

Reply: *“In what ways do you think I’m shy?”*

If the criticism is constructive, that information can be used constructively and the general channel of communication will be improved. If the criticism is manipulative or destructive then the critic will be put on the spot.

Responding Assertively to Criticism: Dealing with Destructive Criticism

Unfortunately we are all going to encounter destructive criticism at some point in our lives. This can be more difficult to deal with than constructive criticism. If we practice the techniques below, we can become skilled at dealing with these difficult situations. As with all skills remember it will take practice and some time to feel confident using these skills. You will notice that some of the skills are the same as for dealing with constructive criticism.

1. **Disagree with criticism**

The first technique for dealing with destructive criticism is simply to disagree with it. It is important that you remain calm and watch your non-verbal behaviours including tone of voice as you do this as it is easy to become aggressive or passive when disagreeing. Keep your voice calm, your eye contact good. For example:

Criticism: *“You’re always late”.*

Response: *“No, I’m not always late. I may be late occasionally, but I’m certainly not **always** late”.*

2. Negative Enquiry.

As described above, if someone makes a comment you may not be sure if it is constructive or destructive criticism. We need to check what is meant. If the criticism is destructive then we can either disagree with it as above, or we can use one of the defusion techniques described below.

3. Fogging aka Clouding aka Defusion.

The three names above all refer to the same techniques. The idea behind the techniques is to defuse a potentially aggressive or difficult situation. You can use this style when a criticism is neither constructive nor accurate. The tendency for most people when presented with destructive criticism is either to be passive and crumble or be aggressive and fight back. Neither of these are good solutions.

Essentially what the techniques do is find some way of agreeing with a small part of what an antagonist is saying. By staying calm and refusing to be provoked or upset by the criticism you remove its destructive power.

There are 3 types of defusion: you can

- a) *agree in part,*
- b) *agree in probability or*
- c) *agree in principle.*

a) **Agreeing in part.**

In this technique you find just one accurate part of what the critic is saying and agree with that.

Example 1:

Criticism: *“You’re not reliable. You forgot to pick up the kids, you let the bills pile up until we could lose the roof over our head, and I can’t ever count on you to be there when I need you.”*

Response: *“You’re certainly right that I did forget to pick up the kids last week after their swimming lesson.”*

Example 2:

Criticism: *"You haven't got a job, you're completely unproductive."*

Response: *"Yes, it's true, I don't have a job".*

b) Agreeing in probability.

With this technique you can still say something may be possible even though you really think the chances are likely to be a million to one. So you agree in probability.

Example:

Criticism: *"If you don't floss your teeth, you'll get gum disease and be sorry for the rest of your life."*

Response: *"You're right I may get gum disease."*

c) Agreeing in principle.

In this technique you acknowledge the person's logic without agreeing with what they say.

Example:

Criticism: *"That's the wrong tool for that job. A chisel like that will slip and mess up the wood. You ought to have a gouge instead."*

Response: *"You're right; if the chisel slips it will really mess up the wood".*

Additional tips to remember when being criticised:

1. Respond to the words not the tone of the criticism.

It is important when you are being criticized to separate the suggestions in the criticism from the way that they are being spoken to you. Often when people are giving criticism they can come across as confrontational, even aggressive. This may mean that we dismiss what they are saying despite the fact that the criticism may be a useful one. We need to practice

separating the criticism from the style of criticism. Even if people speak in an angry manner, we should try to detach their emotion from the useful suggestions which lie underneath.

2. Don't Respond Immediately

It is best to wait a little before responding. If we respond with feelings of anger or injured pride we will soon regret it. If we wait patiently it can enable us to reflect in a calmer way.

3. When Feeling Criticised

1. Stop - Don't react until you are sure what is going on.
2. Question – have you really been criticised? Are you mind-reading?
3. Check if you need to by asking the other person. For example, you can say:
“What did you mean by that?”
4. Once you have worked out if it is really a criticism, decide if it is valid or not and respond using one of the techniques above.

Giving Constructive Criticism

So far we have talked about skills to deal with receiving criticism. There are also skills to learn when giving criticism so that the person is more receptive to what you are saying. You have a right to request a change in someone's behaviour if it hurts, upsets or irritates you in some way. Remember that requesting change doesn't mean that the person will change. However, if you push your resentment down and don't express it, it could cause further problems with the relationship.

Giving direct feedback to others about their behaviour can be both loving and helpful. This feedback can be negative or positive. It shows you value the other person and your relationship with them.

Try and follow the guidelines below when giving constructive criticism.

1. Time and place. Make sure you choose a good time and place. If you are giving constructive criticism about something that has led to you having a strong emotional reaction wait until you are away from the situation that is bothering you and have calmed down before criticising. Don't wait until the next time the situation occurs to confront the behaviour.
2. Describe the behaviour you are criticising rather than labelling the person. For example: "You made a mistake in the report" rather than: "What are you, an idiot?"
3. Describe your feelings (using "I" statements) without blaming the other person. For example: "I feel angry when..." rather than: "You make me angry".
4. Ask for a specific change. If you just make a complaint without giving alternative suggestions you don't give the person any help in knowing how to change the behaviour. For example rather than saying: "I can't stand your loud music" you might say: "I find the loud music really disturbing could you please turn it down after 8.00pm?"
5. Specify both the positive consequences if the person does meet your request for change and negative consequences if they don't make the changes.
6. Be realistic in the changes you are suggesting and the consequences if they do not. Do not make empty threats. For example you wouldn't say: "I will kill you if you don't turn the music down".

7. Ask the other person how they feel about what you have just said. Being assertive is about having an equal interaction. Be careful this doesn't end up as an exchange of criticisms.
8. Try and end on a positive note. If appropriate add a positive statement of your feelings towards the other person.

Module summary

- We all get criticised. Learning to accept constructive criticism is an important skill. Criticism can be constructive or destructive.
- How we respond to criticism can be influenced by the type of criticism we received as a child.
- As with other unassertive behaviour how we think about being criticised can lead us to respond in a passive or aggressive way. We can change this thinking to more assertive thinking.
- Skills for dealing with constructive criticism include accepting the criticism, negative assertion and negative inquiry.
- Skills for dealing with destructive criticism include disagreeing with the criticism, negative inquiry and fogging (also called clouding or defusion)
- Additional tips include paying attention to the words not the tone of the criticism and not responding straight away.
- When giving constructive criticism it is important to pick an appropriate time and place, criticise the behaviour and not the person, be specific about what you want to change and how you want it to change, and end on a positive note.

Coming up:
coming up

The next module introduces how to deal with disappointment assertively

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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Module Eight

How to deal with Disappointment

Assertively

Being Disappointed	2
How do you cope with disappointment?	3
Passive responses to disappointment	3
Aggressive responses to disappointment	3
Assertive responses to disappointment	3
Unhelpful thoughts and disappointment	3
More assertive thinking	4
Module Summary	5
About this module	6

Being Disappointed

It would be impossible to get through life without being disappointed about something. Disappointment occurs when we have an expectation or desire about how we want something to turn out and it doesn't go the way we wanted.

How do you Cope with Disappointment?

There are a number of unassertive ways of responding to disappointment. These include:

- Sulking
- Anger at the thing / person that you see as cause of disappointment. This can include being angry at yourself.
- Depression
- Wanting revenge
- Giving up
- Self-criticism

Take a minute and think of the last time you were disappointed. See if you can remember how you reacted. Write this down.

Situation when disappointed:

What I did:

Now read the descriptions below and see if your behaviour was passive, assertive or aggressive.

Passive Responses to Disappointment

If you respond passively to disappointment you are likely to give up what you were trying to achieve or become overly self critical about why you didn't achieve it. You may feel sorry for yourself and sulk. If others have disappointed you, you may give up on them. All of these reactions can worsen your self esteem and lead to depression.

Aggressive Responses to Disappointment

If you respond aggressively to disappointment you are likely to become angry about the situation or person that led to the disappointment. You may become increasingly resentful towards that situation or person and want to extract some revenge.

Assertive Responses to Disappointment

If you respond assertively you may still feel disappointment when things haven't gone the way you wanted them to. This is normal! However, you will not blame yourself or other people. Nor will you get stuck in negative emotions. You will take responsibility for your part in the disappointment and think through how you can move forward from here. You may need to make some changes; you may need to learn something from the disappointment. There may be nothing you can do differently. Either way you will be graceful in accepting the situation and move forward.

Unhelpful thoughts associated with disappointment

As with the other behaviours we have looked at there are a number of unhelpful thoughts associated with not dealing well with disappointment. Some of these are listed below.

- They should know I don't like it when they do that.
- The world is terrible, I can't bear this.
- That person is bad.
- I can't accept that person for being like that.

- I can't tolerate this.

Can you identify any other unhelpful thoughts that may stop you from responding to disappointment assertively? List them below.

Responding Assertively to Disappointment: More Helpful Thinking

Here are some more helpful and assertive thoughts to challenge any unhelpful thoughts you may have. Remember you can also use Thought Diaries and Behavioural Experiments (see Module 3) to help you come up with more helpful and assertive thoughts.

- It is undesirable to be treated unfairly, but it is not awful.
- I can stand this hurt and frustration and I can do something about the situation.
- I accept how the other person is. They may have been rejecting one aspect of my behaviour not me as a whole person.
- It is best to openly express my feelings; the consequences may not be as bad as I think.

See if you can think of any other assertive thoughts about being disappointed. If you identified your own unhelpful thoughts see if you can identify more helpful thoughts to challenge these.

Module summary

- We are all disappointed at some time in our lives
- As with other unassertive behaviour how we think about being criticised can lead us to respond in a passive or aggressive way. We can change this thinking to more assertive thinking.

Coming up:
~~Coming up:~~

The next module shows us how to respond to compliments assertively and how to give compliments.

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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Module Nine

How to Give and Receive Compliments Assertively

Compliments	2
Accepting Compliments	2
How do you cope with receiving compliments?	2
Passive responses to accepting compliments	3
Aggressive responses to accepting compliments	3
Assertive responses to accepting compliments	3
Unhelpful thoughts and accepting compliments	4
More assertive thinking for accepting compliments	4
Steps for accepting compliments	5
Giving compliments	6
Steps for giving compliments	6
Module Summary	8
About this module	9

Compliments

Being able to give and accept compliments is another assertiveness skill and one which is important in conversations and for building relationships and self esteem. As with all the skills we have looked at in this series of modules there is often some unhelpful thinking which stops us from being able to accept or give compliments. Or we may lack the skills needed to help us with this skill. This module will help you identify and unhelpful thoughts you have about compliments and also show you the steps to take to improve the way in which you accept and give compliments.

Accepting Compliments

Some people find it extremely difficult to accept compliments. Understandably there are times when it may feel uncomfortable; however, being able to accept other people's positive comments about our appearance, our work or some other aspect of ourselves is an important assertiveness and social skill.

How do you Cope with Receiving Compliments?

There are a number of unassertive ways of responding to receiving compliments. These include:

- Ignoring the compliment and changing the topic.
- Disagreeing with the compliment or some part of the compliment. For example: "really, I don't like the colour of the dress at all."
- Dismissing or deflecting the compliment. For example "oh, this old thing, it's nothing special."
- Being sarcastic. For example "Yeah right, it's just gorgeous isn't it?"
- Nervous laughing or smiling
- Self-criticism

Take a minute and think of the last time you were complimented. See if you can remember how you reacted. Write this down.

Situation when complimented:

What I did:

Do you think your response was passive, assertive or aggressive? Read the descriptions below and see if you were right.

Passive Responses to Being Complimented

If you respond passively to being complimented you are likely to either ignore the compliment completely, or deflect or minimise the praise. You may feel very nervous and awkward and don't know how to respond at all. This can result in the other person also feeling awkward. You may then leave the social situation feeling embarrassed and your self esteem may suffer.

Aggressive Responses to Being Complimented

If you respond aggressively to being complimented you may become annoyed, angry or defensive, or disagree and respond sarcastically to the compliment. As with the passive response this may result in the other person feeling awkward.

Assertive Responses to Being Complimented

If you respond assertively you are able to accept the compliment in a positive way. The other person will not feel awkward and the interaction results in both of you feeling better

about yourselves: you for accepting the compliment well and the other person for being able to provide some positive feedback. When we can learn how to embrace positive feedback and accept compliments graciously, we open up the door for more positive thoughts and interactions, and we can actually start to BELIEVE them.

Then, when we hear our old patterns of self criticism, we can intentionally choose to believe the compliments we've been receiving instead.

Unhelpful thoughts associated with being complimented

As with the other behaviours we have looked at there are a number of unhelpful thoughts associated with not dealing well with compliments. Some of these are listed below.

- They don't really mean it. They are just trying to be nice.
- They are being smarmy.
- They must want something from me.
- If I accept a compliment it means I am being big-headed.
- If I accept a compliment they may think I am vain.
- It's too embarrassing to say something back.

Can you identify any other unhelpful thoughts that may stop you from responding to compliments assertively? List them below.

Responding Assertively to Compliments: More Helpful Thinking

Here are some more helpful and assertive thoughts to challenge any unhelpful thoughts you may have. Remember you can also use Thought Diaries and Behavioural Experiments (see Module 3) to help you come up with more helpful and assertive thoughts.

- The compliment may be genuine.
- Even if they are just trying to be nice that is still a positive thing and I can reply appropriately.
- If I don't accept the compliment I may make the other person feel awkward.
- Accepting the compliment may make the other person feel better too.
- Accepting a compliment gracefully doesn't mean I have to agree with it completely.
- If I start believing some compliments I may not feel so bad about myself.
- Accepting a compliment does not mean that I am going to become big-headed. If that were the case I would already be complimenting myself!
- People give compliments for a variety of reasons. Don't waste a lot of time wondering why someone gave you a compliment. Just appreciate the fact that someone took the time to say something nice to you!
- You are just as entitled to receive a compliment as anyone else.

See if you can think of any other assertive thoughts about accepting compliments. If you have discovered some unhelpful thoughts write down some more helpful thoughts to challenge these.

Steps to responding to Compliments Assertively

1. Look at the other person. Sit or stand up straight. If you shrink back or don't look at the person it may seem as if you don't like them or don't believe them.

2. Listen to what he or she is saying.
3. Smile when receiving the compliment. A compliment is intended to make you feel good. If you frown or look down or away the other person may be confused or uncomfortable.
4. Don't interrupt.
5. Say "Thanks," or something that shows you appreciate what was said.
6. Remember to accept the compliment without trying to take the subject off yourself or feeling like you have to pay them back. This will make you feel more confident and let you grow to like yourself better.

Tips for Responding Assertively to Compliments

- As with all the skills you have been learning this one may require some practice. Try these steps in front of a mirror. Imagine someone says something nice, then say "Thank you. That means a lot to me."
- Don't change the topic without acknowledging the compliment.
- It's often good to use the compliment to further conversation. "Thanks! I found it in on eBay - it's amazing what you can get there." That way you've accepted the compliment and moved on to something about which you can both talk.

How to Give Compliments

It is also important to learn how to give compliments. Giving compliments is a way of showing that you have noticed and appreciated something about the person or the situation. People like being around others who are friendly and open. It also shows that you have the confidence to say what you really think, which as you remember is one of the cornerstones of being assertive. Give someone a compliment today!

Steps for Giving Compliments

- Think of the exact words you want to use before you give the compliment. It will make you feel more confident and you'll be less likely to fumble around for words.
- Be specific about the compliment. "That necklace looks really good on you" makes a bigger impact compared to "you look really good today". The more specific the better, it makes the person feel like you have really noticed them.
- Mean what you say. People can tell the difference between sincerity and phoniness.
- Don't overdo it. A couple of sentences will do. ("You did a good job at ..." or "You really did well in")
- Smile and be enthusiastic when you give compliments. It makes the other person feel that you really mean it.
- Be appropriate: Consider the setting and your relationship with the person. Commenting on a colleague's new hair colour is fine, but mentioning it to your boss could be stepping out of bounds.
- Ask a question with your compliment. If you want to use the compliment as a conversational starter, ask a question about the subject of your compliment; "that necklace looks really good on you. Where did you find it?"

Think about a recent example when you admired something about someone (e.g., their clothing, the work they handed in, a generous act they did) and when you did NOT compliment them. What could you have said to this person? Why didn't you give them a compliment? Spend a moment and write down some thoughts. And then think about what you could have said to them.

Module summary

- It is an important assertiveness and social skill to be able to receive and give compliments.
- As with the other assertiveness skills there can be some unhelpful thinking stopping us from being able to accept compliments graciously. This thinking can be challenged and changed.
- It is also useful and friendly to be able to give compliments
- We need to practice receiving and giving compliments regularly. This can impact positively on our self esteem and the self esteem of those around us.

Coming up:
~~Coming up:~~

The next module pulls all the assertiveness skills together and shows you how to start practising to become more assertive

ABOUT THIS MODULE

CONTRIBUTORS

Fiona Michel (MPsych¹ PhD²).
 Centre for Clinical Interventions
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Module Ten

Putting it all Together

Summary so far!	2
Steps to improving your assertiveness	3
Step 1: Creating an assertiveness hierarchy	4
Steps 2 and 3: Challenging unhelpful thinking	4
Steps 4 and 5: Changing unhelpful behaviour	5
Steps 6 to 9: Rehearse and practise	5
Your turn!	6
Assertiveness worksheet	7
Re-rate your assertiveness	8
Module Summary	9
About this module	10

Summary so Far!

In the previous modules you have learned what assertiveness is (module 1), how to recognise assertive, passive and aggressive behaviour (module 2), how to change your unassertive thinking (module 3), some assertiveness techniques (module 4) and how to reduce your physical tension (module 5). You have also looked at how to become more assertive in specific situations, for example saying no (module 6), being criticised and giving criticism (module 7), living with disappointment (module 8) and giving and receiving compliments (module 9). In this module we are going to put all these skills together and show you the steps to take to improve your assertiveness.

Steps to Improving Your Assertiveness

The steps are:

1. Identify the situations you want to work on. Think about how you normally deal with these situations. Do you normally deal with it in a passive or aggressive way? List these situations in order from easiest to hardest in an assertiveness hierarchy (see below).
2. Identify any unhelpful thinking associated with these situations.
3. Come up with a more assertive way of thinking about the situation. Use a Thought Diary if you need to.
4. Identify any unhelpful behaviour you have been using when you have tried to do the task before. Remember to look at both verbal and non-verbal behaviour.
5. Come up with a more helpful behaviour. Use one of the techniques you learned in module 3 if it is appropriate.
6. Rehearse what you are going to say and do. It can be helpful sometimes to write down what you want to say.
7. Do the task you have identified.
8. Once you have done the task praise yourself for what went well and then work out what you might want to improve on next time.
9. Keep practising until you feel comfortable being assertive in this situation.

Step 1. Creating an Assertiveness Hierarchy

In order to become more assertive you need to write down 10 situations in which you would like to be more assertive. This can be at home, at work, with friends or out in public.

You will have got some ideas from the exercise “Rating your assertiveness in different situations?” that you completed in Module 1. If you didn’t do this exercise, now would be a good time to have a look at it. If you did complete it you may want to have another look at it to remind yourself of your responses.

You may also have got some ideas from the Thought Diary work you have been doing or some of the modules that looked at specific situations like saying “no”, receiving and giving criticism and dealing with disappointment.

If you are still struggling to identify situations to work on think about the following situations. They may help you. How do you respond when:

- The food you ordered is cold or overcooked?
- Someone is smoking in a non-smoking section?
- You want to ask a friend to return some money they borrowed from you?
- Everybody leaves the washing up to you?
- You are irritated by a habit in someone you love?

If you think you respond passively or aggressively in the above situations you may want to add these to your list.

Once you have written your list you need to work out the order of difficulty. To do this first give each situation a rating of how hard or difficult you think the task would be.

Another way of thinking about it is to ask yourself how anxious would it make you. You give each situation a rating from 0-100. A rating of zero would mean the task wasn’t difficult at all. A rating of 100 would mean it was the most difficult thing you could imagine doing.

Using the ratings you can then work out which task would be the easiest and which would be the hardest. You can then give each task a rank going from the easiest to the hardest.

Below is an example hierarchy:

My Assertiveness Hierarchy

	Situation	Rating (0-100)	Rank
1.	Tell my mother-in-law that I don't want her to smoke in my house.	70	9
2.	Ring the loan agency and tell them I need more time to decide if I want the loan or not.	50	8
3.	Tell the neighbour that their dog is keeping me awake at night.	40	6
4.	Tell my partner that I want a night by myself.	45	7
5.	Apologise to a work colleague for being irritable the other day.	30	3
6.	Ask the kids to do their chores.	20	1
7.	Ask my friend to return the book I lent her three months ago.	25	2
8.	Tell my boss that I have too much work on at the moment and can't take on the new project she asked me to do.	80	10
9.	Ring my piano tuner and tell them that the piano isn't tuned properly.	40	5
10.	Tell my Dad how much I love him.	30	4

Once you have written your hierarchy you start with the easiest task on the list. In the case above it is asking the kids to do their chores.

Steps 2 and 3. Identify and Change any Unhelpful Thinking!

As you learned in Module 3, there is usually some unhelpful thinking underneath non-assertive behaviour. So before you try the task see if you have some unassertive thinking that has been stopping you from doing the task.

In the example above the person identified an unassertive thought:

"If I keep telling the kids to do their chores they will get annoyed at me and might not like me or think I am a good mum".

They used a Thought Diary and came up with the more assertive thought:

“All kids get annoyed at their mum sometimes, it doesn’t mean they don’t like them. It is important for the kids to learn how to do chores. To be a good mum sometimes I will have to get the kids to do things they don’t like. They may thank me for that later.”

Once they had come up with this new thought they were able to do that task and move onto the next task.

Step 4 and 5. Identify and Change any Unhelpful Behaviour

The person who wrote the hierarchy above recognised that when she asked the kids to do their chores she would usually feel guilty, apologise to the kids, and think she had to give the kids something to make them like her better. She would usually buy them some lollies or fast food. She identified these as unhelpful behaviours. She worked out that a more helpful behaviour would be to just ask them to do the chore without apologising, and verbally praise them once they had done it rather than buy them something.

Step 6 to 9. Rehearse and Practice!

In this situation the person didn’t feel the need to write anything down beforehand. However she did have to practice asking them to do their chores and not apologising to them or buying them something for a couple of weeks before she started feeling more comfortable.

Your Turn!

Now that you have seen the steps to becoming more assertive have a go at writing your assertiveness hierarchy:

My Assertiveness Hierarchy

	Situation	Rank
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

Assertiveness Worksheet

For each item on the hierarchy you can use the following worksheet to guide you through the steps.

1. What is the situation I want to become more assertive in?

2. What unhelpful beliefs are maintaining the unassertive behaviour?

3. What are more assertive beliefs?

4. What unassertive behaviours am I using?

5. What are more assertive behaviours I could use?

Are you More Assertive?

Congratulations! You have now completed all the modules in the programme "Assert Yourself". You can now redo the exercise from module 1 where you rated your assertiveness in different situations and see if you have become more assertive!

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							

Module summary

- The steps to becoming more assertive are: to create a hierarchy of situations you want to work on, identify and change any unhelpful thinking and behaviours and then practise, practise and practise.

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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