

Being assertive

Dr. Chris Williams



Overcoming Depression
A Five Areas Approach.

Acknowledgement

‘Being Assertive’ is part of a longer self-help workbook called ‘Overcoming Depression: A Five Areas Approach’, published by Arnold Publishers (2001). The author is Dr Chris Williams is Senior Lecturer and Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist at the Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Glasgow Medical School, Glasgow, UK. The workbook has been amended for the University of Leeds student mental health with the approval and guidance of Dr Williams.

Section 1:

Introduction.

In this workbook you will:

- Find out about the difference between passive, aggressive and assertive behaviour.
- Learn about the Rules of Assertion and how you can put them into practice.
- Practice assertive techniques in your own life.

What is assertiveness?

Assertiveness is being able to stand up for yourself, making sure your opinions and feelings are considered and not letting other people always get their way. It is **not** the same as aggressiveness. You can be assertive without being forceful or rude. Instead, it is stating clearly what you expect and insisting that your rights are considered.

Assertion is a skill that can be learnt. It is a way of communicating and behaving with others that helps the person to become more confident and aware of themselves.

At some time in each of our lives, however confident we are, we will find it difficult to deal with certain situations we encounter. Examples of these could be:

- . Speaking to a tutor at University.
- Asking someone to return something they have borrowed.
- Dealing with difficult housemates.
- Communicating our feelings to our .friends, family or girlfriend/boyfriend.

Often in life we deal with these situations by losing our temper, by saying nothing or by giving in. This may leave us feeling unhappy, angry, out of control and still may not actually solve the problem. This tendency that many people have to react in either an unassertive or an aggressive way may become even more of a problem if they become depressed. The loss of confidence and self-worth that is common in depression may make the person more likely to **give in** to everyone around them, or in contrast become **very irritable** towards those around them. Both responses are unhelpful because they are likely to worsen how you feel (by being frustrated at yourself and others), and add to your problems.

Where does assertiveness come from?

As we grow up we learn to adapt our behaviour as a result of the things that happen to us. We model ourselves upon those around us, for example parents, teachers and our friends, and other

influences such as television and magazines. If during this time our self confidence is eroded, for example through being bullied or ridiculed at school or criticised within the family, then in our adult lives we may be more likely to react passively or aggressively in similar situations.

Although a person may have learned to react passively or aggressively in life, they can change and learn to become more assertive. You will now look at the effects of acting in an *aggressive* or a *passive* way, and then contrast this with the impact of *assertion*.

Elements of passive behaviour

Passive behaviour is **not** expressing your *feelings, needs, rights* and *opinions*. Instead there is an over-consideration for other's feelings, needs, rights and opinions.

Feelings: Bottling up your own feelings or expressing them in indirect or unhelpful ways.

Needs: Regarding the other person's needs as **more important** than your own. Giving in to them all the time.

Rights: The other person has rights but you do not allow yourself the same privilege.

Opinions: You see yourself as having little or nothing to contribute and the other person as always right. You may be frightened to say what you think in case your beliefs are ridiculed.

The aim of passive behaviour is to **avoid conflict** at all times and to **please others**.

Effects of passive behaviour.

On you: short-term:

- Reduction of anxiety.
- Avoidance of guilt.
- Martyrdom.

On you: long-term:

- Continuing loss of self-esteem.
- Increased internal tensions leading to stress, anger and worsened depression.

There are immediate positive effects of being passive but the longer lasting effects may be detrimental to your own health and cause others to become increasingly irritated by you and to develop a lack of respect for you.

Elements of aggressive behaviour.

Aggression is the opposite of assertion. Aggression is expressing your own feelings, needs, rights and opinions with **no respect** for other people's feelings, needs, rights and opinions.

Feelings: Expressing your feelings in a demanding, angry and inappropriate way.

Needs: Your own needs are seen as being more important than others and theirs are ignored or dismissed.

Rights: Standing up for your own rights, but doing so in such a way that you violate the rights of other people.

Opinions: You see yourself as having something to contribute and see other people as having little or nothing to contribute.

The aim of aggression is to **win**, if necessary at the expense of others. Try to think of a time when someone else has been aggressive to you and ignored your opinions. How did it make you feel about them and yourself?

Effects of aggression

Aggression has both short-term and long-term consequences.

Short-term:

- Release of tension.
- The person feels more powerful.

Long-term:

- Feelings of guilt and shame.
- Place responsibility for anger onto others.
- Decreasing self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Resentment in those around the aggressive person.

Although the short-term effects may be rewarding, the longer lasting effects of using aggression may be less beneficial and cause problems for the person and others.

Elements of assertive behaviour.

In contrast to aggression and passivity, assertion is expressing your **own** feelings, needs, rights and opinions while maintaining respect for **other people's** feelings, needs, rights and opinions.

Feelings: In assertion, you are able to express your feelings in a direct, honest and appropriate way.

Needs: You have needs that have to be met otherwise you feel undervalued, rejected, angry or sad.

Rights: You have basic human rights and it is possible to stand up for your own rights in such a way that you do not violate another person's rights.

Opinions: You have something to contribute irrespective of other people's views.

Assertion is not about winning, but it is concerned with being able to walk away feeling that you put across what you wanted to say. Try to think about a time when someone else has been assertive with you and respected your opinion. How did you feel about them and yourself?

About me - I felt: (write here):



About them - I felt: (write here):



The benefits of assertion

Assertiveness is an **attitude** towards yourself and others that is helpful and honest. In assertiveness you ask for what you want:

- Directly and openly.
- Appropriately, respecting your own opinions and rights and expecting others to do the same.
- Confidently without undue anxiety.

You do not:

- Violate people's rights.
- Expect other people to magically know what you want.
- Freeze with anxiety and avoid difficult issues.

The result is improved self-confidence in you and mutual respect from others.

The Rules of assertion.

All people have basic human rights that give us dignity as individuals. By not allowing your rights to be violated you are not being selfish but are maintaining your self-respect. As well as being aware of your own rights, if you respect other people's rights you have the foundation for assertive communication.

The rules of assertion

I have the right to:

1. **Respect myself** - who I am and what I do.
2. **Recognise my own needs as an individual** - that is separate from what is expected of me in particular roles, such as " ", "son", "daughter" *girlfriend, boyfriend, brother, sister, student*.
3. **Make clear "I" statements** about how I feel and what I think. For example, *"I feel very uncomfortable with your decision"*.
4. **Allow myself to make mistakes**. Recognising that it is normal to make mistakes.
5. **Change my mind**, if I choose.
6. **Ask for "thinking it over time"**. For example, when people ask you to do something, you have the right to say *"I would like to think it over and I will let you know my decision by the end of the week"*.
7. **Allow myself to enjoy my successes**, that is by being pleased with what I have done and sharing it with others.
8. **Ask for what I want**, rather than hoping someone will notice what I want.
9. **Recognise that I am not responsible for the behaviour of other adults**.
10. **Respect other people** and their right to be assertive and expect the same in return.

Currently, how much do you believe each of these rules, and put them into practice?

The rules of assertion

I have the right to:	Do I believe this rule is true?	Have I applied this in the last week?
1. Respect myself	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
2. Recognise my own needs as an individual independent of others.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
3. Make clear "I" statements about how I feel and what I think. For example, " <i>I feel very uncomfortable with your decision</i> ".	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
4. Allow myself to make mistakes.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
5. Change my mind.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
6. Ask for "<i>thinking it over time</i>".	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
7. Allow myself to enjoy my successes.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
8. Ask for what I want , rather than hoping someone will notice what I want.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
9. Recognise that I am not responsible for the behaviour of other adults.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
10. Respect other people and their right to be assertive and expect the same in return.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

It is possible to practice putting these rights into practice by using a number of assertiveness techniques.

1). "Broken record"

This is a useful technique and can work in virtually any situation. You rehearse what it is you want to say by **repeating over and over again** what it is you want or need. During the conversation, keep returning to your prepared lines, stating clearly and precisely exactly what it is you need or want. Do not be put off by clever arguments or by what the other person says. Once you have prepared the lines you want to say, you can relax. **There is nothing that can defeat this tactic.**

Example

Anne: "Can I borrow £10 from you?"

Paul: "I cannot lend you any money. I've run out."

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

Paul: "I cannot lend you any money."

Anne: "I would do the same for you. You won't miss £10."

Paul: "I am your friend but I cannot lend you any money. I'm afraid I've run out."

Remember:

- Work out beforehand what you want to say.
- Repeat your reply over and over again and stick to what you have decided.

This approach is particularly useful in:

- Situations where your rights are being ignored.
- Coping with clever articulate people.
- Situations where you may lose your self-confidence if you give in.

Saying "No"

Many people find that saying "No" seems to be one of the hardest words to say. We can sometimes be drawn into situations that we don't want to be in because we avoid saying this one simple word. The images we associate with saying "no" may prevent us from using the word when we need it. We may be scared of being seen as mean and selfish, and of being rejected by others. Saying "no" can be both important and helpful.

Q. Do I have problems saying "No"?

Yes

No

If Yes: try to practice saying "No" by using the following principles:

- Be straightforward and honest but not rude so that you can make your point effectively.
- Tell the person if you are finding it difficult.
- 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.
- Remember that it is better in the long run to be truthful than breed resentment and bitterness within yourself.

It may be that you have fears of how others may see or react to you if you do say no. If these fears are not helpful or true, use the techniques that you have learned to challenge them. Remember, you cannot be responsible for the reactions of other adults, but you can be responsible for your own actions.

2). Scripting.

Scripting involves planning out in advance in your mind or on paper exactly what you want to say in a structured way. This is a four-stage approach that covers:

- The **event**: the situation, relationship or practical problem that is important to you.
 - Your **feelings**: how you feel about situation or problem.
 - Your **needs**: what you want to happen to make things different.
 - The **consequences**: how making these positive changes will improve the situation for you and/or for others.
-
- **Event**: Say what it is you are talking about. Let the other person know precisely what situation you are referring to.
 - **Feelings**: Express how the event mentioned affects your own feelings. Opinions can be argued with, **feelings cannot**. Expressing your feelings clearly can prevent a lot of confusion.
 - **Needs**: People aren't mind readers. You need to tell them what you need. Otherwise people cannot fulfil your needs and this can lead to resentment and misunderstanding.
 - **Consequences**: Tell the person that if they fulfil your needs, there will be a positive consequence for both of you. Be specific about the consequences.

A good way to begin to practice scripting is to **write down** what you want to say before you go into a situation. The "event" and "feelings" aspect of this can be used as a part of a broken record. Once you have engaged the person in discussion you can bring in the needs and consequences.

Example:

Melanie: *"Hello, how are you?"*

Jenny: *"Alright and you?"*

Melanie: *"I saw Sarah yesterday. She said she was sorry to hear that I wasn't getting on with my housemate. I told you about that in confidence. I didn't expect you to go round telling others."*

(Event)

Jenny: *"I thought Sarah was a good friend of yours. I didn't think you would mind. She asked how you were and said you seemed troubled. It seemed natural to tell her, - why?"*

Melanie: "Sarah's okay but she has a tendency to discuss other people's problems with everyone she meets. I feel angry and upset that you have discussed this with her and let down by you as a friend." **(Feeling)**

Jenny: "I didn't realise. I'm sorry."

Melanie: "I value our friendship and the fact that usually I can talk to you about things without you telling everyone else about it."

Jenny: "Yes, I feel the same. I don't know what made me say anything to Sarah. She seemed genuinely concerned."

Melanie: "I'd like us to remain friends and to be able to share problems but I need to feel I can trust you." **(Need)**

Jenny: "I won't make this mistake again. Let's not spoil our friendship over this."

Melanie: "We can stay friends but I would appreciate it if you didn't discuss my problems with others. Then we can both benefit from a friendship where we know a confidence will not be betrayed." **(Consequence)**

Putting what you have learned into practice:

Think about how you can be more assertive in your own life. If you recognise that a lack of assertiveness is a problem for you, try to:

- Use one of the two assertiveness techniques during the forth-coming week.
- Remind yourself about and put into practice the **rules of assertion**. The sheet on the next page can be torn out so that you can carry it around with you, or put it in a prominent place (e.g. by your television or on a door or mirror) to remind you of these rules.
- After a week of trying this, **then** read the final part of the workbook.

The Rules of assertion.

I have the right to:

- 1. Respect myself** - who I am and what I do.
- 2. Recognise my own needs as an individual** - that is separate from what is expected of me in particular roles, such as "", ", "daughter", "son". Girlfriend, boyfriend, brother, sister, student.
- 3. Make clear "I" statements** about how I feel and what I think. For example, *"I feel very uncomfortable with your decision"*.
- 4. Allow myself to make mistakes.** Recognising that it is normal and acceptable to make mistakes.
- 5. Change my mind**, if I choose.
- 6. Ask for "thinking it over time"**. For example, when people ask you to do something, you have the right to say *"I would like to think it over and I will let you know my decision by the end of the week"*.
- 7. Allow myself to enjoy my successes**, that is by being pleased with what I have done and sharing it with others.
- 8. Ask for what I want**, rather than hoping someone will notice what I want.
- 9. Recognise that I am not responsible for the behaviour of other adults.**
- 10. Respect other people** and their right to be assertive and expect the same in return.

Section 2:

Review of your attempts to be assertive.

In first part of the workbook, you learned that assertiveness is being able to stand up for yourself by making sure your opinions and feelings are considered. It is very different from being aggressive.

Elements of assertive behaviour.

In contrast to aggression and passivity, assertion is expressing your **own** feelings, needs, rights and opinions with respect for **other people's** feelings, needs, rights and opinions.

Feelings: In assertion, you are able to express your feelings in a direct, honest and appropriate way.

Needs: You have needs that have to be met.

Rights: You have basic human rights and it is possible to stand up for your own rights in such a way that you do not violate another person's rights.

Opinions: You have something to contribute irrespective of other people's views.

Assertion is not about winning, but it is concerned with being able to walk away feeling that you put across what you wanted to say.

Q. Were you able to act in an assertive way at some stage in the last week?

Yes No

If yes: Were you able to respond:

Q. Directly and openly? Yes No

Q. Appropriately? Yes No

Q. Respecting your own opinions and rights and expecting others to do the same?
Yes No

Q. Overall, was the result improved self-confidence in you? Yes No

Review of the Rules of assertion.

The following table contains the *rules of assertion*. Look through them and then **please tick** those rules that you have (or could have) put into practice over the last week.

The rules of assertion

I have the right to:	Have I applied this in the last week?	Could I have applied this in the last week?
1. Respect myself	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
2. Recognise my own needs as an individual independent of others.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
3. Make clear "I" statements about how I feel and what I think. For example, " <i>I feel very uncomfortable with your decision</i> ".	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
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6. Ask for " <i>thinking it over time</i> ".	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
7. Allow myself to enjoy my successes.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
8. Ask for what I want, rather than hoping someone will notice what I want.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
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10. Respect other people and their right to be assertive and expect the same in return.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

If you could have been more assertive this week, but avoided putting the Rules of Assertion into practice, this shows that you need to continue to work on this area.

If you applied any of these rule of assertion in the last week, what was the impact on:

a. You? Helpful Unhelpful

b. Others? Helpful Unhelpful

Q. Did you fear that if you were assertive, it would go badly wrong? Yes No

If yes: Was this fear accurate and/or helpful?

Accurate Inaccurate

Helpful Unhelpful

Often, one of the reasons why a person may avoid being assertive is that they **fear** what the consequences may be. They may mind-read that others will dislike them or reject them, or they may have catastrophic fears about the social consequences of assertion. As with most extreme fears, these fears are both untrue and inaccurate. One problem is that unless the person is able to identify and question their negative thoughts, they may **avoid** being assertive as a consequence. The very best way of challenging such thoughts is to **undermine** them by **choosing** to be assertive.

Summary:

In this workbook you have:

- Find out about the difference between passive, aggressive and assertive behaviour.
- Learn about the Rules of Assertion and how you can put them into practice.
- Practice assertive techniques in your own life.

Putting into practice what you have learned:

Re-read what you learned earlier in the workbook about the *broken record* and *scripting* approaches, and try to put them into practice during the next week. In particular, the Scripting approach allows you to plan out how to be assertive in a particular situation and with a specific person. View this as a sort of action plan that can help you to both change how you are, and also learn something new about yourself and other people.

My notes: