

# ASSERT YOURSELF!



## Module Three

# How to Think More Assertively

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.
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#### 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.
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#### 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.
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#### 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)	
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Step 3: Identify a more realistic prediction

Remind myself of the more realistic prediction I have made (can be from a Thought Diary)	
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Step 4: Identify my helpful behaviours and set up my experiment

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

## ABOUT THIS MODULE

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We would also like to thank Paula Nathan for her contribution to these modules

### 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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Clark, D. M. (1986). A cognitive approach to panic. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 24, 461-470.

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### REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create this module:

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