In this chapter you will learn to:

☐ Evaluate your current patterns of communication

☐ Differentiate between aggressive, passive, and assertive styles of communication

☐ Express your feelings and opinions, set limits, and initiate change

☐ Listen assertively

☐ Avoid manipulation

How you interact with people can be a source of major stress. Assertiveness training can reduce that stress by teaching you to stand up for your legitimate rights, without bullying others or letting them bully you.

Before reading any further, write down how you would typically respond to the following problem situations.

1. You finish shopping in the market, and after you walk out you discover that the change is five dollars short.

_I would:_
2. You order a steak rare and it arrives medium-well.  
*I would:*

3. You're giving a friend a lift to a meeting. The friend keeps puttering around for half an hour and you realize that you will arrive late.  
*I would:*

4. You have really been looking forward all week to seeing a particular movie, and your companion informs you that he or she wants to see a different movie.  
*I would:*

5. You are relaxing with the paper after a long day. Your spouse pops in, list in hand, and says, "I thought you'd never get here. Quick, pick these up from the store."  
*I would:*
6. While you wait for the clerk to finish with the customer ahead of you, another customer comes in and the clerk starts to wait on him before you.

I would:


After you have written down what you would do in these problem situations, set your responses aside. They will be put to use shortly.

**Background**

Andrew Salter initially described assertiveness as a personality trait in 1949. It was thought that some people had it, and some people didn’t, just like extroversion or stinginess. But Wolpe (1958) and Lazarus (1966) redefined assertiveness as “expressing personal rights and feelings.” They found that nearly everybody could be assertive in some situations, and yet be totally ineffectual in others. The goal of assertiveness training is to increase the number and variety of situations in which assertive behavior is possible, and decrease occasions of passive collapse or hostile blowup.

You are assertive when you stand up for your rights in such a way that the rights of others are not violated. Beyond just demanding your rights, assertiveness implies that you can express your personal likes and interests spontaneously, you can talk about yourself without being self-conscious, you can accept compliments comfortably, you can disagree with someone openly, you can ask for clarification, and you can say no. In short, when you are an assertive person, you can be more relaxed in interpersonal situations.

Some people think that assertiveness training turns nice people into irascible complainers or calculating manipulators. Not so. It’s your right to protect yourself when something seems unfair. You are the one who best knows your discomfort and your needs.

Investigators such as Jakubowski-Spector (1973) and Alberti and Emmons (1970) discovered that people who show relatively little assertive behavior do not believe that they have a right to their feelings, beliefs, or opinions. In the deepest sense, they reject the idea that we are created equal and are to treat each other as equals. As a result, they can’t find grounds for objecting to exploitation or mistreatment. They likely learned as children traditional assumptions that implied that their perceptions, opinions, feelings, and wants were less important or correct than those of others. They grew up doubting themselves and looking to others for validation and guidance.

You did not have much choice about which traditional assumptions you were taught as a child. Now, however, you have the option of deciding whether to continue behaving according to assumptions that keep you from being an assertive adult. Each of these mistaken assumptions violates one of your legitimate rights as an adult:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mistaken Traditional Assumptions</th>
<th>Your Legitimate Rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. It is selfish to put your needs before others’ needs.</td>
<td>You have a right to put yourself first sometimes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It is shameful to make mistakes. You should have an appropriate response for every occasion.</td>
<td>You have a right to make mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. If you can’t convince others that your feelings are reasonable, then the feelings must be wrong, or maybe you are going crazy.</td>
<td>You have a right to be the final judge of your feelings and accept them as legitimate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. You should respect the views of others, especially if they are in a position of authority. Keep your differences of opinion to yourself. Listen and learn.</td>
<td>You have a right to have your own opinions and convictions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. You should always try to be logical and consistent.</td>
<td>You have a right to change your mind or decide on a different course of action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. You should be flexible and adjust. Others have good reasons for their actions and it’s not polite to question them.</td>
<td>You have a right to protest unfair treatment or criticism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. You should never interrupt people. Asking questions reveals your stupidity to others.</td>
<td>You have a right to interrupt in order to ask for clarification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Things could get even worse, don’t rock the boat.</td>
<td>You have a right to negotiate for change.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. You shouldn’t take up others’ valuable time with your problems.</td>
<td>You have a right to ask for help or emotional support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. People don’t want to hear that you feel bad, so keep it to yourself.</td>
<td>You have a right to feel and express pain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. When someone takes the time to give you advice, you should take it very seriously. They are often right.</td>
<td>You have a right to ignore the advice of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistaken Traditional Assumptions</td>
<td>Your Legitimate Rights</td>
</tr>
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<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Knowing that you did something well is its own reward. People don’t like show-offs. Successful people are secretly disliked and envied. Be modest when complimented.</td>
<td>You have a right to receive formal recognition for your work and achievements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. You should always try to accommodate others. If you don’t, they won’t be there when you need them.</td>
<td>You have a right to say “no.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Don’t be anti-social. People are going to think you don’t like them if you say you’d rather be alone instead of with them.</td>
<td>You have a right to be alone, even if others would prefer your company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. You should always have a good reason for what you feel and do.</td>
<td>You have a right not to have to justify yourself to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. When someone is in trouble, you should help them.</td>
<td>You have a right not to take responsibility for someone else’s problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. You should be sensitive to the needs and wishes of others, even when they are unable to tell you what they want.</td>
<td>You have a right not to have to anticipate others’ needs and wishes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. It’s always a good policy to stay on people’s good side.</td>
<td>You have a right not to always worry about the goodwill of others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. It’s not nice to put people off. If questioned, give an answer.</td>
<td>You have a right to choose not to respond to a situation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you continue through this chapter, keep in mind that assertive communication is based on the assumption that you are the best judge of your thoughts, feelings, wants, and behavior. Nobody is better informed than you regarding how your heredity, history, and current circumstances have shaped you into a unique human being. Therefore, you are the best advocate for expressing your positions on important issues. Because of your uniqueness, there are many times when you differ with significant people in your life. Rather than overpowering the meek or giving in to the aggressive, you have the right to express your position and try to negotiate your differences.
Symptom Effectiveness

Assertiveness training has been found to be effective in dealing with depression, anger, resentment, and interpersonal anxiety, especially when these symptoms have been brought about by unfair circumstances. As you become more assertive, you begin to lay claim to your right to relax and take better care of yourself.

Time to Master

Some people master assertiveness skills sufficiently for symptom relief with just a few weeks of practice. For others, several months of step-by-step work are necessary to experience significant change.

Instructions

1. Three Basic Interpersonal Styles

Assertiveness is a skill that can be learned, not a personality trait that some are born with and others are not. The first step in assertiveness training is to identify the three basic styles of interpersonal behavior.

Aggressive style. In this style, opinions, feelings, and wants are honestly stated, but at the expense of someone else’s feelings. The underlying message is, “I’m superior and right, and you’re inferior and wrong.” The advantage of aggressive behavior is that people often give aggressive individuals what they want in order to get rid of them. The disadvantage is that aggressive individuals make enemies, and people who can’t avoid them entirely may end up behaving dishonestly toward them in order to avoid confrontations.

Passive style. In this style, opinions, feelings, and wants are withheld altogether or expressed indirectly and only in part. The underlying message is, “I’m weak and inferior and you’re powerful and right.” The advantage of passive communication is that it minimizes responsibility for making decisions and the risk of taking a personal stand on an issue. The disadvantages are a sense of impotence, lowered self-esteem, and having to live with the decisions of others.

Assertive style. In this style, you clearly state your opinions, feelings, and wants without violating the rights of others. The underlying assumption is, “You and I may have our differences, but we are equally entitled to express ourselves to one another.” The major advantages include active participation in making important decisions, getting what you want without alienating others, the emotional and intellectual satisfaction of respectfully exchanging feelings and ideas, and high self-esteem.

To test your ability to distinguish interpersonal styles, label person A’s behavior in the following scenes as aggressive, passive, or assertive:

Scene 1

A: Is that a new dent I see in the car?
B: Look, I just got home, it was a wretched day, and I don’t want to talk about it now.
A: This is important to me, and we’re going to talk about it now.
B: Have a heart.
A: Let’s decide now who is going to pay to have it fixed, when, and where.
B: I’ll take care of it. Now leave me alone, for heaven’s sake!
A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

Scene 2
A: You left me so by myself at that party ... I really felt abandoned.
B: You were being a party pooper.
A: I didn’t know anybody—the least you could have done is introduce me to some of your friends.
B: Listen, you’re grown up. You can take care of yourself. I’m tired of your nagging to be taken care of all the time.
A: And I’m tired of your inconsiderateness.
B: Okay, I’ll stick to you like glue next time.
A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

Scene 3
A: Would you mind helping me for a minute with this file?
B: I’m busy with this report. Catch me later.
A: Well, I really hate to bother you, but it’s important.
B: Look, I have a four o’clock deadline.
A: Okay, I understand. I know it’s hard to be interrupted.
A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

Scene 4
A: I got a letter from Mom this morning. She wants to come and spend two weeks with us. I’d really like to see her.
B: Oh no, not your mother! And right on the heels of your sister. When do we get a little time to ourselves?
A: Well, I do want her to come, but I know you need to spend some time without my relatives underfoot. I’d like to invite her to come in a month, and instead of two weeks, I think one week would be enough. What do you say to that?
B: That’s a big relief to me.
A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

Scene 5
A: Boy, you’re looking great today!
B: Who do you think you’re kidding? My hair is a fright and my clothes aren’t fit for the Goodwill box.
A: Have it your way.
B: And I feel just as bad as I look today.
A: Right. I’ve got to run now.
A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

Scene 6
(While at a party, A is telling her friends how much she appreciates her boyfriend taking her out to good restaurants and to the theater. Her friends criticize her for being unliberated.)
A: Not so. I don’t make nearly as much as a secretary as he does as a lawyer. I couldn’t afford to take us both out or pay my own way to all the nice places we go. Some traditions make sense, given the economic realities.
A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

Now that you have labeled person A’s responses in these scenes as aggressive, passive, or assertive, compare your assessment with ours:

Scene 1. A is aggressive. A’s seemingly innocent question is actually an accusation in disguise. A’s insistence on immediate action with total disregard for B’s state of mind sets up a polarized conflict in which B is likely to feel wrong, withdrawn, and defensive.
Scene 2. A is aggressive. The tone is accusing and blaming. B is immediately on the defensive and no one wins.
Scene 3. A is passive. A’s timid opening line is followed by complete collapse. File problem must now be dealt with alone.
Scene 4. A is assertive. The request is specific, nonhostile, and open to negotiation.
Scene 5. A is passive. A allows the compliment to be rebuffed and surrenders to a rush of negativity.
Scene 6. A is assertive. She stands up to the prevailing opinion of the group and achieves a clear, nonthreatening statement of her position.

2. The Assertiveness Questionnaire
(Adapted from Sharon and Gordon Bower’s Asserting Your Self.)
The second step in assertiveness training is to identify those situations in which you want to be more effective. Having clarified the three interpersonal styles, now record your responses to the six problem situations you responded to at the beginning.
chapter. Label your responses as falling primarily in the aggressive, passive, or assertive style. This is a start in objectively analyzing your behavior and finding out where assertiveness training can most help you.

To further refine your assessment of the situations in which you need to be more assertive, complete the following questionnaire. Put a check mark in column A by the items that are applicable to you and then rate those items from 1–5 in column B:

1. comfortable
2. mildly uncomfortable
3. moderately uncomfortable
4. very uncomfortable
5. unbearably threatening

(Note that the varying degrees of discomfort can be expressed whether your inappropriate reactions are hostile or passive.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEN do I behave nonassertively?</th>
<th>A Check here if the item applies to me</th>
<th>B Rate from 1–5 for discomfort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking for help</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stating a difference of opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Receiving and expressing negative feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving and expressing positive feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with someone who refuses to cooperate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking up about something that annoys me</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking when all eyes are on me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Protesting a rip-off</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Saying “no”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Responding to undeserved criticism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Making requests of authority figures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negotiating for something I want</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Having to take charge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking for cooperation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Proposing an idea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with attempts to make me feel guilty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ask for a date or appointment</strong></td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WHO** are the people with whom I am nonassertive?

- Parents
- Fellow workers, classmates
- Strangers
- Old friends
- Spouse or mate
- Employer
- Relatives
- Children
- Acquaintances
- Sales people, clerks, hired help
- More than two or three people in a group
- Other

**WHAT** do I want that I have been unable to achieve with nonassertive styles?

- Approval for things I have done well
- To get help with certain tasks
- More attention, or time with my mate
- To be listened to and understood
- To make boring or frustrating situations more satisfying
- To not have to be nice all the time
- Confidence in speaking up when something is important to me
- Greater comfort with strangers, store clerks, mechanics, and so on
- Confidence in asking for contact with people I find attractive
- To get a new job, ask for interviews, raises, and so on
- Comfort with people who supervise me or work under me
To not feel angry and bitter a lot of the time  
To overcome a feeling of helplessness and the sense that nothing ever really changes  
To initiate satisfying sexual experiences  
To do something totally different and novel  
To have time by myself  
To do things that are fun or relaxing for me  
Other  

Evaluating your responses. Examine your answers, and analyze them for an overall picture of what situations and people threaten you. How does nonassertive behavior contribute to the specific items you checked on the What list? In constructing your assertiveness program, focusing initially on items you rated as falling in the 2–3 range will be useful. These are the situations that you will find easiest to change. Items that are very uncomfortable or threatening can be tackled later.

3. Describing Your Problem Scenes

The third step in assertiveness training, according to Sharon and Gordon Bower, is to describe your problem scenes. Select a mildly to moderately uncomfortable situation that suggests itself from items on the Assertiveness Questionnaire. Write out a description of the scene, being certain to include who the person involved is, when it takes place (time and setting), what bothers you, how you deal with it, your fear of what will take place if you are assertive, and your goal. Always be specific! Generalizations will make it difficult later on to write a script that will make assertive behavior possible in this situation. The following is an example of a poor scene description:

I have a lot of trouble persuading some of my friends to listen to me for a change. They never stop talking, and I never get a word in edgewise. It would be nice for me if I could participate more in the conversation. I feel that I'm just letting them run over me.

Notice that the description doesn't specify who the particular friend is, when this problem is most likely to occur, how the nonassertive person acts, what fears are involved in being assertive, and a specific goal for increased involvement in the conversation. The scene might be rewritten as follows:

My friend Joan (who), when we meet for a drink after work (when), often goes on nonstop about her marriage problems (what). I just sit there and try to be interested (how). If I interrupt her, I'm afraid she'll think I just don't care (fear). I'd like to be able to change the subject and talk sometimes about my own life (goal).
Here is a second poor scene description:

A lot of times I want to strike up a conversation with people, but I worry that maybe they don’t want to be disturbed. Often I notice someone who seems interested, but I can’t imagine how to get their attention.

Once again there is a lack of detail. No clear statement is made as to who these people are, when the experience takes place, how the nonassertive person behaves, or the specific goal. The described scene will become much more useful by including these elements:

There is an attractive girl (who) who always brings a bag lunch and often sits at my table in the cafeteria (what, where) at lunch (when). I just eat in silence and read my book (how). I would like to start a conversation by asking about her boss, who has a very hard-to-get-along-with reputation (goal), but she looks so intent on her book I’m afraid she would be put out if I interrupted (fear).

Write three or four problem scenes, and for each scene try to relive the thoughts and feelings you actually experienced. You might notice, for example, that in each problem scene you gun yourself down with negative thoughts (“I can’t do it . . . I’m blowing it again . . . boy, do I look stupid”), or you usually feel tense in the stomach and seem to be breathing way up in your chest. Some of the strategies in other chapters of this workbook that will help you cope with distressing habitual thoughts and physical reactions when you act assertively are: refuting irrational ideas, coping skills training, deep muscle relaxation, and breathing exercises. This chapter, however, primarily focuses on changing your habitual way of behaving in these problematic interpersonal situations.

4. Your Script for Change

The fourth step in assertiveness training is writing your script for change. A script is a working plan for dealing with the problem scene assertively. There are six elements in a script:

1. **Look at your rights, what you want, what you need, and what your feelings are about the situation.** Let go of blame, the desire to hurt, and self-pity. Define your goal and keep it in mind when you negotiate for change.

2. **Arrange a time and place to discuss your problem that is convenient for you and for the other person.** This step may be excluded when dealing with spontaneous situations in which you choose to be assertive, such as when a person cuts ahead of you in line.

3. **Define the problem situation as specifically as possible.** This is essential for focusing the discussion. Here is your opportunity to state the facts as you see them and share your opinion and beliefs. For example: “It’s time to make a decision about where we’re going to eat tonight. I know you love Mexican food, but we’ve eaten at Tijuana Joe’s the last three times we’ve gone out for dinner. We’re in a rut!”

4. **Describe your feelings so that the other person has a better understanding of how important the issue is to you.** Once they are expressed, your feelings can often play a major role in helping you get what you want, especially when your opinion differs markedly from that of your listener. If nothing else, the listener may be able to relate to and understand your feelings about an issue even when...
he totally disagrees with your perspective. When you share your feelings, you become less of an adversary.

There are three important rules to remember when assertively expressing your feelings:

1. Do not substitute an opinion for a feeling ("I feel that Mexican food should be abolished!"). A more accurate feeling statement is, "I hate Mexican food!"

2. Use "I messages" that express your feelings without evaluating or blaming others. Rather than saying, "You are inconsiderate" or "You hurt me," the I message would be, "I feel hurt."

3. I messages connect the feeling statement with specific behaviors of the other person. For example, "I feel hurt when you ignore my wishes about where we eat." Contrast the clarity of this message with the vague blame statement, "I feel hurt because you are inconsiderate."

5. Express your request in one or two easy-to-understand sentences. Be specific and firm! Instead of expecting others to read your mind and magically meet your needs, as in the case of the passive individual, clearly state your wishes and needs. Rather than assuming that you are always right and entitled to getting your way, as an aggressive person might, state your wants as preferences, not commands. For example, "I would really like to go to a French restaurant tonight."

6. Reinforce the other person to give you what you want. The best reinforcement is to describe positive consequences. "We'll save money... We'll have more time together... I'll give you a backrub... My mother will only stay a week... I'll be less tired and more fun to be with... I'll be able to get my work in on time... Little Julia will do better in school," and so on.

In some cases, positive reinforcement may be ineffective. If the person you're dealing with seems resistant or you feel that you're having trouble motivating him or her to cooperate with you, consider describing some negative consequences for failure to cooperate. The most effective negative consequences are descriptions of the alternative way you will take care of yourself if your wishes aren't accommodated.

- If we can't leave on time, I'll have to leave without you. Then you'll have to drive over later on your own.
- If you can't clean the bathroom, I'll hire someone to do it once a week and add it to your rent.
- If you won't fold and put away your clothes, I'll just leave them in this box. I guess you can sort through it whenever you need something.
- If you keep talking in this loud, attacking way, I'll leave. We can talk again tomorrow.
- If you drink heavily again at these office functions, I won't go with you.
- If your check bounces again, we'll have to work on a cash basis only.
- If you keep talking during the movie, I'm going to ask the manager to come in here.
- If you can't give me an accurate idea of when you'll be home, I'm not going to cook and keep things warm for you.
Notice that these examples are different from threats. The consequence of noncooperation is that the speaker takes care of his or her interests. The consequences are not designed to hurt, merely to protect the speaker. Threats usually don’t work because they make people so angry. If you do make a threat (“You won’t go to my sister’s wedding? I won’t go to your family reunion!”), make sure you are willing and able to back it up. Even then it will often do more harm than good.

The first letters of each script element (Look, Arrange, Define, Describe, Express, and Reinforce) combine to spell LADDER. You may find this a useful mnemonic device to recall the steps toward assertive behavior. The LADDER script can be used to rewrite your problem scenes so that you can assert what you want. Initially, LADDER scripts should be written out and practiced well in advance of the problem situation they are created for. Writing the script forces you to clarify your needs and increases your confidence in success.

As an example of a LADDER script, let’s say that Jean wants to assert her right to half an hour each day of uninterrupted peace and quiet while she does her relaxation exercises. Frank often interrupts with questions and attention-getting maneuvers. Jean’s script goes like this:

Look at your rights and goal in this situation.
It’s my responsibility to make sure Frank respects my needs, and I am certainly entitled to some time to myself.

Arrange a time and place to discuss the situation.
I’ll ask him if he’s willing to discuss this problem when he gets home tonight. If he isn’t, we’ll set a time and place to talk about it in the next day or two.

Define the problem specifically.
At least once, and sometimes more often, I’m interrupted during my relaxation exercises—even though I’ve shut the door and asked for the time to myself. My concentration is broken and I find that relaxing deeply is harder.

Describe your feelings using I messages.
I feel angry when my time alone is broken into and I feel frustrated that the exercises are then made more difficult.

Express your request simply and firmly.
I would like not to be interrupted when my door is closed, except in a dire emergency. As long as it is closed, assume that I am still doing the exercises and want to be alone.

Reinforce the other person to give you what you want.
If I’m not interrupted, I’ll come in afterward and chat with you. If I am interrupted, I will take more time to do the exercises.

In another example, Harold has felt very reluctant to approach his boss to find out why he was turned down for a promotion. He’s received no feedback about the reasons for the decision, and Harold is now feeling somewhat negative toward the company and toward his boss in particular. Harold’s script is as follows:

Look at rights and goal:
Resentment won’t solve this. I need to assert my right to reasonable feedback from employer.

Arrange meeting:
I’ll send him a memo tomorrow morning asking for time to discuss this problem.
Define problem:
I haven’t gotten any feedback about the promotion. The position I applied for has been filled by someone else, and that’s all I know.

Describe feelings:
I feel uncomfortable not knowing at all why I didn’t get it and how the decision was made.

Express request:
I’d like to get some feedback from you about how my performance is seen, and what went into the decision.

Reinforce:
I think your feedback will help me do a better job.

These scripts, like the problem scenes described earlier, are specific and detailed. The statement of the problem is clear and to the point, without blaming, accusing, or being passive. The feelings are expressed with I messages and are linked to specific events or behaviors, not to an evaluation of Jean’s husband or Harold’s boss. I messages provide a tremendous amount of safety for the assertive individual because they usually keep the other person from getting defensive and angry. You are not accusing anyone of being a bad person, you are merely stating what you want or feel entitled to.

Successful LADDER scripts do the following:

1. When appropriate, establish a mutually agreeable time and place to assert your needs.

2. Describe behavior objectively, without judging or devaluing.

3. Describe clearly, using specific references to time, place, and frequency.

4. Express feelings calmly and directly.

5. Confine your feeling response to the specific problem behavior, not the whole person.

6. Avoid delivering put-downs disguised as “honest feelings.”

7. Ask for changes that are reasonably possible, and small enough not to incur a lot of resistance.

8. Ask for no more than one or two very specific changes at a time.

9. Make the reinforcements explicit, offering something that is really desirable to the other person.

10. Avoid threats or negative consequences that you’re not willing or able to do.

11. Keep your mind on your rights and goals when being assertive.

Using these rules, we can now distinguish between good and bad scripts. For example, for two semesters running, Julie has wanted to take a night class in ceramics. Each time, her husband has an excuse for why he can’t watch the children on the class night. Here’s Julie’s script:
L  I'm sick of being pushed around,
A  so I'm going to tell him tonight.
D  A year is long enough to wait.
D  He's too selfish to help,
E  so he's just going to have to suffer every Wednesday night.
R  If he doesn't like it, he can just kiss this marriage good-bye.

Julie has violated these rules for a good script:
1. She didn't get an agreement on the time and place for the discussion.
2. She used nonspecific and accusing phrases such as “pushed around.”
3. She failed to specify exactly what the problem is.
5. She described her husband as selfish, rather than expressing her feelings about specific behaviors.
8. She did not specify times, or duration of the semester.
9. She threatened negative consequences that she isn't willing or able to carry out.

Julie’s script could be successfully rewritten as follows:

L  I have a right to have time to myself during which I can pursue interests of my own. I want to attend this ceramics class.
A  I'll ask him to discuss it after breakfast Saturday morning, or as soon afterward as possible.
D  I've missed two previous ceramics classes because you weren't available for babysitting on class night. I've waited a year and I would like to enroll this time.
D  I feel frustrated that I haven't been able to explore something that really excites me. I also feel hurt when you do other things rather than help me take the class.
E  I'd like you to look after the children on Wednesday nights between 6:30 and 9:00. The semester ends June 2.
R  If you're willing, I'll cook my special meatloaf for you on Wednesdays, but if you're not, we'll have the expense of a baby-sitter.

The described problem behavior has become specific and the expressed feelings are now nonthreatening. Julie's reinforcements are realistic and explicit. Note that negative reinforcement is often not necessary, and that positive reinforcement may require no more than the assurance that you will feel good if a certain behavior change is made. Elaborate promises can usually be avoided.

Now you can write your own LADDER scripts, using copies of the blank from on the next page. Then you can rehearse your written scripts in front of a mirror. If possible, tape-record your rehearsals to further refine your assertive style. Rehearsing scripts with a friend to get immediate feedback is helpful. Let yourself imagine or, better yet, act out the worst possible response that could be made to your assertive request. Get desensitized to the “nightmare” response by facing it, and then prepare your countermeasures.
Assertive Ladder Script

Look at your rights and goal in this situation.

Arrange a time and a place to discuss the situation.

Define the problem specifically.

Describe your feelings using "I messages."

Express your request simply and firmly.

Reinforce the other person to give you what you want.
Short Form Assertiveness Technique

The short form assertiveness technique is designed for situations where you lack the time or energy to prepare an entire LADDER script. Assertiveness can be condensed to three basic statements:

1. **Your thoughts** about the problematic situation. This is a nonblaming, nonpejorative description of the problem as you see it. You stick as closely as possible to objective facts, making no inferences about the motives or feelings of others.

2. **Your feelings.** These are *I* statements about your emotional reaction to the problem. Try to avoid the implication that you’re holding the other person responsible for your feelings. You’re angry, sad, hurt, or disappointed. But your main message should be that you are trying to solve a problem, not blame or prove the other person wrong.

3. **Your wants.** As in the LADDER script, make your request specific and behavioral. Don’t ask your tardy spouse to be “more considerate.” Request specifically that he call if he’ll be more than fifteen minutes late.

Whenever you’re in a situation that requires an assertive response, quickly run through the three short form components in your mind:

I think . . . we’ve been working every night for two weeks on our bathroom remodel.

I feel . . . tired, grumpy, and pressured by your desire that it be done in one month’s time.

I want . . . not to work more than three nights without one night off.

Make sure you’ve developed some idea of what you think, feel, and want before you start to speak. Try to express each component of your assertive statement in order. Finish one part before going on to the next.

Make a great effort to follow the rules about being nonblaming and making *I* statements. If you stick to these two simple rules, you’ll find the other person far less defensive and far more cooperative. Stay away from attempts to prove that your needs are more important or more legitimate than the other person’s. Just keep on track with a statement of facts, feelings, and a specific request for change.

Annie usually eats lunch with her co-worker, Marge. Once or twice a week Marge asks Annie to drop her by a bank or store on the way to eat. Annie finally reaches the boiling point when Marge has her drive forty minutes to get something notarized. Annie quickly reviews the three statements in short-form assertiveness:

I think . . . Once a week or more I help you with errands and we miss fifteen to thirty minutes of our lunch.

I feel . . . tired from rushing and disappointed that I don’t get to relax at lunch.

I want . . . to stop being a taxi service for you during my lunch hour.

The “I want” seemed a bit harsh and attacking, so Annie changed it to, “Let’s eat on our own if either of us has errands.”

Recall a problematic situation in your life. As an exercise in thinking on your feet, mentally composing an assertive message:
I think ... (just the facts)
I feel ... (expressed as an I statement)
I want ... (specific behavior change)

Now keep practicing. Think of at least three situations where you’d like to be more assertive. As you recall each one, pretend you are really there and have to make some response. Quickly go over the three parts of your assertive statement, then say them out loud. Listen to how they sound. Are they blaming? Is your request specific enough? Are you saying clearly what you want? Are you criticizing the other person’s motives or feelings? Correct what doesn’t sound right and try saying it again.

5. Assertive Body Language

The fifth step in assertiveness training is to develop assertive body language. Practicing with the mirror will help you follow these five basic rules:

1. Maintain direct eye contact.
2. Maintain an erect body posture.
3. Speak clearly, audibly, and firmly.
4. Don’t whine or use an apologetic tone of voice.
5. Make use of gestures and facial expression for emphasis.

6. Learning How to Listen

The sixth step of assertiveness training involves learning how to listen. As you practice being assertive in real-life situations, you will find that sometimes you need to deal with an issue that is important to the other person before he or she will be able to focus on what you have to say. This is especially true when what you want directly conflicts with long unspoken and unmet needs of the listener. For example, “You say you want an hour of silence when you first get home from work? Well, I haven’t said this before because you’re working so hard, but I’m ready to tear out my hair after spending the day with the kids. I have needs too, you know.” At this point, it might be wise to practice assertive listening.

In listening assertively, you focus your attention on the other person so that you can accurately hear the speaker’s opinions, feelings, and wishes. Assertive listening involves three steps:

1. Prepare. Become aware of your feelings and needs. Are you ready to listen? Are you sure that the other person is really ready to speak?

2. Listen and clarify. Give your full attention to the other person; listen to the speaker’s perspective, feelings, and wants. If you are uncertain about one of these three elements, ask the speaker to clarify with more information: “I’m not quite sure how you view the situation ... could you say more about it?” “How do you feel about this?” “I don’t understand what you want ... could you be more specific?”

3. Acknowledge. Communicate to the other person that you heard his or her position. For example, “I hear you don’t want to take on this new project because
you’re feeling overwhelmed with your current responsibilities and want to catch up.” Another way to acknowledge the other person’s feelings is to share your feelings about what has been said: “I’m feeling overwhelmed too, and I feel terrible about having to ask you to do more work.”

Assertive listening and assertive expressing go together. Here is a sequence in which both people use assertive listening and expressing skills to solve a problem. John is unhappy about the way Carmen communicates her needs to him.

John: Is this a good time to talk about something that’s bugging me a little? (Arrange.)

Carmen: Okay.

John: Yesterday you told me you were feeling cut off and kind of abandoned by me. (Define.) I felt like I was doing something horrible to you. I felt very wrong, but totally confused about exactly what I was doing. (Describe feeling.) Rather than making general complaints like that, could you say what I’m not doing that you need, or what I could change? (Express request.) I think I could be a lot more responsive that way. (Reinforce.)

Carmen: What was it you needed more information about? (Clarify.)

John: What you needed me to do, at that moment, to feel closer.

Carmen: Okay, so what you’re saying is that my talking about my feelings without making any specific requests for change leaves you feeling confused and responsible. (Acknowledge.)

John: Right.

Carmen: Well, sometimes I’m just telling you how I feel. I don’t know why I feel that way or what to do about it. Telling you is an attempt to open the discussion. (Redefining problem.)

John: I see. So you really aren’t sure what I could do at that point. (Acknowledge.) How about just saying you aren’t sure and asking what we could do about it together? Making it we instead of me would help a lot on my end. (New request.)

Carmen: That sounds right. I like it.

Notice that Carmen clarifies and acknowledges before attempting any further explanation of the problem from her point of view. Then, in a nonblaming way, she explains why she can’t go along with John’s request. John, in turn, acknowledges what Carmen has said. He then uses this new information to make a second proposal that works better for Carmen.

Here’s the rub: You can’t always expect the other person to play by the rules. There are times when you’ll have to express and listen assertively in the face of defensive or hostile reactions. Consider the case of Hal and Sara.

Sara: I have a problem with the cash projections, can we talk? (Arrange.)

Hal: Whatever.

Sara: Currently you’re only running them out to the next three months, and I can’t see how sales, inventory, and costs are going to interact six to eight months.
down the line. *(Define.)* I’m getting pretty nervous about the big printing bills because we don’t know if the money will be there. *(Describe feeling.)* Could you run out the cash projection at least six months? *(Express request.)* I think we’d all breathe easier. *(Reinforce.)*

**Hal:** Forget it, Sara. There’s no time. I haven’t got the bodies in my department to do stuff like that. Take a Valium and cool off.

**Sara:** How much extra work would it take? *(Clarify.)*

**Hal:** (loudly) Forget it, Sara. Forget it, okay?

**Sara:** I hear you. You’re overworked and haven’t the staff to take on anything extra. *(Acknowledge.)* But I’m wondering, how many extra hours of work are involved? *(Clarify.)*

**Hal:** At least twenty. Keep pushing, Sara. I’m up to here with everybody’s demands.

**Sara:** I hear how stressed you are. *(Acknowledge.)* If once a month I got a twenty-hour bookkeeper from the pool for you, could you handle it? *(New request.)*

**Hal:** Probably, Sara. Let me see the body first.

In the face of sarcasm and anger, Sara continues to clarify and acknowledge until she understands Hal’s problem. She doesn’t get sidetracked by hostile resistance. She keeps working to understand Hal’s stresses and needs so she can make a new, more acceptable proposal.

### 7. Arriving at a Workable Compromise

The seventh step of assertiveness training is learning to arrive at a workable compromise. When two people’s interests are in dire conflict, a fair compromise that totally satisfies both parties is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Instead, look for a workable compromise you both can live with, at least for a while. Although a compromise may naturally emerge in your discussion, sometimes you might need to make a list of all the alternative solutions you can think of. Cross off the ones that are not mutually acceptable. Finally, decide on a compromise you can both live with. This brainstorming process is most effective if you let your imaginations run wild while generating ideas. It’s best to agree to review a workable compromise in a specified length of time, such as a month. At that time, you can examine the results of your changed behavior. If you aren’t both sufficiently satisfied, you can renegotiate.

Typical compromise solutions include:

- My way this time, your way next time.
- Part of what I want with part of what you want.
- Meeting halfway.
- If you’ll do ________ for me, I’ll do ________ for you.
- We’ll do this one my way, but we’ll do ________ your way.
- We’ll try my way this time, and if you don’t like it you can veto it next time.
- My way when I’m doing it, your way when you’re doing it.
If you feel resistant to brainstorming and making lists of alternatives, try this simpler approach. When a person doesn’t want to give you what you want, ask for a counterproposal. If the counterproposal isn’t acceptable to you, make a new one of your own. But first do a little assertive listening to uncover the other person’s feelings and needs in the situation. Keep going back and forth with counterproposals until something works for both of you.

A second route to compromise is to ask this question: “What would you need from me to feel okay doing this my way?” The answer may surprise you and offer solutions you never thought of.

8. Avoiding Manipulation

The eighth and final step to becoming an assertive person is learning how to avoid manipulation. Inevitably, you will encounter blocking gambits from those who seek to ignore your assertive requests. The following techniques are proven ways of overcoming the standard blocking gambits.

**Broken record.** When you find that you are dealing with someone who won’t take no for an answer or refuses to grant you a reasonable request, you can carefully choose a concise sentence to use as your broken-record statement that you’ll say over and over again. You could say to your insistent four-year-old, “Jeff, I am not going to give you any more candy.” You might say to the aggressive used-car salesman, “I am not going to buy a car today; I’m just looking.” You might say to the uncooperative store clerk, “I want you to give me back my money for this defective radio.” Briefly acknowledge that you have heard the other person’s point, and then calmly repeat your broken-record statement without getting sidetracked by irrelevant issues. “Yes, but . . . Yes, I know, and my point is . . . I agree, and . . . Yes, and as I was saying . . . Right, but I’m still not interested.”

**Content-to-process shift.** Shift the focus of the discussion from the topic to an analysis of what is going on between the two of you. “We’re getting off the point now.” “We’ve been derailed into talking about old issues.” “You appear to be angry with me.”

**Defusing.** Ignore the content of someone’s anger, and put off further discussion until he has calmed down. “I can see that you are very upset and angry right now. Let’s discuss it later this afternoon.”

**Assertive delay.** Put off a response to a challenging statement until you are calm, have more information, or know exactly how you want to respond. “Yes . . . very interesting . . . I’ll have to reserve judgment on that . . . I don’t want to talk about it at this time.”

**Assertive agreement.** Acknowledge criticism you agree with. You don’t need to give an explanation unless you wish to. “You’re right. I did botch the Sudswell account.” “Thanks for pointing out that I was smiling when I was trying to say no to that salesman. No wonder I couldn’t get rid of him.” “You’re right, boss, I am half an hour late . . . my car broke down.”

**Clounding.** When someone is putting you down as a person, acknowledge something in the criticism you can agree with, and ignore the rest. **Agree in part:** “You’re right. I am late with the report.” **Agree in the probability:** “You may be right that I am often late.” **Agree in the principle (agreeing with the logic without agreeing with the premise):** “If I were late as often as you say, it certainly would be a problem.” When clounding, rephrase the critic’s
words so that you can honestly concur. By giving the appearance of agreeing without promising to change, you soon deplete the critic of any reason to criticize you.

**Assertive inquiry.** Invite criticism in order to find out what is really bothering the other person. “I understand you don’t like the way I chaired the meeting last night. What is it about my behavior that bothered you? What is it about me that you feel is pushy? What is it about my speaking out that bothers you?”

Prepare yourself against a number of typical blocking gambits that will be used to attack and derail your assertive requests. Some of the most troublesome blocking gambits include:

**Laughing it off.** Your assertion is responded to with a joke. “Only three weeks late? I’ve got to work on being less punctual!” Use the content-to-process shift (“Humor is getting us off the point”) and the broken record (“Yes, but . . .”).

**Accusing gambit.** You are blamed for the problem. “You’re always so late cooking dinner, I’m too tired to do the dishes afterward.” Use clouding (”That may be so, but you are still breaking your commitment”) or simply disagree (“Eight o’clock is not too late for the dishes”).

**The beat-up.** Your assertion is responded to with a personal attack. “Who are you to worry about being interrupted, you’re the biggest loudmouth around here.” The best strategies to use are assertive irony (“Thank you”) in conjunction with the broken record or defusing (“I can see you’re angry right now, let’s talk about it after the meeting”).

**Delaying gambit.** Your assertion is met with, “Not now, I’m too tired,” or “Another time, maybe.” Use the broken record, or insist on setting a specific time when the problem can be discussed.

**Why gambit.** Every assertive statement is blocked with a series of “why” questions, such as, “Why do you feel that way . . . I still don’t know why you don’t want to go . . . why did you change your mind?” The best response is to use the content-to-process shift (“Why isn’t the point. The issue is that I’m not willing to go tonight”) or the broken record.

**Self-pity gambit.** Your assertion is met with tears and the covert message that you are being sadistic. Try to keep going through your script using assertive agreement (“I know this is causing you pain, but I need to get this resolved”).

**Quibbling.** The other person wants to debate with you about the legitimacy of what you feel, or the magnitude of the problem, and so on. Use the content-to-process shift (“We’re quibbling now, and have gotten off the main concern”) with the assertion of your right to feel the way you do.

**Threats.** You are threatened with statements such as, “If you keep harping at me like this, you’re going to need another boyfriend.” Use assertive inquiry (“What is it about my requests that bothers you?”) as well as content-to-process shift (“This seems to be a threat”) or defusing.

**Denial.** You are told, “I didn’t do that,” or “You’ve really misinterpreted me.” Assert what you have observed and experienced, and use clouding (“It may seem that way to you, but I’ve observed . . .”).
Further Reading


