

## Assertiveness and Assertiveness Training

The term 'assertiveness' is often misunderstood. Consequently, to understand the concept and purpose of assertiveness training, it is important to understand what assertiveness is *not*.

Assertiveness training does *not* teach the student to be aggressive, loud, or bullying, although it may well help them to stand up to those who are. Assertiveness is not about trying to dominate others: it is a more a matter of resisting those who seek to dominate and manipulate you.

If well-taught, assertiveness training can help the student recognise when they are being abused or manoeuvred for someone else's benefit, and how to resist such treatment effectively *without* becoming angry and aggressive. It emphasises the value of clear, calm, frank communication as a means of establishing relationships in which everyone knows where they stand and no-one feels ill-used.

Assertiveness training can help those who have previously suffered in silence to speak up for themselves, and many students on assertiveness training courses are people who have suffered a loss of self-confidence due to destructive relationships in their personal or working lives. However, not all assertiveness training students are people who feel downtrodden and abused. Some people in positions of authority seek assertiveness training in order to learn how to persuade people to do as they wish without having to become a bully.

Assertiveness training as a method of personal development grew in popularity during the 1980s and 1990s, and the subject is now taught in many universities and colleges. Initially, it was seen primarily as a 'woman's subject' and associated with feminism, with the assertiveness training viewed as a means for women to escape from traditional, submissive female roles. The majority of assertiveness training students are still women, but over the years an increasing number of men have discovered its benefits.

### Manuel J Smith and the Bill of 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. The book explains that assertiveness is largely about expressing oneself clearly and resisting manipulation. It proclaims a ten-point 'Bill of Assertive Rights', all based around one key principle: *'The right to be the final judge of yourself is the prime assertive right which allows no one to manipulate you'*.

The 'Bill of Assertive Rights' in *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* reads as follows:

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 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 make mistakes - and be responsible for them.

You have the right to say, 'I don't know'.

You have the right to be independent of the goodwill of others before coping with them.

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'.

Smith's book explains that anger and fear induce automatic physiological responses that inhibit clear thinking and articulate verbal responses:

*When you become angry or afraid...the blood supply is automatically rerouted away from your brain and gut to your skeletal muscles to prepare them for physical action...You just don't think clearly or efficiently.*

## Feeling the Fear and Doing it Anyway

Fear is an essential warning mechanism. It is neither practicable nor desirable to eliminate all anxiety and apprehension from life, but we cannot be assertive if we let fear overwhelm us. The challenge for the assertive person is that made in the title of the 1991 book by Susan Jeffers that has become another of the standard reference works in assertiveness training: *Feel The Fear And Do It Anyway*.

Jeffers writes of the liberating realisation that: 'Not only am I going to experience fear whenever I'm on unfamiliar territory, but so is everyone else.' It therefore follows that personal growth cannot be accomplished without overcoming fear, since the exploration of 'unfamiliar territory' – learning new skills, meeting new people, having new experiences – is an essential component of personal development.

Jeffers also notes that 'The only way to get rid of the fear of doing something is to go out and do it.' In other words, by confronting challenges that have frightened us in the past, we can remove their power to intimidate us and thus build up our self-confidence and self esteem.

## Assertiveness Techniques

Assertiveness training involves the learning of skills and techniques for resisting manipulation and coping with criticism. Three of the key assertive techniques are Broken Record, Fogging and Negative Assertion.

### Broken Record

Broken record derives its name from the days before CDs, when vinyl was the dominant medium for audio reproduction. A faulty or dirty vinyl disc might 'stick' and repeat the same short snatch of music over and over again until the stylus was lifted from it. In the broken record technique, a request is repeated over and over again until the desired response is obtained or a workable compromise is reached. Attempts at distraction or changing the subject are resisted.

In the context of h2g2, it might work something like this:

**Researcher A:** *Could you finish writing your new Guide entry tonight like you promised me you would? It'd help me with the essay I have to write, and I'm really looking forward to reading it.*

**Researcher B:** *I'll do it some time soon. There's Extreme Plumbing Live From Niagara on the sports channel in five minutes, and I can't miss that.*

**A:** *You could tape that and watch it later. You promised that you'd write the Guide entry tonight, and it would help me a lot.*

**B:** *Do you really need it tonight? I've got a lot of other stuff to do.*

**A:** *Yes, I need it to write my essay. Come on, you did promise.*

**B:** *Anyway, haven't you got some Scouting to do?*

**A:** *That's true, but my Scout picks aren't due until next Thursday and my essay's due the day after tomorrow. I really need you to finish the Guide entry like you promised you would.*

**B:** *Tell you what, the show's only an hour long. I absolutely promise that I'll write the Entry as soon as it's finished. OK?*

**A:** *That's great. Thank you.*

Researcher A politely but firmly repeats the request, reminds Researcher B of the obligation, and refuses to be deflected from the point by B's attempts to bring in other factors. Eventually, with a little workable compromising, A gets the desired response and a mutually-acceptable plan is agreed upon.

### Fogging

Imagine that one day, when you were out walking, a thick fog descended and left you unsure of which way to turn. You might feel frustrated or angry, but there'd be nothing you could do to the fog to relieve the frustration. Punching the fog, throwing missiles at it or cursing it would leave it unaffected. This explains the name of one of the key techniques taught in assertiveness training. Fogging requires some self-control, but it can be devastatingly effective. This will have been discovered accidentally by many people who work in jobs that involve a lot of contact with the general public, many of whom must surely practice fogging regularly without being aware of the term.

Fogging involves training yourself to stay calm in the face of criticism, and agreeing with whatever may be fair and useful in it. By refusing to be provoked and upset by criticism, you remove its destructive power. Why, after all, should you crave someone else's complete approval, when doing so gives them power over you? After all, the 'Bill Of Assertive Rights' grants you the right to cope with people without necessarily enjoying their goodwill.

So, for instance, if someone calls you stupid, you can agree that sometimes you are. After all, everyone does foolish things sometimes. 'Stupid' is a relative term, and you probably *are* unintelligent if compared to, say, Professor Stephen Hawking. If someone criticises your work, you can probably agree that it could be better. Even if it's already pretty good, there's likely to be some way in which you could make it better still.

The point of fogging is that it robs your critic's words of their destructive power. While superficially it may seem like a submissive strategy, it is in fact assertive because of what it implies. By refusing to become upset or angry in the face of criticism, you're denying your critic the satisfaction of seeing you being intimidated and disempowered. If they're just trying to bully you, and their words don't overpower you, there's a good chance that they'll turn their attentions to someone else who's easier to intimidate.

Phrases typically used when fogging include: 'That could be true', 'You're probably right', 'Sometimes I think so myself', 'I agree', 'That's true', 'You're right' and 'You have a point there.' A phrase that is *never* used when fogging, but is constantly implied, is: 'So what?'

### **Negative Assertion**

But what if the person who's complaining has valid, specific points to make about how you can improve? Well, then you can use negative assertion. This simply means agreeing with those parts of the criticism that are valid, but without allowing yourself to become consumed by guilt and self-loathing.

So if they tell you that you're homework's late and it *is* late, admit it. Just say 'Yes, you're right. I need to organise my time better' - or words to that effect. Then change your behaviour if you want to, or don't change if you don't want to - but either way, don't beat yourself up just because you've been criticised.

Another form of negative assertion is simply owning up to your mistakes before anyone's even taken you to task for them: for instance, by turning up late at the office and simply saying 'Hi, I'm late'. In that situation, you are acknowledging that there's a problem and accepting responsibility for the situation, which should count in your favour with any bosses or colleagues who are annoyed with you. An example of this kind of negative assertion on h2g2 would be the Researcher who goes to Editorial Feedback to admit that they made a mistake in their Edited Entry before anyone else had spotted it.

Assertiveness training teaches that it's also important to acknowledge compliments, and accept them if you believe them to be sincere (rather than manipulative buttering-up) and agree with the nice things that are being said about you. The really important thing is that, at all times, you are the ultimate judge of your own behaviour.

### **DESC Scripting**

Another useful skill taught in assertiveness training classes is the technique for framing complaints or requests known as DESC Scripting.

The acronym 'DESC' stands for '**D**escribe, **E**xpress, **S**pecify, **C**onsequences'. In the 'Describe' part of the DESC script, you say what seems to you to be happening. In the 'Express' part, you say how it's making you feel. In the 'Specify' part, you say what you'd like to happen. Finally, in the 'Consequences' part, you say what will happen if you don't get what you want.

So, for instance, you might tell your flatmate:

'You're playing your Britney Spears CD really loud again.' (**D**escription)

'It's really getting on my nerves, and distracting me while I'm trying to write my Guide entry.'  
(**E**xpress how you feel.)

'I'd like you to turn it down, please.' (**S**pecify what you want to happen.)

'If you don't, I'll play some Radiohead with the volume cranked up later while you're trying to watch *Big Brother*.' (Say what the **C**onsequences will be if your request is not met.)

The **C**onsequences bit of the DESC Script need not be a negative sanction. Often it can be more effective to use a positive inducement. So the **C**onsequences section in the above example might be: 'And then I'll get us a pizza when I've finished the Guide entry' instead. You could also offer a less tangible inducement - for instance: 'And then I think we'll get along better'.

### **Transactional Analysis**

An assertiveness training course is also likely to include some tuition in the analysis of human interaction and the roles people play. Transactional Analysis, developed by Eric Berne, is one method of examining relationships that is now commonly used in assertive training and other psychology-related courses, and many UK universities and colleges also offer courses entirely devoted to transactional analysis itself.

The central idea of transactional analysis is that human beings have three basic 'ego-states': parent, adult and child. People move between these three ego-states, or states of mind, whether or not they are in fact parents, children or adults.

The Parent ego-state is based on the instructions a person received during the earliest years of their life. When in the parent ego-state later in life, they'll unconsciously replay the tone and/or content of the instructions they got from adult authority figures as a young child. Consequently, they'll try to guide and control others' behaviour, either with good intentions or with the intention of manipulating their subject to their own advantage. The adult ego-state is a more analytical mode of thinking and behaviour, based upon analysis of personal experience. The child ego-state is that of the uncomprehending infant, reacting to experiences in an emotional, instinctive, non-analytical way. When in the child state, a person is likely to be dependent, looking to others to tell them what to do and fulfil their needs, though they may also be playful and creative.

We often switch between the different ego-states unconsciously in response to others' behaviour. If someone is in the child ego-state, and is behaving irrationally in a way that obstructs our aims, we may slip into the parent ego-state and try to control them - for instance, by telling someone to stop being noisy when you're trying to work. While this might achieve the short-term goal of getting you some peace from what you perceive as their prattling, it's not the sort of exchange that builds mutually respectful and constructive relationships. Transactional analysis training can help the student to recognise their own different ego-states, so that they can understand their own behaviour better and try to avoid the traps associated with each ego-state. It aims to promote interaction between people based on the attitude of mutual respect neatly encapsulated in the title of the best-selling book that first brought transactional analysis to a mass audience in the late 1960s: Thomas A Harris' *I'm OK, You're OK*.

Transactional analysis examines the effects of the equal and unequal exchanges people have when in different ego-states. It emphasises the importance of a person's early development on subsequent behaviour, suggesting that dysfunctional behaviour can be the result of a 'life script' learned in early childhood. Examining and, where necessary, changing, the life script is the aim of transactional analysis psychotherapy. Replacing destructive 'life-scripting' with something more conducive to co-operative and mutually beneficial relationships is among the aims of other applications of transactional analysis - such as its use in assertiveness training.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A2998551>