



## Mountains Into Molehills

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**Mountains Into Molehills** is a free internet book which aims to build understanding of self and others. It integrates relevant theory with practical step by step guides to coping with stressful situations, and handling difficult situations assertively.

### Chapter Seven – How To Become More Self Confident And Assertive

1. Reasons to be assertive
2. Assertive Behaviours
3. What is assertive behaviour
4. How assertive are you? Self Assessment
5. Assertive conversations
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7. Breaking out of the vicious circle of avoidance
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11. What's stops us being assertive...  
..... and what to do about it
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To be read in conjunction with Chapter Six 'Overcoming Lack of Confidence in Some Situations' and Chapter Eight 'Difficult Conversations'

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## Reasons Given By Clients For Wanting To Be More Assertive

No doubt you have your own reasons for wanting to be more assertive.

These are some of the reasons often given by my clients

- I want to stand up to my mother/ father/sister/boss
- I want to stop being bullied by family members
- I want to be able to handle difficult people and difficult situations
- I want to be able to deal with conflict
- I want to be able to get my point across at work
- I want to be able to speak in groups and social situations
- I want to be able to speak to strangers - handle introductions etc
- I want to be assertive in dealing with friends in a work situation
- I want to be assertive with anyone making my job difficult
- I want to be assertive without appearing aggressive
- I want to be more assertive with aggressive people on the phone
- I want to be able to open a conversation
- I want to be more confident speaking to someone I am not close to
- I want to feel confident in a group and in large social situations
- I want to learn how to stand up for myself
- I want to please people without being a pushover
- I want to say 'NO' without feeling guilty
- I want to speak more confidently
- I want to stop being afraid how I will react in unfamiliar situations

Assertive Behaviours –  
If you act positive you will feel more positive

DO

- Hold your head up
- Raise your voice energy to the level of the other person
- Speak firmly – don't mutter
- If they stand you stand
- Use positive language especially the 'I' word – 'I want' 'I feel' 'I need'
- Walk confidently, but – in interviews sit only when invited
- Don't agree reluctantly – keep talking or say 'NO'
- Don't back down too easily
- Don't knock others
- Use repetition to hold your ground – use the Stuck Record
- Use the 'Stop' hand signal when people are going on at you
- Use the 'I have something to say' hand signal – just hold your hand up like you are back in school and want to say something in class
- Use silence to signal your disagreement but check that your silence is not interpreted as meaning 'I agree' when you don't
- Smile when on the phone
- Stand when on the phone

DON'T

- Don't divert eyes down to avoid eye contact
- Don't put yourself down, knock yourself or your achievements
- Don't play victim – making excuses, blaming anybody or anything except you.
- Don't keep apologizing
- Don't laugh at something you find objectionable just to be liked

When meeting someone for the first time dress appropriately and plan how will you spend the first minute:-

- Move assertively – don't creep about
- Make good eye contact
- Good handshake when appropriate
- Stay in the 'Here and Now' concentrate on what is going on and listen intently – gets your attention away from yourself

Remember: Choosing assertive language and body language will not only send signals to the other person. It will also influence your state of mind and make you feel more confident

**Exercise:** Sit down. Go limp, droop your shoulders, lower you eyes, look down. Speak quietly. **How do you feel?**

Now stand up, hold yourself erect, head high, shoulders back, hands clasped behind your back, speak louder than usual. This is called 'The Duke of Edinburgh Posture' **Now how do you feel?**

### Remember

No-one can make you feel inferior without your permission

### Know what you want

If you can't make your mind what you want how can you ever ask for it? The most difficult thing to overcome for a passive person may be indecisiveness. If you are passive you have to learn to start deciding what you want in situations, stop sitting on the fence – then you can pursue what you want assertively

### What is assertive behaviour?

1. It's knowing what we want and communicating our needs, wants, and feelings clearly when appropriate
2. Its about deciding what we want, evaluating if its fair, and asking clearly for what we have decided is fair
3. It's about being aware of our rights and feeling OK about pursuing them
4. Doing this, confidently, sensitively, and courteously
5. Doing this without infringing other people's rights.
6. It's not using passive or aggressive behaviour unless appropriate
7. Its about giving and receiving complements easily
8. Its about giving and accepting fair feedback
11. It's about being prepared to take risks in being open
12. It's about not being put on, nor putting on, others.

### Watch out for the passive to aggressive pendulum

Sometimes when people who are passive start to be assertive they get carried away and swing straight over to aggressive.

## How Assertive Are You

Exercise: Identify the areas of assertive behaviour which need most work. Rank yourself against each of the following on a scale of 1 to 4.

'No' = 1

Rarely = 2

Often = 3

Normally = 4

1. I find it easy to decide what I want
2. I express my needs and feelings sensitively and courteously
3. I consider other people's rights and still ask for what's fair
4. I don't 'sweep problems under the carpet'
5. I don't let myself be put on: I say 'No' when I want to say 'No'
6. I am comfortable expressing my opinion
7. I am comfortable complementing and being complemented
8. I am comfortable giving constructive criticism
9. I take risks in being open
10. I am prepared to take the lead

TOTAL SCORE

[Maximum Possible 40]

The higher your score the more assertive you are!

## Assertive Conversations

It's strange that the conversations which we find most difficult and which most challenge our confidence, are potentially a blessing in disguise! Why do I say that?

Because in learning how to face up to situations which we have found difficult in the past we can acquire the keys which will enable us to escape from our lack of self confidence in some situations. By exposing ourselves to the situations we fear over a period of time we can escape into a new self confident world, boost our self esteem, and banish fears which have terrorized us.

In understanding how this works lets first look at the nature of self confidence, and at the other side of the coin, lack of confidence in some situations.

Imagine a concert pianist. Imagine her sitting there playing at the Albert Hall in London in front of a full house. She performs brilliantly. At one moment attacking her music with vigour and energy, at another soft, gentle, caressing the key board in moments of great beauty and gentleness. She is in total control, totally confident in her ability to do what she does and do it well. Her audience applauds long and enthusiastically. She takes her bows, smiling, confident, accomplished, savouring her triumph. At this moment her self esteem is high.

Now picture her in another situation. This time she is in the audience at a concert. The conductor spots her and calls on her up onto the stage to make an impromptu speech of encouragement to the young musicians in the orchestra and in the audience. She climbs the steps to the platform her head whirling with thoughts of what to say. She stumbles, stutters, rushes. She is relieved when it is over and leaves the stage remarking to the conductor on the way back to her seat how much she hates making speeches. Her self confident self has disappeared. At this moment her self esteem is low.

The same person! At one moment confident, competent, enjoying herself. At another moment stumbling, incompetent, and lacking in confidence! How could this be?

This is because confidence is situational. Everyone lacks confidence in some situations. Everyone, including you, feels confident in some situations.

There is no such thing as someone who is totally lacking in self confidence. Its just that everyone is lacking in self confidence in some situations.

Until now you may have thought of yourself as 'not self confident'. You are wrong. Believe me, you are self confident in some situations. Its just that you are not self confident in certain situations, perhaps many situations, but you are still self confident sometimes.

To prove this to yourself please take a few moments to make a list of the situations in which you feel self confident. Think of your typical day. Go through all the things you do, however minor. List the things you do confidently right from making tea at home through to talking to close friends and family. Ignore all the situations where you have not been confident so far.

Writing the list should help you realise that you are not totally lacking in self confidence. Please never again label yourself as not self confident. Its just that you lack self confidence in some situations. This is the same for all of us. However confident we seem there are situations when we are far from confident – just like you.

So what makes the difference between when we are confident in a situation and when we aren't?

Let's consider again the concert pianist. She has practiced her piano skills many many times and knows she can perform well; she has many good memories of the applause and recognition. She has also learned to handle her own thoughts when things do not go so well.

When invited unexpectedly to say a few words she was being asked to do something she did not have much experience of, something which she had unpleasant memories about from previous occasions, and something which she believed she could not do well.

From this look at both aspects of one person we can see that the keys to confidence are:-

- A. The specific situation
- B. The level of experience in handling that situation
- C. Positive memories about that situation
- D. Self belief – belief that you can handle that situation well

Recall now a situation in which you are [as yet] lacking self confidence and you will soon understand why.

- i. How often have you chosen to put yourself in that situation?
- ii. What are your memories about that situation?
- iii. How do you feel about that situation?
- iv. How do you behave in that situation?
- v. Do you believe that you can handle that situation well in the future?

What do your answers look like?

I'll bet that you try to avoid that situation, have bad memories about it, feel bad about it, don't behave assertively when in that situation, and don't believe you could ever handle the situation well!

All this adds up to the very opposite of what will help you to approach the situation feeling confident. It turns you into the pianist making a speech, not the pianist playing the piano!

### So how can we develop self confidence and build self esteem?

As you know only too well, life is full of potentially scary situations. Although you may find it hard to believe at the moment, you can learn to look on these difficult situations as opportunities for practice so that you can develop your competence, build positive memories, begin to accept that you can handle situations which you once feared. In fact the more difficult situations you choose to face the more your self confidence will grow.

Benjamin Disraeli the British Prime Minister in the 19<sup>th</sup> century inspired me to become a confident speaker by the way he overcame his fear of speaking in public. He had a stutter and was laughed down during his maiden speech in the house of commons. He made a resolution to the effect that 'It's OK to choose not to speak - but when I am afraid to speak I must speak. He became one of the great orators of all time!

There is an alternative to avoidance. There is always an alternative. We can choose to try to hide from scary situations by avoiding them. In this way we can get some short term relief. However we cannot hide from the fear that we may have to face such situations one day. The fear of what we might have to do into reaches into our lack of self confidence prison, and forces us to experience in our minds what we avoid experiencing in reality, causes us to shudder and turn away.

We can get short term relief trying to avoid pursuing our assertive rights in our contacts with others. We can choose to let people walk all over us. We can put up with abuse of our rights. We can bottle up the things we would like to say, bottle up our anger. We can stay silent in the face of injustice. We can stand by and watch others be abused. We can choose to live in the shadows as though we, and how we think and feel, do not matter.

Or we can decide that enough is enough. We do matter, we have rights, including the right to express ourselves, to be heard, to stand for things. We can decide to push out the walls of our prison, to break free.



**How Big Is The Prison You Have Been Living In?**

To break out of the prison of passiveness and lack of self confidence.....

.....the first, and most important thing for you to do is:

- A. Start deciding what you want and
- B. Make the decision to pursue what you want

Until you make that decision you are stuck, absolutely stuck where you are right now.

- Don't worry about the possible consequences of your decision to be more assertive. Just take the decision.
- Having taken the decision to be more assertive make a 'contract' with yourself. Write down 'I am going to be more assertive' in big, bold, writing.
- Put your contract where you will see it often, a constant reminder of your decision to change the way you are, to change your life, to choose freedom to express yourself, to be yourself, to go for what you want.
- Congratulate yourself on taking THE DECISION. Give yourself a treat. Do something nice, eat something nice, buy something. Whatever 'a treat' means to you.

'How do I develop this new assertive me?'

Lets look at the keys to success mentioned earlier:

1. Competence in being assertive in handling specific difficult situations
2. Good memories of similar situations in the past
3. Positive belief that you can handle the situation well

Lets compare this with where you might be at the moment

1. Competence in being assertive in handling specific scary situations.

You aren't competent in scary situations because you have been avoiding them

2. Good memories of similar situations in the past.

You don't have them. What memories you have cause you to fear the situation.

3. Belief that you can handle the situation well.

You don't have it

Fear has led you to avoid, which has led leads to lack of practice, which has reinforced fear, which has led to avoidance, which.....

This is the vicious circle that keeps you prisoner to passivity and fear.

- Avoidance leads to lack of competence and exaggeration of imagined difficulties.
- Bad memories and thoughts create a conviction that you will fail if you take the risk.
- This leads to further avoidance, and so the vicious circle remains unbroken.

How do you break out of this vicious circle of lack of competence, bad memories, and lack of confidence about tackling difficult situation?

How do you break into a virtuous circle of competence, good memories, and confidence to tackle future situations? What is to come first, the chicken or the egg?

How can you have the competence, good memories, and confidence which come from handling situations if you don't have the competence, good memories, and confidence to start tackling the situations in the first place?

It's a bit like the starting handle which they have on vintage cars. The confidence to get going is what you need. Where do you get your starting handle from?

These are some important things you can do  
to create a virtuous circle.

1. You have already made a start, by developing your understanding of what assertive behaviour is.

2. You can read Chapter **XXXX** which describes the best ways to tackle difficult situations:

- The Three Step Sequence In Saying 'No'
- How To Calm Down An Angry Person
- How To Safely Express The Way You Feel
- How to Ask Assertively For What You Want
- How To Give Negative Feedback Positively
- Challenging Gently
- When On The Receiving End Of Criticism

3. You can use positive visualisation and other techniques to help you to overcome the fear of being assertive in specific **situations** [See Chapter Six]

4. START IN A SMALL WAY USING A TEN STEP PLAN

Until you start to face the situations you find scary you will remain stuck as you are. You can 'dive in the deep end' or you can start in a small way building up your confidence gradually. That's what the 'The Ten Step Approach' in **Chapter XXX** is all about. So you should read **Chapter xxxx** and construct your plan for gradual, step by step, exposure to the situations where you have lacked confidence in the past.

- Practice will bring success
- Practice will bring competence
- Practice will bring self belief

Success, competence, and self belief will encourage you to practice more and the virtuous cycle of practice, success, good memories, rising self belief, and more practice will be energized. This virtuous circle will eventually obliterate the vicious cycle of avoidance, lack of competence, bad memories, lack of self belief.

It will not be easy, it will require courage and determination and patience with yourself. You will have to constantly remind yourself why you are putting yourself through it.

One day you will be so very glad that you faced your demons and escaped from your prison of fear.

## AFFIRMATIONS, PERMISSIONS, AND RIGHTS

In choosing to be assertive and working to develop increased self confidence its very helpful to have a some things which you can say to yourself which inspire confidence. You can use these messages drown out your internal negative voice with a new voice, one that supports you, encourages you, reminds you that you have it in you to succeed.

### Unhelpful beliefs

Many of the things we believe about ourselves result from the messages we got from parent figures [our real parents, but also teachers, aunties, uncles, grandparents]. Some of the negative things we believe about ourselves were never said - we worked them out for ourselves from the way we experienced their behaviour toward us. Often the things we learned to believe about ourselves had no basis in reality, it's just the way it seemed to us. Our beliefs about ourselves, the world, and others are often self limiting.

The language of the Parent in our heads can be full of should's, shouldn't, must's, mustn't, can's, can't, ought's, ought not's, right's, and wrong's. In Transactional Analysis [TA] these parental instructions which our inner Child receives when we are in Parent Ego State are called Injunctions and Drivers. They include lots of Don'ts, including 'Don't Be You' and some unhelpful Do's such as 'Please Others'.

### That damned chatterbox

Throughout our lives our inner chatterbox has been reminding us of parental messages, reminding us what to do if we are to win approval. The Child inside us still believes these messages, just as we used to believe other things they told us which were untrue [Father Christmas, the tooth fairy, the bogey man, etc]. We unlearned the Father Christmas and other stuff, but we didn't yet unlearn the other fiction - the fiction about what we must do, how we must be, to be a good person, an OK person.

Affirmations, Permissions, and Rights are true statements which are more helpful than some of the ones we have.

Affirmations, Permissions, and Rights are one of the ways to achieve a more realistic and helpful view of ourselves and the world. In fact they may well be the very opposite of what you have been believing. The magic is that if we suspend disbelief, if we keep using affirmations, permissions, and rights with conviction, they can become our new beliefs about ourselves.

When we use affirmations, permissions, and rights statements we are giving our brain an alternative view of ourselves so we have a choice about what to believe. If our thoughts about ourselves are mainly negative and self limiting how can our brain help us be more positive. By offering an alternative view, a positive, powerful, resourceful, successful, assertive, self confident view of ourselves we are sending a clear message to our brain about how we are determined to be.

Affirmations, Permissions, and Rights help us overcome unhelpful voices from our childhood and help us to be the way we want to be.

### Combat each negative thought with a positive thought

Do this until it becomes reflex, an automatic reaction. Whenever you catch yourself having a negative thought slam it on the head with a positive thought – and congratulate yourself on spotting what your chatterbox was trying to do to you. It's OK to talk to yourself out loud in private – never let your negative chatterbox have the final word!

#### A selection of rights

- ✓ I have the right TO BE, to exist and take space
- ✓ I have the right to ask for what I need
- ✓ I have the right to be myself
- ✓ I have the right to say 'No'
- ✓ I have the right to refuse to explain why when I say 'NO'
- ✓ I have the right to refuse to be involved
- ✓ I have the right to express my opinion
- ✓ I have the right to stand for things

#### A selection of affirmations

- ✓ Whatever happens I can handle it
- ✓ I am not perfect, but I am good enough
- ✓ When I choose to take risks, to face my fear, I choose to grow

## A selection of permissions

- ✓ I give myself permission to say how I feel
- ✓ I give myself permission to be fallible: to make mistakes
- ✓ I give myself permission to say 'NO'
- ✓ I give myself permission to be passive when I choose
- ✓ I give myself permission to be aggressive when I choose
- ✓ I give myself permission to say nothing when I choose
- ✓ I give myself permission not to have a snappy answer
- ✓ I give myself permission to walk away
- ✓ I give myself permission to cry, and to show emotion
- ✓ I give myself permission to admit when I need advice

*THE KEY TO SUCCESS IN USING AFFIRMATIONS, PERMISSIONS, & RIGHTS*

Choose a few that feel most powerful and relevant to you. Write them on index cards and put the cards where you will come across them often. Remember – your chatterbox has been sending you self limiting messages for years, maybe ever since you can remember. To replace those self limiting messages will take time and constant repetition too.

Aspects of the way we are, the way we think, and reality, which stop us communicating assertively, openly, and appropriately

### 1. You have not yet made the decision to be assertive

You wish that you could be assertive but the thought scares you and you have not taken a definite decision to tackle your lack of assertiveness, to overcome your fears. **What's needed:** Take your decision

### 2. You don't know how to be assertive, how to handle the situations

**you would like to.** **What's needed:** Familiarise yourself with Chapter Eight 'Difficult Conversations'

### 3. You are afraid:

- Conflict phobia
- Fear of being blamed if they do it your way and it goes wrong
- Fear of the consequences if you speak out
- Fear that you may lose control if you open your mouth
- You are afraid to risk damage to an important relationship
- You are afraid of hurting peoples feelings

- You fear an aggressive and hurtful response
- You fear criticism and won't risk a slanging match
- Fear of looking foolish. 'Better to keep your mouth shut and feel a fool than open your mouth and prove it!'
- You fear that people will look down on you if you admit to being scared, feeling sad, feeling angry, or not understanding something.
- You are afraid to show how human, vulnerable, and fallible you are – just like the rest of us!
- You are ashamed of what you see as weaknesses and don't want others to know about them.

**What's needed:** Be prepared to take risks.

**Ninety nine percent of what we fear never happens  
The fear is usually much worse than the reality**

- Read Chapter Six – 'Don't Panic: Preparing For Situation That Make You Anxious'
- Use Affirmations, Permissions, and Rights

**5. You bury your anger; behave in a passive aggressive way**

- You collect anger stamps. You let things build up without expressing your feelings. Your resentment remains unexpressed and grows. This blinds you to anything good about some people. You stop communicating. You plan a big showdown one day.
- You prefer to get even rather than sort the problem out. You take pride in controlling your reaction and suffer silently.
- You enjoy winding other people up and spreading misinformation
- You believe that people can read minds that you should not need to say what you want, how you feel.

**What's needed:** Express your views and needs openly when it is safe to do so

**6. You have a paranoid tendency: you assume everyone has an ulterior motive and will misuse what you say**      **What's needed:** Be aware when paranoia is blocking assertive communication. Check out how likely it is that your paranoia is justified

**7. Your Values make it impossible to say 'No'**

Love of another person, your ideas about being of service, your sense of responsibility, your feelings that something bad will happen if you personally don't help. You choose to put others first and say 'yes' when often your own needs and feelings cry out to say 'no'.      **What's Needed:** Learn how to say 'NO' [See Chapter Eight]

### 8. Feelings of helplessness

- You feel other people always treat you unfairly and nothing you can say or do will change it.
- You feel that there is no point in tackling things, think nothing will change. You may think 'Who am I to think I can do something about that'.
- You have got used to not being listened to, to feeling powerless, and impotent. You think 'They won't listen if I do say anything' – so you don't. You may also think 'Who am disagree when others seem so sure...'
- You are dealing with someone who won't take 'NO' for an answer so you don't bother to try **What's needed:** Stop discounting yourself. Choose some affirmations which counter your thoughts and use them frequently until you believe them.

## Reading List

Mountains Into Molehills Chapter Four  
Why Conflict Occurs and What To Do About It

Mountains Into Molehills Chapter Six  
Overcoming Lack of Confidence in Specific Situations

Mountains Into Molehills Chapter Eight  
Difficult Conversations

Feel The Fear and Do It Anyway [ ]  
Susan Jeffers ISBN 0 09 974100 8

The Feeling Good Handbook David D Burns  
Plume ISBN 0-452-28132-6

Saying No Without Feeling Guilty  
Patti Breitman & Connie Hatch ISBN 0 09 182224 6

Difficult Conversations Douglas Stone & others  
Penguin 1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2