

THINKING SUCCESS

# The Assertiveness Toolkit



*Five tools to speak up,  
stand firm, and stay kind*

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*Clear Thinking. Real Change.*

## WELCOME

## If you've said yes when you meant no, you're in the right place.

Most of us have lost count of the times it's happened. You agreed to the thing you didn't want to do. You stayed quiet when you had something to say. You walked out of a conversation angry at yourself, not at them — wishing you'd spoken up, set the limit, held the line. And then you lay awake at three in the morning rehearsing what you should have said.

You are not alone, and you are not weak. Most people struggle with assertiveness in at least some situations. Maybe you're fine at work but can't set limits with your family. Maybe you hold your ground with strangers but crumble with people you love. Maybe you're superb in writing and fall apart in person.

Here's the good news, which I'll get to straight away: assertiveness is a skill, not a personality trait. You weren't born passive or aggressive — you learned the patterns you have, and you can learn new ones.

This toolkit gives you five tools to start. They're drawn from cognitive behavioural therapy and from real clinical practice, and they work.

### What this toolkit is

This isn't a book. It isn't a course. It's a short, practical collection of the five tools I give clients most often in the first few sessions of assertiveness work — each designed to be used on its own. You don't need to read the whole thing before you can start. Pick the tool that fits the situation you're in.

### A few things worth knowing up front

- Every tool in here is drawn from work with real clients. They're clinical tools, not confidence hacks.
- Some will feel natural straight away. Some will take practice. Both are fine.
- Assertiveness is not about winning arguments. It's about being heard — and hearing others — with mutual respect.
- If something feels uncomfortable, notice that. The discomfort is often the most useful signal in the toolkit.

**A note on assertiveness vs aggression.** These are not the same thing. Being assertive does not mean being rude, cold, or combative. In fact, if your assertiveness sounds like aggression, it's a sign you've been passive for too long — and you're overcorrecting. Proper assertiveness is quiet, steady, and deeply respectful of both people. We'll come back to this.

## TOOL 01

# The Quick Assertiveness Check

**For use:** before you start. To see your pattern clearly.

Before you can change a pattern, you need to see it clearly. This short self-check helps you identify where assertiveness already comes easily to you — and where it doesn't. You may already have a rough sense. The value of writing it down is in the specificity.

### Instructions

Rate each statement from 0 to 5, where 0 means 'no problem at all' and 5 means 'I really struggle with this.' Be honest. Nobody sees this but you.

#	Situation	Score 0–5
1	Saying no to a friend who asks a favour	
2	Expressing a different opinion in a group	
3	Sending back food that isn't right in a restaurant	
4	Telling someone their behaviour is bothering you	
5	Asking for help when you need it	
6	Accepting a compliment without deflecting	
7	Speaking up in a meeting at work	
8	Setting a limit with a family member	
9	Disagreeing with someone you respect	
10	Asking for what you want in a relationship	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>/ 50</b>

## What your score means

0 – 10	You're already quite assertive. This toolkit will sharpen your skills for the trickier moments — the ones that still catch you out.
11 – 25	A mixed picture — assertive in some areas, struggling in others. Very common, and very workable.
26 – 40	Assertiveness is a significant challenge right now. You have the most to gain from learning these skills.
41 – 50	You're finding it very difficult across most situations. This toolkit is your starting point. The full course is your programme for change.

### Your top three

Look at your highest-scoring items — the ones where you struggle most. Write them here. These are your priority areas.

1.

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2.

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3.

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**What to do with this.** As you read the rest of the toolkit, keep these three situations in mind. Each tool is designed to be applied to specific situations — so the question to ask yourself with each one is: how would this have changed what happened last time?

## TOOL 02

## Your Bill of Assertive Rights

**For use:** first thing in the morning, for a week, until they stop feeling uncomfortable.

Assertiveness is built on a simple idea — you have rights. Not legal rights. Human rights. The right to have feelings, to express them, to be treated with respect. Most people who struggle with assertiveness have quietly given these rights away, often without noticing, and often years ago.

Read the list below slowly. If any of them feel uncomfortable — or genuinely hard to accept as true — that's worth noticing. It's usually a sign of exactly the belief that's been holding you back.

01	I have the right to express my feelings, opinions and beliefs.
02	I have the right to say no, without feeling guilty.
03	I have the right to set my own priorities, and make my own decisions.
04	I have the right to be treated with respect and dignity.
05	I have the right to make mistakes — and to be responsible for them.
06	I have the right to change my mind.
07	I have the right to say 'I don't know' or 'I don't understand.'
08	I have the right to ask for what I want.
09	I have the right to disagree with other people.
10	I have the right to choose not to assert myself in any given situation.

**The key insight.** These rights come with a matching responsibility — you extend the same rights to everyone else. Your right to say no is also theirs. Your right to disagree is theirs too. Assertiveness is not about winning. It is about mutual respect, held firmly in both directions.

### Which ones feel hardest?

Circle the ones that feel uncomfortable to claim. Then write them out here, in your own words:

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### How to use this

- Read the list every morning for a week. Out loud, if you can bear it.
- On the rights that feel hardest, ask yourself: whose voice is saying this is wrong?
- Treat the discomfort as information, not as truth. It shows you what's been quietly running.

## TOOL 03

## The Three Communication Styles

**For use:** to recognise which style you're in — and shift, in real time.

Every interaction you have uses one of three styles. Passive. Aggressive. Assertive. Most people default to one of them, slide into a different one under pressure, and never quite notice they're doing it. Understanding which style you're in — moment by moment — is the key to changing the pattern.

Here they are, side by side.

	PASSIVE	ASSERTIVE	AGGRESSIVE
CORE BELIEF	You count. I don't.	<b>We both count.</b>	I count. You don't.
VOICE	Soft, apologetic	<b>Calm and steady</b>	Loud, demanding
EYE CONTACT	Avoided	<b>Steady and open</b>	Staring, intimidating
BODY	Slumped, shrinking	<b>Open and relaxed</b>	Tense, invasive
TYPICAL WORDS	"It doesn't matter..."	<b>"I feel... I need..."</b>	"You always... You never..."
AFTERWARDS	Resentment builds quietly	<b>The issue gets addressed</b>	Damage and fallout
LONG-TERM COST	Self-esteem drops	<b>Self-respect grows</b>	Relationships break

**The honest question.** Think of a difficult conversation you had recently. Which column best describes how you handled it? No judgement. Just notice. Awareness is always the first step.

### **Where you switch**

Most people are not the same style everywhere. You may be assertive at work and passive at home. Passive with your parents, aggressive with your partner. Assertive with strangers, silent with friends. Noticing where you switch tells you exactly where the work is.

**I'm most assertive when:**

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**I go passive when:**

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**I go aggressive when:**

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## TOOL 04

## Three Phrases That Change Conversations

**For use:** whenever the words won't come. Borrow these until your own arrive.

You don't need a psychology degree to start being more assertive. Sometimes all you need is a better sentence. Here are three you can use today — not as scripts to be read mechanically, but as structures that hold the assertive intention steady while you find your own words inside them.

### PHRASE 1

#### “I understand that... and I need...”

##### *Empathic assertion.*

You acknowledge the other person's position before stating your own. The word in the middle is 'and' — not 'but.' 'But' cancels what came before. 'And' holds both things at once. People are far more willing to hear you when they feel heard first.

##### EXAMPLE

*“I understand you're busy and this is short notice, and I need to leave by five today.”*

### PHRASE 2

#### “When you... I feel... because...”

##### *Negative-feeling assertion.*

This names the specific behaviour, your emotional response, and the reason — without blame, without character attacks. It keeps the conversation about what happened, not about who's a bad person. It is remarkably effective with people who become defensive quickly.

##### EXAMPLE

*“When you check your phone while I'm talking, I feel like what I'm saying doesn't matter — because it seems like you're not listening.”*

## P H R A S E 3

**“No, I'm not able to do that.”***The direct no.*

No preamble. No elaborate excuse. No apology. Just a clear, calm, honest answer. You can add a brief reason if you choose to. You don't owe one. The power of this phrase is in its simplicity — and in the silence that follows it.

**E X A M P L E**

*“No, I'm not able to take that on this week.” (And then stop talking. Don't fill the silence.)*

**Have them ready.** Write down one real situation this week where you could use each phrase. Having the words ready before you need them — rather than trying to find them under pressure — makes all the difference.

**A situation where I could use Phrase 1:**

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**A situation where I could use Phrase 2:**

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**A situation where I could use Phrase 3:**

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## TOOL 05

## The 60-Second Reset

**For use:** before the assertive conversation. Or in the middle of it, if you need to.

Here's the thing nobody tells you about assertiveness: your body often gets in the way before your brain does. When you feel anxious, threatened, or put on the spot, your nervous system fires up a stress response — racing heart, shallow breathing, tense muscles, foggy thinking. In that state, assertive communication is almost impossible. Your brain knows what to say. Your body just won't let you say it.

This 60-second tool activates your parasympathetic nervous system — the 'calm and connect' system — and gives your thinking brain a chance to catch up.

### Extended-exhale breathing

<b>01</b>	<p><b>Pause</b></p> <p><i>Stop what you're doing. You're allowed to take a moment. If you're mid-conversation, say "Give me a second" — that's assertive in itself.</i></p> <hr/>
<b>02</b>	<p><b>Inhale for 4 seconds</b></p> <p><i>Slowly, through the nose. Let your belly expand, not your chest. Shallow chest-breathing keeps the stress response running.</i></p> <hr/>
<b>03</b>	<p><b>Exhale for 6 seconds</b></p> <p><i>Slowly, through the mouth. The exhale being longer than the inhale is what triggers the calming response. This is the active ingredient.</i></p> <hr/>
<b>04</b>	<p><b>Repeat four to six times</b></p> <p><i>That's it. Sixty seconds. Heart rate drops, muscles soften, thinking clears.</i></p> <hr/>
<b>05</b>	<p><b>Then respond</b></p> <p><i>Now you can choose your words deliberately — rather than reacting on autopilot.</i></p> <hr/>

**Why this works.** Extended-exhale breathing is one of the fastest evidence-based techniques for calming the nervous system. The longer out-breath stimulates the vagus nerve, which tells your brain you're safe. Used by therapists, first responders, and elite athletes. Takes one minute.

### **Build it before you need it**

Don't wait for a difficult conversation to try this for the first time. Practise it when you're already calm — a few times a day, for a week. You're building a skill your nervous system can reach for automatically when the pressure's on. By the end of the week, you won't need to count the seconds. The rhythm will come by itself.

## KEEP THIS ONE

## The quick-reference card

When you're about to have a hard conversation, you don't want to flip through ten pages to find the right tool. Use this. Print it. Stick it to the inside of your notebook.

When this happens...	Use this
You need to see your pattern clearly	<b>Tool 1</b>
A right is being crossed — and you're not holding it	<b>Tool 2</b>
You can feel yourself slipping into passive or aggressive mode	<b>Tool 3</b>
You know what to say, but can't find the words	<b>Tool 4</b>
You're about to have a difficult conversation and feel it in your body	<b>Tool 5</b>

### Your challenge this week

- Complete the Quick Assertiveness Check and circle your top three priority areas.
- Read through your Bill of Assertive Rights every morning for one week.
- Use one of the Three Phrases in one real conversation.
- Practise the 60-Second Reset at least once a day — especially when you're not stressed.

## GOING FURTHER

## If this was useful, here's where to go next.

This toolkit is a set of starting tools. Used consistently, they will genuinely change how you communicate — and the cumulative effect, over weeks, is real. But they are, by design, a set of separate instruments rather than a full programme.

If you've recognised yourself in this toolkit and you'd like to go deeper, there are two ways to do that.

## THE FULL COURSE

### Assertiveness Training: Speak Up. Stand Firm. Stay Kind.

An eight-session therapy-based programme that takes these tools much further. It covers:

- The specific beliefs that drive passive and aggressive patterns — and how to shift them
- Saying no, without guilt — in family, work, and relationship contexts
- Handling criticism — fair and unfair — without crumbling or counter-attacking
- Managing conflict, and dealing with anger (yours and other people's)
- CBT-based exercises for changing the thinking that keeps you stuck
- Guided relaxation and stress-management practices
- A personal assertiveness action plan you build throughout the course

Available at [www.thinkingsuccess.co.uk](http://www.thinkingsuccess.co.uk)

## THE STANDALONE MANUAL

### Assertiveness: A Practical Handbook

If you'd like the depth of the course but prefer to go at your own pace, in book form, the standalone manual covers much of the same territory — with additional exercises throughout. Written to stand on its own, wherever you read.

Available at [www.thinkingsuccess.co.uk](http://www.thinkingsuccess.co.uk) and on Amazon.

### And if you'd just like to keep in touch

Sign up to the mailing list on the Thinking Success homepage. It's where tools like these ones are shared first, along with occasional longer pieces. No hard sell. You can unsubscribe any time.

***A final word.***

Assertiveness is not about becoming someone you're not. It's about taking your place in conversations you've been quietly absent from.

It takes practice. It takes a little courage. And, every time you do it, it becomes easier.

**Speak up. Stand firm. Stay kind.**

— *John*

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