

5 Assertiveness Tools For Healthy Relationships

“It’s surprising how many people go through life without ever recognizing that their feelings toward other people are largely determined by their feelings toward themselves and if you are not comfortable within yourself, you can’t be comfortable with others.”

Sidney J. Harris

“There are days I drop words of comfort on myself like falling rain & remember it is enough to be taken care of by myself.”

Brian Andreas
www.Storypeople.com

“Ask yourself, “In this relationship, am I a fault finder, or a love seeker?”

Gary Chapman

In this toolkit you will learn about assertiveness in relationships. Use this material to compliment the [27 Rights for Healthier Relationships](#), [Good to Know File & Reasonable Expectations](#) and the [Checkers Tool](#) All available on this site.

Tool #1 Passive or Aggressive Thoughts

Tool #2 Range of Human Responses Inventory Passive → Assertive → Aggressive

Tool #3 How to become more assertive

Tool #4 Practice assertive communication until you are confident.
Words to lose, words to use.

Tool #5 Assertiveness with difficult, damaging or dangerous relationships
Cycle of abuse

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Tool #1**Passive, Assertive or Aggressive?**

Relationship interactions range from **passive** → **assertive** → **aggressive** responses. Understanding yourself requires your ability to accurately identify when your own thoughts or statements fall into the range of passive/victim to aggressive/bully. When I first learned about this range of thinking, I thought I would only relate to assertive thoughts...I mean, I am a therapist, right?! Upon further reflection, asking my husband if he really wanted to wear *those socks* while he was mowing the lawn... was a tad controlling. Not mean, just not my business. He had not asked for a comment from the fashion police. I also noticed my habit of overloading my schedule, then complaining that I never had enough time—sounded a tad “victimie”. Do any of the sentences below feel familiar to you?

Personal inventory: Identify your thoughts*. Check each statement you identify with.

Section 1:

1. “They make me feel like I can’t do anything right.”
2. “I never get to do what I want to do.”
3. “Parents manipulate and control me by making me feel guilty.”
4. “I’m afraid I’ll hurt someone’s feelings if I talk about this.”
5. “I hate conflict so I just give in. It’s easier that way.”

Section 2:

1. “If they would just follow my advice, they wouldn’t have a problem.”
2. “I have to yell to get what I want. They never listen.”
3. “If I don’t step in and fix their problems, they will ruin their lives!”
4. “I’m usually right, so I insist that others listen to me.”
5. “I wouldn’t have to be so mean if they would not be so stupid.”

Scoring Section 1. Thoughts endorsed in Section 1 are *passive* thoughts. Passive thinking leads to martyrdom and playing the victim. Although passive thinking people claim to be powerless or feel used, they often attempt to gain control through inflicting guilt or expressing passive dependency. Passive thoughts avoid taking responsibility for personal change and growth. Passivity feels selfish, guilty, or unworthy when advocating for self. **Blinded by fear of conflict, passive thinking often lacks insight regarding the role it plays in relationship problems. Passive thinking truly believes passivity is just being “nice.”**

Scoring Section 2. Thoughts endorsed in Section A are *aggressive* thoughts. These thoughts violate other people’s rights to make their own decisions and to be responsible for their own lives. Aggressive thinking leads to bullying, domineering, controlling, and manipulating behavior. Aggressive thinking lacks empathy and struggles with compromise. Aggressive thoughts will engage in scorekeeping, power struggles and may even justify verbal, emotional, or physical abuse. **Blinded by the thought that they “are right” aggressive thinking lacks insight regarding its toxicity. Aggressive thinking truly believes that aggression is “for another’s own good”.** *It is common to range from passive to aggressive, depending on the circumstances or your own stress level or triggers.

Tool # 2 Range of Human Responses Inventory

Our emotional responses to our relationships vary based on experiences, mood, situation and the people involved. Which of these match your responses with family, friends and others?

- Check all items that represent your thoughts and feelings in various relationships.
Yes, you may choose multiple columns.

Passive: Shut Up!	Assertive Problem Solve & Negotiate	Aggressive Blow Up!
<p style="text-align: center;">PASSIVE RESPONSE </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Violates self. <i>Afraid if I speak up, they won't like me.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Low self-esteem. <i>Everyone is better than me.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Blames self. <i>Everything is my fault.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Excessive guilt & shame. <i>Feels guilty about everything.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Dependent. <i>People pleaser, fear of disapproval, fear of being alone.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Afraid of failure. <i>Mistakes cause shame.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Overly responsible. <i>Feels responsible for everyone.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Learned helplessness. <i>Why bother? Give up, give in.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Dishonest. <i>Withholds truth to avoid conflict, don't rock the boat.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Victim. <i>Depression & anxiety are the expressed emotions.</i> 	<p style="text-align: center;">ASSERTIVE RESPONSE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Honors self and others. <i>Healthy boundaries, self-respect.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy self-esteem. <i>All people are equally valuable.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Seeks solutions rather than blame. <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy guilt. <i>Guilt aligned with values.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Independent. <i>My sense of who I am does not depend on your approval.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Learns from mistakes. <i>Mistakes are expected, no shame.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Responsible adult. <i>Responsible for own actions.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Flexible problem solver. <i>Problem solver, not fault-finder.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Honesty and integrity. <i>Aligns words and actions with personal values.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Negotiator, leader. <i>Manages all emotions by coping, learning, and leading.</i> 	<p style="text-align: center;">AGGRESSIVE RESPONSE </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Violates others. <i>Disregard for rights of others.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Grandiose self-esteem. <i>I'm better than everyone.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Blames everyone else. <i>Fingers pointing at others.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> No guilt/shame. <i>You asked for it, you made me.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Domineering. <i>My way or the highway.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't admit mistakes. <i>Blames others, never apologize.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Avoids responsibility. <i>Takes credit, never the blame.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Rigid, polarized, all or nothing thinking. <input type="checkbox"/> Dishonest. <i>Say anything to get own way.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Bully. <i>Anger & hostility are the expressed emotions.</i>

Tool #3 Communicate Assertively

1. **Write out** your assertive dialog until you are comfortable with your wording.
2. **Practice** assertive conversations out loud by yourself. No, that is not weird.
3. **Rehearse** difficult conversations with trusted people before you address a difficult person.
4. **Listen to great communicators** and notice how they navigate difficult conversations.
5. **Mulligans:** Know that you will mess this up. Sometimes emotions flood your body and trigger fight/flight/freeze response, but that is why you are practicing! You can clean-up a messy conversation by asking for a do-over. **Apologies build trust and respect when they are delivered authentically with the intention of improving understanding and building connection.**

Advocating for yourself, setting limits and maintaining boundaries sounds like this:

- *“My personal time is important to me. I will schedule more time to myself.”*
- *“I need time to think this over. I’ll have my answer tomorrow.”*
- *“I have the right to have access to this information.”*
- *“I deserve to be treated with respect.”*
- *“I need to know I can depend on you.”*
- *“I don’t allow smoking inside, but you are welcome to use the patio.”*
- *“I turn off my phone at 9:00 p.m. I will contact you in the morning.”*
- *“I’m sorry, I never lend money. I don’t want loans to damage our relationship.”*
- *“I prefer to keep my personal life private.”*
- *“I will let you know which of my photos or my information is ok to post on Facebook.”*
- *“Because this is my problem I must do what I think is best.”*
- *“I am happy to be your (insert relationship preference) But I am not able to be your (insert relationship preference).”*
 - *Examples: I am happy to be your friend, but I can’t be your: boss/ therapist /roommate/ bank/ caregiver /date/ employee etc..*

Addressing conflict sounds like this:

- *“Help me understand how you thought this was ok after I had said no.”*
- *“Are you angry with me or is something else bothering you?”*
- *“We have an incompatibility issue on this topic, how would you like to problem-solve?”*
- *“I am not upset that you lied, I am sad that I can no longer trust you.”*
- *“I would like to clear the air about something that has bothered me, are you free?”*
- *“I understand that you are upset about my rules, I still value our relationship and I hope that you do to.”*
- *“I will discuss this with you after we both have had a chance to calm down.”*
- *“This is not the place to have this discussion. Let’s find a more private location.”*

Tool #4 Practice assertive communication until you are confident.

Still need more practice calming down those emotional responses by tuning into your [wise mind](#)?

**Words to Lose, Words to Use
Practice Tool**

Words to Lose



- "What's your problem?"*
- "That's not true and you know it!"*
- "Why can't you just do what I say?"*
- "Shut Up! I can't stand your yelling!"*
- "You are so stubborn! "*
- "You are too rough."*
- "Quit complaining."*
- "No I can't help you, I'm overloaded."*
- "Don't interrupt!"*
- "How could you be so stupid?"*
- "This is all your fault!"*
- "If you didn't make me mad,
I wouldn't have blown up."*
- "I hate you. You are such a @#!*"*

Words to Use



- "How may I help?"*
- "You and I view this differently."*
- "I'd like to work this out with you."*
- "Please lower your voice. You are hurting my ears."*
- "We both have very strong opinions."*
- "I prefer your gentler touch."*
- "This is really hard for you."*
- "I can help you as soon as I finish my other work."*
- "You'll have your turn in a moment."*
- "Help me understand."*
- "It's easy to assign blame, let's take a moment to think this through."*
- "I get mad when that happens."*
- "I can't talk right now, I'm too mad."*

Words to LOSE

“You never help me.”

“You never listen to me.”

“You love them more than you love me.”

“You treat your friends better than you treat me.”

“You’re crazy!”

“Why does everything have to be your way?”

“You think you know everything.”

“What made you think I care?”

“Why are you so mean to me?!”

“I can’t talk to you!”

Words to USE

“I need to be able to depend on you.”

“I need to know that you hear me.”

“I feel insecure and jealous about your other relationships.”

“I’d like to be treated as respectfully as you treat your friends.”

“I’m having trouble understanding you right now.”

“I’d like to work with you toward a win/win solution.”

“You sound very confident about this.”

“I’m sorry, I just can’t deal with this right now.”

“Help me understand why you think it’s ok to swear at me.”

“I want to be able to talk to you.”

**Tool #5 Assertiveness with difficult, damaging or dangerous people.
Cycle of abuse**

“What if I assert myself by advocating for myself, setting limits, maintaining boundaries, and addressing conflict but then someone threatens self-harm... or threatens to harm me?”

Difficult people who are so deeply disturbed that they pose a danger to themselves or others need professional help. I know this is embarrassing and frightening, but let the professionals do their jobs. *Obtain professional psychiatric care, community services or police protection.

- **Threats of suicide or homicide should not convince you to tolerate inappropriate behavior.**
- **Never let anyone blackmail you into something you believe is wrong or dangerous.**

- **Threatening self-harm may be a symptom of a mental illness.** Remember mental illness is brain illness. Threats of self-harm require a medical evaluation.
- **Threatening harm to you or to others, with a plan and intent, is a crime.** A threat to harm you or others, requires a police report and protection.

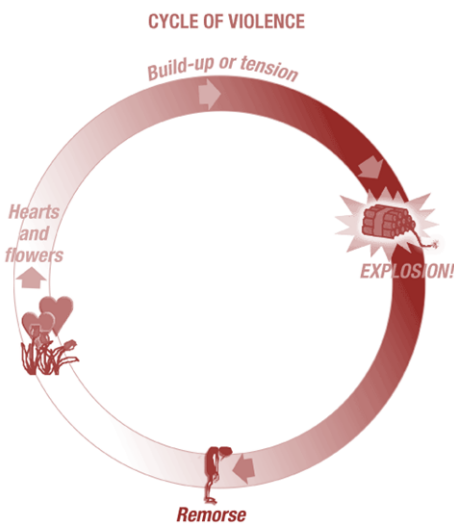
*2020 update: Access to adequate mental health interventions, community services and police protection are not equally guaranteed for all people in every community. Use your vote to help resolve systemic injustices.

“Everyone tells me to end my relationship because of the lying, cheating, abuse and betrayal. But I am in love, what should I do?”
Chris, age 42

Answer. People often shop for cars with more logic than choosing relationships. If a car ran efficiently and effectively for 50% of the time but the other 50% it broke down, rolled into a ditch or burst into flames, would you place your children in that car? What if it “only” burst into flames 20% of the time? Would you keep driving, seek a repair shop or look for a new ride?

Relationships built on a foundation of deception, disrespect or violence create emotional wounds and broken trust. This type of relationship is referred to as “Cycle of Violence” developed in the

1970s by Lenore Walker to explain patterns of behavior in abusive relationships. Each person in this relationship participates in the cycle. Each has a role. Here are typical examples:



“I know she loves me. It’s not her fault when she gets violent. I always say or do something to set her off.”

“He says he won’t cheat on me again. He only lied to protect me.”

“We only hit each other when we drink too much, so I wouldn’t call that violence.”

“He is so sorry afterwards. Each time he promises to change. He cries and begs me to stay. I’m afraid to make him mad by leaving.”

Continuing to tolerate the cycle reinforces the behavior. Upon further inspection, you may begin to understand that “lying, cheating, betrayal and abuse” are not compatible with “respect, trust, loyalty and love”. Rather than asking “Do you love your partner?” ask yourself the following questions:

1. *Do I respect my partner? Do I feel respected?*
2. *Do I trust my partner? Do I feel trusted?*
3. *Do I have confidence in my partner? Do I feel confident?*
4. *Am I confident with myself as a relationship role model?*
5. *Would I want my son, daughter, sibling or best friend to be in a relationship exactly like mine?*

Breaking the cycle of violence requires safety, resources and support. The next page offers additional insight into dealing with difficult people.

Relationships with difficult, disordered, or addicted people.

You thought things would get better. You never intended to be in a relationship like this. You hoped for change. And waited. And waited. **Now you realize it is time for you to choose a healthier response** to your beloved's addictive, abusive, impulsive, inappropriate, or intolerable behavior. Even though you use the tools to improve your communication skills, demonstrate assertiveness and enforce limits, **practicing assertiveness does not guarantee that others will respond positively.**

- ❖ Mentally ill and addicted people may refuse to engage in healthier relationship rules.
- ❖ Some will ignore or even sabotage your attempt to negotiate changes.
- ❖ Some will consider your self-improvement and assertiveness as “selfish.”
- ❖ Others will react with increased hostility and may even threaten violence.



Substance Use Disorders: People who are abusing mood-altering substances are not capable of consistently participating in trustworthy relationships. Their substance use creates problems with thoughts, emotions and behaviors. *Consider attending Alanon.*

Raging, angry people: Whether their anger is limited to intimidation and verbal threats or their rage has escalated to physical acts of assault, these aggressive personality types rarely respond positively to their beloved's assertiveness or independence. *Police protection, legal action and/or relocation may be necessary. Seek help immediately.*

Con artists and others who repetitively engage in deception or criminal activity: As with angry people, deceptive people will not “improve” as loved ones set limits or attempt to negotiate healthier relationship rules. Because conning, dishonesty and deception are main coping mechanisms for these people, *professional guidance, legal action, protection and even criminal prosecution may be necessary.*



***Personality disorders and severe mood disorders:** People who suffer from severe mood disorders, psychotic disorders and personality disorders represent approximately 5.2% of the population in the United States. These disorders challenge abilities to maintain loving relationships. **General signs and symptoms of psychiatric disorders may include: frequent mood swings, social isolation, angry outbursts, impulsivity, stormy relationships, difficulty maintaining employment, impaired judgement and decision making, increased risk of illegal activity and substance use disorders.**

*In 2019, there were an estimated 13.1 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States with **Serious Mental Illness (SMI)**. This number represented 5.2% of all U.S. adults. In 2019, there were an estimated 51.5 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States with **Prevalence of Any Mental Illness (AMI)**. This number represented 20.6% of all U.S. adults. **Serious mental illness (SMI)** is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities. The burden of mental illnesses is particularly concentrated among those who experience disability due to SMI. **Any mental illness (AMI)** is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>