

LIFEHACK

Expand your toolbox of life skills and strengthen your mental wellbeing



Optional Module


Express yourself & say no





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How to Use this Workbook

LifeHack is a self-help programme in which you learn various life skills for all sorts of situations you might encounter in life. This program is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and consists of reading material and interactive exercises. Four domains are covered: your emotional well-being, your studies, your social life and your self-esteem.

Each domain consists of one main module and two related optional modules. The best way to do the programme is to complete one domain per week by doing the main module and any of the optional modules that seem relevant to you. Therefore, the whole programme will take approximately 4 to 6 weeks.

You can find a list of resources in the community [here](#) when you need support. Counselling and Psychological services are available at HKU for current students. It is free-of-charge, professional and confidential. Don't hesitate to seek help if needed.

Enquiries and Feedback
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Main Module

Express yourself & say 'no'

Introduction

Do you often say “yes” even if you actually want to say no? Do you find it difficult to openly express your thoughts and feelings to other people? Then you’re in the right place!

After this module, you will...

- Understand what assertiveness is (and what it isn't)
- Uncover what might be stopping you from speaking up
- Learn about personal boundaries and how to set them for yourself
- Learn how to openly and confidently express your boundaries and needs



Before we get into it: describe your personal goal(s) with regards to speaking up or saying no. What would you like to achieve after doing this module? (answer A)

Let's go!

What is assertiveness?

An umbrella term for things such as setting personal boundaries, saying 'no' and speaking up is 'assertiveness'. There are many different interpretations of what 'being assertive' actually entails.

How do you define assertiveness?

How assertive would you say you are on average?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Not at all, I never speak up

Very, I always speak up

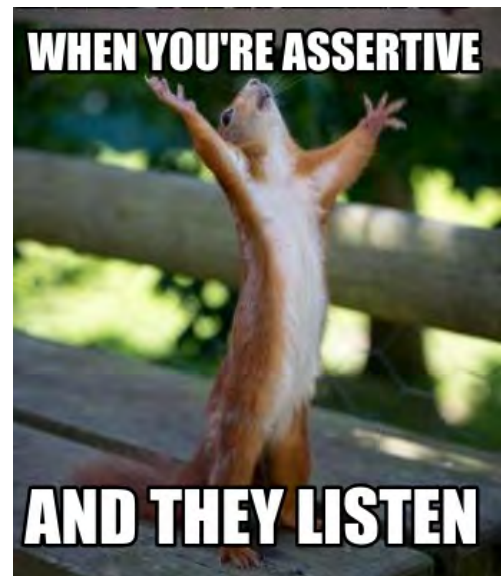
Why did you give yourself that rating?

For comparison, here's the official definition of assertiveness:

An adaptive style of communication in which individuals express their feelings and needs directly, while maintaining respect for others.

Assertiveness is an important skill that anybody can learn. It has been shown to link to higher self-esteem and healthier social relationships. Assertiveness can help successfully navigate (social) challenges such as:

- Asking for help when you need it
- Disagreeing with someone
- Standing up for yourself
- Telling someone to stop
- Giving someone negative or positive feedback
- Receiving negative or positive feedback
- Requesting something, asking for a favor
- Asking questions (for example: during a lecture)
- Initiating interaction (for example: stepping up to talk to someone at a party)



As you can see from the definition, assertiveness is a style of communication - and it's not the only one! So let's check those out next.



Communication styles

Everyone is different, which also means that everyone expresses themselves in their own way. But roughly speaking, there are four communication styles. Watch this video and see if you can recognise any of them. [\(The video transcript is available on p.19\)](#)



Reflect on your own style(s). In which situations are you passive, in which aggressive, in which passive-aggressive, and in which assertive?

What could you gain by being more assertive? How would that benefit you?

Dangerous situations

It's important to note that the assertive style is not always the best. In extreme situations it can be wise to be aggressive or passive. For example if you feel threatened or forced into something you don't want to do, saying 'NO!' is extremely important. In that case, don't concern yourself with the 'rules of communication' and try to make sure your boundaries aren't crossed.

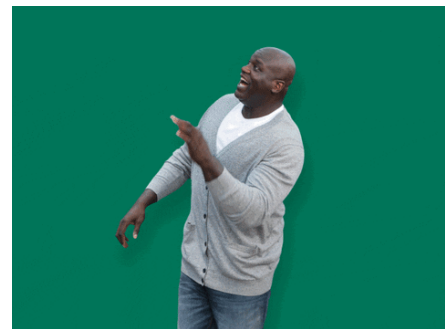
But barring dangerous situations, assertiveness is an important prerequisite for having good relationships with others. So next we'll discuss 3 steps to better express yourself and your needs.

1. Change the way you think

There can be different reasons for being passive, aggressive or passive-aggressive (rather than assertive), such as

- Feeling assertiveness is too close to aggressiveness or to being a jerk
- Feeling less important than others
- Being afraid of what others will think or say, of being judged
- Worrying that people will get mad or reject them
- Coming from a culture or a family in which a certain style is predominant, or in which assertiveness is not appreciated, found inappropriate or perceived as offensive or rude
- A lack of knowledge on assertiveness techniques.

Many of these reasons have to do with our attitude towards speaking up. So one way to become more assertive is by adopting more positive attitudes towards assertiveness. And the way to do that is by uncovering the negative thoughts we have about assertiveness and changing them into positive ones.



Think about the last time you wanted to express yourself but you did not. What kinds of negative thoughts did you have that prevented you from speaking up? (you can use the examples on the next page as inspiration)

Negative thoughts:	Alternative thoughts:
I am not as good/important as other people.	I am just as good/important as everyone else.
Being assertive is the same as being a jerk (aggressive).	Being assertive differs from being aggressive because you still respect and listen to the other person.
Listening to me talking about my problems is a waste of time for people.	I'm sure people would want to support or listen to me when I face problems, just like I would happily support others when they face tough times.
I should not question the opinions of others. They know more than me.	I have the right to question the opinions of others (even of authority figures), because everyone can make a mistake.
I should avoid (the risk of) conflicts with other people.	I can have a different opinion than others, that doesn't mean we'll have a big fight.
My needs are not as important as the needs of others.	My needs, emotions, and opinions are just as important as the needs of everyone else.
I should always be liked or approved by others.	Being approved by others is nice, but I do not need the approval of others for my thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.





Is it true though?

Most negative thoughts aren't 100% accurate. That's why it's important to first check the extent to which the thought is true (this is called the 'fact checking' technique).

The way to fact-check is to ask yourself questions like the ones below and to then formulate 3 (or more) arguments why the thoughts might not be (totally) true.

- Is there another side to the story?
- Is the thought exaggerated?
- Are there facts supporting the thought, or is it based on assumptions?
- Does it include predictions about the future?
- Does the thought draw premature conclusions?
- What would I say to a close friend if they had this thought?

Use the arguments against the thought(s) you wrote above to come up with a more nuanced, realistic thought:

Next time you want to speak up but struggle to do so, repeat this process. Uncover the negative thought, 'fact check' it and formulate a new thought. This is often already enough to overcome hesitations and speak up!

2. Set personal boundaries

The second step to expressing yourself and becoming more assertive is to set your boundaries so you know when to speak up. Personal boundaries are the limits and rules we set for ourselves that determine what we find acceptable and what we don't in interpersonal relationships. There are roughly 3 kinds of boundaries.



Rigid boundaries

You tend to keep others at a distance (emotionally or physically). You have a hard time asking for help, don't have many deep and intimate relationships, and keep your emotions and personal information to yourself.



Porous boundaries

Your boundaries are often too loose and allow for inappropriate interactions. You have a hard time saying no, depend too much on the opinions of others, and accept disrespectful behaviors from others.



Healthy boundaries

You can both say no and accept it from others, know what you want and don't and can communicate it, and are comfortable opening up to form deep and close relationships.

Readjusting your boundaries

There are roughly 3 steps to readjusting our unhealthy boundaries:

(i) Becoming aware of the boundary styles we adopt

The first step is to become aware of our own type of boundary. Most people have a mix of boundary types depending on context. For example, you could have porous boundaries in romantic relationships and rigid boundaries with your family. Or you could even have a boundary style with specific people only.

What style of boundary do you have in the different aspects of your life?

Which aspects of life are you unhappy with when it comes to your boundaries?

(ii) Define the behaviours we'd like to see change (our own as well as other people's)

Now that you're more aware of what you're unhappy with, you can define what needs to change. These can be your own behaviours as well as those of other people.

What behaviours from yourself or others would you like to see change? Make sure you write down concrete behaviours, not general thoughts or feelings.

Examples of behaviours that need to change:

Own:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When someone makes a joke that I find insulting or offensive, I laugh along out of politeness.• When someone asks for help and I'm really busy, I agree to help instead of saying no.• When someone offers me a drink/pill and I want to stay sober, I often still take it.
Other people:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• My roommates don't stick to the rules of the house.• My family always expects me to drop everything when they need help with something.• My partner often pressures me to go to expensive clubs with them, even though I'm on a budget

So for your own behaviours, what would you like to do or say differently? Come up with new actions to replace the way you would normally act.

(iii) Actually changing our own behaviour and expressing our needs to others

The last step is to take action. Changing your own behaviour is 100% within your control (even if it sometimes doesn't feel that way) and we'll give you some tips to do that below. Unfortunately we cannot change other people's behaviour, but we can express our needs and ask them to make changes. You will learn how to do that in the next chapter '3. Expressing your needs'.



So, how do we change our own behaviour? There is no 1 simple, foolproof method to it, but here are some general tips:

- Re-read chapter '1. Change the way you think' of this module to challenge the negative thoughts that stop you from being assertive.
- Address the fear of saying 'no'. Ask yourself: what exactly am I afraid of; what do I think will happen if I say 'no'? Then question how realistic these fears are, how likely they are to happen. Realising our fears are completely irrational can help overcome them.
- Think of what will happen if you do NOT speak up: the other person will constantly cross your boundaries (probably unwittingly) and you will feel unhappy and resentful. This will likely damage your relationship and possibly even end it.
- Start small: think of the smallest possible thing you could do (so it doesn't feel so daunting) and build your way up.
- Plan and practice: decide exactly what and when you want to do it, and if possible do a testrun (such as practicing the conversation with someone first).

Take another look at the actions you defined for yourself above. How can you make sure you actually perform these actions?

3. Express your needs

And lastly, when someone does something you don't like, it's important to speak up. This can be especially difficult when you want to tell someone what is bothering you. Most people prefer to avoid confrontation, and keep things bottled up inside, but the problem with that approach is that it results in resentment and sometimes even explosive fights.



If we can be assertive and speak up about our wants and needs before something becomes a big issue, it is infinitely better for the relationship. Luckily, there is a fairly simple 4 step process you can follow to make expressing yourself a bit easier. Let's go over each step using a real situation.

Describe a situation (current or from your past) in which you would like to speak up:



Step 1. Name your own feelings



You start the conversation by naming your feelings. Don't do this in an angry tone but keep it neutral. By expressing your feelings, it is more likely that the other is willing to change their behavior and look for a solution together. Some examples:

- It bothers me that ...
- I don't like that ...
- It annoys me that ...

What were your feelings about the situation you just described? Formulate it like the examples above; as if you would tell a person.

Step 2. Name the other person's behaviour



Here it is important that you describe observable behavior, rather than criticize or judge, so that the other feels less attacked. You describe the behavior as concretely as possible. Examples:

- It bothers me that you play your music so loudly.
- I don't like that you're not sticking to the general house rules.
- It annoys me that you interrupt me while I'm speaking.

What is the concrete, observable behaviour of the other in the situation you described earlier? Again, formulate this as if you would tell the other person.

Step 3. Name the consequences of that behaviour on yourself



This makes it clearer to the other why the issue is important to you and allows them to understand you better.

- It bothers me that you play your music so loudly. I can't concentrate and study for my exam because of it.
- I don't like that you're not sticking to the general house rules. I end up having to do dishes first when I want to start cooking.
- It annoys me that you interrupt me while I'm speaking. I can't finish my story and lose track of what I was saying.

What are the consequences of the other person's behaviour for you? Again, formulate this as if you would tell the other person.


Step 4. Express what you would like from the other



In the first three steps, you explained what you **do not** want and why. Now it is important to say what you **do** want.

- It bothers me that you play your music so loudly. I can't concentrate and study for my exam because of it. Could you turn down the volume a bit?
- I don't like that you're not sticking to the general house rules. I end up having to do dishes first when I want to start cooking. Please do your dishes after you've finished cooking.
- It annoys me that you interrupt me while I'm speaking. I can't finish my story and lose track of what I was saying. I would like it if you would let me finish my story.

What would you like for the other to do or change?



And just like that, you've prepared what you can say to the other person!

General tips for the conversation

The last thing to do is to actually talk to the other person. Here are some tips to help you have a productive conversation.

- Pick a good time to talk to the other person. Make sure you have enough time (don't squeeze it in somewhere) and that you are both in a reasonably good mood (it's often unwise to have these types of conversations when you are feeling emotional).
- Listen to the other person as best as you can. In heated conversations this is often difficult, but it is also necessary to come to a solution. Remind yourself of this during the conversation.
- If necessary, take a short or longer break. For example, if one of the two gets emotional, or if you can't seem to find a solution together. Then make a clear plan for when to continue the conversation.
- Don't hurt the other person on purpose. In our anger, we sometimes tend to hurt the other person on purpose (with words). However, this never leads to a solution, but only to irreparable "wounds".
- A few days after the conversation, evaluate how it went together. What did you like about the conversation? What would you do differently next time? In this way, you work together on a continuously improved relationship.

As with most things, it's easy to have the intention of speaking up, but actually doing it is a lot harder. It is uncomfortable to have such conversations with others, and there isn't much that can be done about that. That's why it's important to make a concrete plan to do it anyway.



If the situation you worked with today was a current one, now plan a moment to have the conversation. What day, time and place might work? If it wasn't a current situation, you can leave this question blank.

Need a little extra preparation?

Practice the conversation in your mind beforehand. Close your eyes and picture having the talk as concretely as possible: where are you, with whom, is it light or dark outside, etc. Then start the conversation in your mind: what exactly are you going to say (take another look at this module before the talk!)? Then imagine what happens next. What will the other say or do? Assume the other person will respond positively, instead of things escalating. In reality, this is usually the case: generally assertive reactions are received positively. And how can you react to that response?

Go over 2 to 3 different scenarios in your mind, so you feel extra prepared.

Hack wrap-up



Give yourself a pat on the back for reaching the end!

Now let's take a look back at what you said at the beginning of this module.

This is what you wanted to achieve with regards to speaking up or saying no:

(refer to answer A on p.2)

How will you move forward with this goal, using the tips from this module?

This module in bullets:

- You now know what assertiveness entails, and how it differs from being passive, aggressive or passive-aggressive
- Negative thoughts about assertiveness, about your 'worthiness', or about the way other people might react, can prevent you from expressing yourself
- To overcome that barrier, apply the 'fact checking' method: analyse your negative thought, question its 'true-ness' and formulate a more realistic new thought.
- If you feel your personal boundaries are often crossed, you can readjust them by becoming aware of your boundary style (healthy, porous or rigid) and define concrete new behaviours for change.
- You can express yourself in 4 steps: name your feelings, the behaviour of the other person, the consequences of the behaviour and what you would like to see differently.



Hey, psst! Does the optional module 'Overcome social anxiety' sound useful as well? Then head over there as soon as you complete this module, since you're **on a roll** now anyway ;)

What did you think of this module? Please let us know your views [here](#).



Supplementary Information

Video transcript of Communication Styles

Roughly speaking, there are 4 communication styles when people express themselves. Let's have a look at each of them.

The first communication style is the passive style. With this style, you rarely or never stand up for yourself and others easily walk all over you. You tend to put yourself last, finding it difficult to express your needs, ask for support and/or receive compliments. You are also more likely to please others than yourself.

The second style is the aggressive communication style. With this style, you stand up for yourself so strongly that you steamroll over others. You aren't very concerned about the feelings of the other person and you run a high risk of overstepping the boundaries of others and hurting them.

Thirdly we have the passive aggressive style. With this style, you express your negative feelings in an indirect, masked way. You deliberately act hostile and try to 'get back' at others, but never speak up directly. Ultimately, you feel powerless and your negative feelings often only intensify.

Lastly we have the assertive style. With this style, you express your feelings and thoughts and invite others to do something about the situation together. You stand up for yourself in a respectful manner and always take the other person into account.

A person doesn't always use the same style; it can change over time or per situation. And being assertive also doesn't guarantee that your needs and wants will be met. Still, most of the time, being assertive is very important for boosting your self-esteem, having healthy relationships, and getting socially connected with others. It can be even helpful for you to perform better in an academic setting or when networking for your future career!