Relationships are precious, and they are vulnerable. They bring love, companionships, and support. Yet, sometimes in a matter of moments, they can become broken beyond repair. Keeping your relationships healthy and alive requires interpersonal skills. The most necessary and important of these skills is assertiveness, which is the ability to 1) ask for what you want, 2) say no, and 3) negotiate conflict *without damaging the relationship*.

First developed for treating borderline personality disorder, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) has proven effective as treatment for a range of other mental health problems, especially for those characterized by overwhelming emotions. Research shows that DBT can improve your ability to handle distress without losing control and acting destructively. In order to make use of these techniques, you need to build skills in four key areas -- distress tolerance, mindfulness, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness.

This book, a collaborative effort from three esteemed authors, offers straightforward, step-by-step exercises for learning these concepts and putting them to work for real and lasting change. Start by working on the introductory exercises and, after making progress, move on to the advance skills chapters. Whether you are a professional or a general reader, whether you use this book to support work done in therapy or as the basis for self-help, you'll benefit from this clear and practical guide to better managing your emotions.

The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook

volume 4

Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills and Putting It All Together

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CHAPTER 8

Basic Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

Interpersonal effectiveness skills are a composite of social-skills training (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1983), assertiveness training (Alberti & Emmons, 1990; Bower & Bower, 1991), and listening skills (Barker, 1990; Rogers, 1951) which have been combined by Linehan (1993a) for dialectical behavior therapy. In addition, we've added negotiation skills (Fisher & Ury, 1991) to complete the program.

Relationships are precious, and they are vulnerable. They bring love, companionship, and support. Yet, sometimes in a matter of moments, they can become broken beyond repair. Keeping your relationships healthy and alive requires interpersonal skills that you can learn in this chapter and the next. The most necessary and important of these skills is assertiveness, which is the ability to (1) ask for what you want, (2) say no, and (3) negotiate conflict *without damaging the relationship*. Before learning assertiveness, however, there are some key things you need to know.

MINDFUL ATTENTION

Relationships require attention. Whether it's a lover, friend, coworker, or merely a carpool companion, maintaining a good relationship depends on *noticing* the other person's feelings and reactions and then watching the process between you. Using the mindfulness skills you practiced in chapters 3 through 5, you can observe facial expression, body language, tone of voice, and choice of words during a conversation to get a fix on the mood and state of the relationship.

Paying attention means staying in the here and now—not thinking about what you want to say next or focusing on some memory. It means remaining present to what you see, hear, and sense emotionally. In the same way that you can breathe, walk, or even do dishes mindfully, you can also relate with full awareness to the present moment. When you pay attention, you notice trouble

coming—before it overwhelms you—and also gain time to ask clarifying questions that can help you correct misconceptions.

Not paying attention—focusing away from the moment between you and others—has a heavy price. You'll end up doing one or more of the following:

- Missing vital cues about the other person's needs and reactions
- Projecting, inaccurately, your fears and feelings on the other
- Blowing up or running away when "surprised" by a negative response you could have seen coming

Mindful attention also involves watching your own experience in relation to others. Do you need something from the other person (for example, more attention or some help)? Do you need to change the process between you (for example, critical comments, demands, intrusive questions)? Do you have feelings that signal something important about what's going on (hurt, sadness, loss, shame, anxiety)? Noticing your feelings can help you figure out what needs to change in a relationship—before you blow up or run away.

In summary, then, the first interpersonal skill you need to cultivate is mindful attention because it helps you read important signals about the state of a relationship.

Exercise: Mindful Attention

In the very next conversation you have, practice being an observer of the moment by attending to the other person's physical and verbal behavior. If you find anything ambiguous or hard to read, ask a clarifying question. Here are some examples:

- How are you feeling? Are you doing okay?
- How are we doing? Are we okay?
- How are things between us?
- I notice _____; is that accurate?
- Is everything okay with you? With us?

Also notice your own needs and feelings in the interaction—do any of these require communication? How could you say it in a way that preserves the relationship?

Bill had noticed his girlfriend Gina looking away from him during dinner. When he asked "How are things between us?" she told him that she'd been hurt not to be invited to his office solstice party. This gave him a chance to explain that he hated company events and only planned to put in an appearance for a few minutes.

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PASSIVE VERSUS AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

These interpersonal patterns have a huge impact on your relationships. Being passive sometimes seems safe. You go along with what the other person expects. Long term, however, passivity is the royal road to interpersonal disaster. When you give in to others and abandon your own needs, it creates frustration and resentment that builds inside of you. Eventually, the relationship becomes so painful that you blow up, collapse into depression, or run away. The paradox of being passive is that in the short term, giving in seems to protect the relationship. Long term, however, the relationship takes a shape you can't stand—and you have to destroy it to stop the pain.

In comparison, aggressive behaviors also destroy relationships because they push people away. An aggressive interpersonal style derives from two sources. The first is a strong sense of the way things *should* be. In particular, you are acutely aware of how others ought to behave. You see clearly the right and wrong way to act in each situation. When others act in a way that violates your sense of what is appropriate or right, you may feel a strong need to punish them.

The second source of aggression is a need to control interpersonal events. Things have to go a certain way, and you expect certain outcomes to happen or not happen. So when the other person either violates your sense of what's right or fails to do what you expect, anger starts to roil up in you. You apply more pressure to control what happens. At times, you may feel so determined that you explode—and drive others away.

Passivity and aggression both destroy relationships. Either one of these patterns ends up being very painful for you—and those you care for. The assertiveness skills you'll be introduced to in the next chapter are a middle way. They will give you the tools to seek what you need in relationships, set limits, and negotiate conflicts—all without anger or coercive efforts to control.

Exercise: Identify Your Style

Think back over recent interactions in your five most significant relationships. Place a check (✓) next to the statements that reflect your typical behavior:

____ 1. I go along with something, even if I don't like it.

____ 2. I push people to do what's right, even if there's an upset.

____ 3. I try to be pleasant and easygoing, no matter what people do or say.

____ 4. I give people a piece of my mind when they deserve it.

____ 5. I always try to be sensitive to what other people need and feel, even if my own needs get lost in the process.

____ 6. I know what I want and insist on it, even if it means having to get angry.

____ 7. When there's a conflict, I tend to give in and let things go the other person's way.

____ 8. When people don't do what's appropriate or reasonable, I don't let them get away with it.

____ 9. I'll pull away from a relationship rather than say anything that could be upsetting.

____ 10. You can't let people continue being selfish or stupid; you have to shake them till they see what they're doing.

____ 11. I leave people alone, let them be whatever they are.

____ 12. If people ignore my needs or insist on things that don't work for me, I get more and more upset till they pay attention.

If you tended to mark *odd* numbers, your predominant style is passive; if you checked *even* numbers, you may have a tendency to an aggressive problem-solving style.

"I WANT–THEY WANT" RATIO

Every relationship consists of two people trying to get what they need. Sometimes they need the same thing—companionship, recreation, calm, and quiet—and it's easy. But when they need different things at the same time, or when one of them needs something the other doesn't want to give, there's trouble. For relationships to succeed you must be able to do the following:

- Know and say what you desire.
- Notice or find out what the other person desires.
- Negotiate and compromise so you can get at least some of what you want.
- Give what you can of what the other person wants.

If the "I want–they want" ratio isn't balanced, your relationship becomes unstable. Paying attention to what each person desires and using assertiveness skills to negotiate conflicts is vital to maintaining healthy relationships.

Exercise: "I Want–They Want"

The following exercise will help you assess the "I want–they want" ratio. Choose one relationship you want to evaluate. In the left-hand column, fill in the things you want and need in that relationship.

Under "Outcome," assess how well those needs are met. In the two right-hand columns, do the same for the other person. Now take a look at the outcomes on each side of the chart. Are more of one person or the other's needs being met? How does the relationship deal with those unmet needs? Are they ignored or negotiated? Are they sources of blame or withdrawal?

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"I WANT–THEY WANT" ASSESSMENT

I Want	Outcome	They Want	Outcome

"I WANT–I SHOULD" RATIO

Every relationship requires keeping a delicate balance between seeking what you want to do and doing what you think you should do (for the good of the relationship or the other person). If most of your focus is directed toward getting and doing what you want with little attention to what must be done for the other, you'll soon earn resentment. If you're overbalanced on the side of "shoulds"—how you *should* act, what you *should* do for the other person—the relationship will begin to feel like a joyless burden, and you'll dream of escape.

For many, "shoulds" can become a controlling tyranny, forcing them to ignore important needs. They're so busy being good and giving that they fail to notice how depressed and desperate they've become. Sooner or later, the pain of denying yourself grows too big, and you have to escape or blow up the relationship.

Exercise: The "Shoulds"

Put a check (✓) next to the items that describe your beliefs or feelings:

____ You should try to give everything that's asked of you in a relationship, even when it means putting your own needs aside.

____ When someone is in pain, you should do anything required to help them.

____ You should be caring and considerate at all times.

____ You shouldn't ask for something if you know the other person doesn't want to give it.

____ There is a right way to act with people, and it should be followed even if it means keeping quiet about your feelings and needs.

____ You shouldn't say no to people; it's impolite.

____ You shouldn't express feelings that might upset someone; it's wrong.

____ You should respond to the needs of others because their needs are a high priority.

____ You should never hurt or offend anyone.

____ You should try not to disappoint others.

The more items you checked, the stronger your beliefs about the right and wrong way to relate with others and the more likely you are to deny your own needs in a relationship. There's nothing wrong with having values about how to treat others, but if those values overpower your ability to ask for what you want, you'll end up feeling helpless in any relationship.

difficult situation or person, or strengthen awareness of your higher power. You can connect to your higher power through prayer, an act of kindness, or some giving of yourself to others. What you choose is up to you, but committed action—in some form—is necessary to make any real change in your life.

Right now, choose the five daily practices you will use tomorrow. Then, write them here as part of your commitment to really *do* them.

MY DAILY PRACTICES

Mindfulness: _____

Deep relaxation: _____

Self-observation: _____

Affirmation: _____

_____

Committed action plan: _____

_____

_____

What time each day will you do your practices? Please write that here: _____

_____

So far, so good—you know what you'll do for your daily practices and when you'll do them. But now comes the most important part: persevering—spending those fifteen minutes every day strengthening your skills.

How do you persevere? The answer is one day at a time—making sure that on *this* day, at the appointed time, you do your practices. And the next day you do the same thing … and the next. A commitment isn't something you make once, and you're set for life. It's something you keep making, every day.

The daily practices will change your life because they will help you shape new responses to old struggles. Life isn't about hopes or intentions. It's about *doing.* It's about *being* effective. Now, as we close the book, we're asking you to live what you've learned. You can do this, maybe not perfectly, but enough to make real changes.

The poet and author Samuel Johnson once said: "The future is purchased by the present." Similarly, by investing in your dialectical behavior therapy skills and practices today, you can create a happier and healthier tomorrow.

The daily practices take a total of about fifteen minutes. They should be done, ideally, at the same time each day—so they can become a healthy habit. Choose a period in your day when you can be alone and have a little quiet. It could be just after your morning coffee or in your workspace just before going to lunch. It could be how you de-stress when you come home at night or part of your bedtime routine. Whatever time you choose, stick to it. Don't let other events or commitments interfere. Consider the time spent in daily practices as an appointment with yourself—no less important than all the other commitments that you keep.

Your daily practices will be assembled from a menu of choices. Here's how that works:

1. Mindfulness. *Three to five minutes*. Choose to do one of the following:
   - Mindful breathing (see chapter 3)
   - Wise-mind meditation (see chapter 4)
2. Deep relaxation. *Three minutes*. Choose to do one of the following:
   - Cue-controlled relaxation (see chapter 2)
   - Band of light (see chapter 3)
   - Safe-place visualization (see chapter 2)
3. Self-observation. *Three minutes*. Choose to do one of the following:
   - Thought defusion (see chapter 3)
   - Be mindful of your emotions without judgment (see chapter 7)
4. Affirmation. See chapter 2 for a list of self-affirmations or create a self-affirmation yourself. Repeat the affirmation five times while taking slow, long breaths. You can choose a different affirmation each day—or keep working on the same one.
5. Committed action. *Three minutes*. Choose to do one of the following:
   - Plan to implement today's (or tomorrow's) committed action (see chapter 2).
   - Plan for what you can do today (or tomorrow) to connect to your higher power (see chapter 2).

Each component of your daily practices is designed to strengthen one or more core skills. First and foremost are mindfulness skills because all of the others depend, to some degree, on mindful awareness. Deep relaxation is a key to distress tolerance, while self-observation and affirmation will help with emotion regulation. Finally, a plan for committed action will strengthen emotion regulation and interpersonal effectiveness skills.

The concept of committed action deserves special note. Your daily practices should include a plan for something you'll do—that day or the next—to solve a problem, deal effectively with a

SKILL BUILDING

Improving your interpersonal skills will take hard work. You don't need anyone to tell you how difficult it is to change relationship patterns. But you know why it's important—some relationships you value have blown up because you didn't know how to fix things that went wrong. This chapter and the next will give you new tools to manage how you function in relationships. Sometimes they'll work, sometimes they won't; and sometimes you may forget to use them. But you'll also be amazed how much they can improve a conversation or help to solve a problem.

It's hard, but it's okay if you fall down sometimes—if you blow up or withdraw—because it takes time to learn a new way. Practicing your new interpersonal skills will yield the following results:

- Help you be more effective in your dealings with people
- Improve your ability to get your needs met
- Help you negotiate conflicts without damaging a relationship
- Strengthen your self-respect by giving you alternatives to old, damaging patterns of anger or withdrawal

KEY INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

There are six core interpersonal skills that will change how your relationships feel:

1. *Knowing what you want.* How do you know what you want in a relationship? In some cases, you sense a yearning. Or you're aware of discomfort. The key is to pay attention and look for a way to describe, in your own mind, what you're feeling.
2. *Asking for what you want—in a way that protects the relationship.* The next chapter will give you an effective method and format for doing this. But for the moment, the basic idea is to put your needs into words that are clear, not attacking, and ask for specific behavioral change.
3. *Negotiating conflicting wants.* The willingness to negotiate starts with a clear commitment that there won't be winners or losers. It assumes that each person's needs are valid and understandable, and it draws on a willingness to compromise so that each person gets some of what he or she wants. A simple protocol for negotiating conflicting needs is provided in the next chapter.
4. *Getting information.* One of the most crucial of all interpersonal skills is finding out what the other person needs, fears, hopes for, and so on. The major blocks to getting

information are when you (1) falsely assume you know what the other person wants; (2) project your own fears, needs, and feelings on the other person; (3) fear appearing to pry; (4) fear hearing the worst possible answer; and (5) don't know how to ask or what to look for. The next chapter will give you some key strategies for getting information.

5. *Saying no—in a way that protects the relationship.* You can say no in three ways: (1) in a limp, powerless style that just gets overridden; (2) in a hard-edged, aggressive style that alienates people; or (3) in an assertive style that validates the other person's needs and desires while setting firm boundaries around what you will and won't do. The first two strategies undermine relationships because someone is going to end up feeling controlled and resentful. We'll describe how to implement the third strategy in the next chapter.

6. *Acting according to your values.* Being passive or aggressive in a relationship diminishes both your self-respect and the self-respect of others, because someone is losing out in the relationship—someone's needs and feelings are being ignored. Being clear about how you want to treat others is a critical step to interpersonal effectiveness. Ask yourself, "What type of relationships do I want with other people?" Do you want a loving relationship, a trustworthy relationship, or a committed relationship? Hopefully, as you've been using the skills and exercises in this workbook, you've begun to think about how you value your relationships. Acting in your relationships according to what you value is another crucial step that will determine the entire nature of your relationships. Don't be surprised when valueless relationships don't work out well. Try setting positive intentions and values for each of your relationships, and act in those relationships according to what you're trying to achieve.

Exercise: Identify Your Interpersonal Values

On the following lines, list any of your interpersonal behaviors that diminish self-respect. Include anything that emotionally damages you or another person. Also write down sins of omission—things you should have done, but didn't.

Example: *I get angry as soon as someone criticizes me.*

_____

_____

_____

_____

Now, in the space that follows, list your values regarding how people should be treated. These are your basic rules about what you and others are entitled to in a relationship.

CHAPTER 10

Putting It All Together

The skills you have learned in this book will grow stronger each day that you practice them. Conversely, if your skills aren't used, they'll slip further from your grasp. They'll cease to be real choices, real ways to change. Instead, they'll become mere ideas, vaguely recalled, with no power to help you.

Keeping and strengthening your skills will take sustained effort. There's an old saying that victory belongs to the most persevering, which is exactly what's needed now: a commitment to practice your skills daily—over time.

You may wonder—legitimately—where you'll find the motivation to keep doing something so challenging. And all this talk of perseverance may sound very nineteenth century and preachy. But there is a way to practice daily what you've learned, and it doesn't take a huge amount of willpower. What it requires is getting in the *habit* of spending about fifteen minutes a day practicing your skills.

DAILY PRACTICES FOR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

The *daily practices* are, in essence, an exercise regimen to maintain your emotional and psychological health. The practices have five parts:

1. Mindfulness
2. Deep relaxation
3. Self-observation
4. Affirmation
5. Committed action

4. *Tell him I can do anything but collating, copying, and working with a mouse. I need to stop doing those things till my wrist is better.*

5. *If he objects, I'll ask what his concern is about temporarily changing my duties. Then I'll try to negotiate.*

The most important thing to remember about your new interpersonal skills is to keep working at them. Your persistence will benefit you. Shrug it off when things go wrong, figure out what happened, and then make a new plan. You have the ability to change your relationships and your life. All you have to do is keep trying.

Example: *It's important to me to hear that someone I love is hurting.*

When you compare the two lists, assess whether you're using interpersonal strategies that violate your values. Which core values do you disregard most frequently? How are your relationships impacted when you violate your values?

In the next chapter, you will learn interpersonal strategies that will help you be effective while at the same time preserving your self-respect.

BLOCKS TO USING INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Despite how diligent you are about using your new interpersonal skills, there will still be many obstacles along the way that might temporarily block the success of your relationships. But don't worry—identifying these obstacles is half the battle. Once you know what they are, you can prepare to overcome them. Here are some of the most common blocks to using interpersonal skills:

- Old habits—of the aggressive kind
- Old habits—of the passive kind
- Overwhelming emotion
- Failure to identify your needs
- Fear
- Toxic relationships
- Myths

Old Habits—of the Aggressive Kind

In your family of origin, you observed how people solved interpersonal problems, and you began to model your own behavior on what you saw. If members of your family dealt with conflict using anger, blame, or withdrawal, these are the strategies you may have learned to use as well.

Techniques for influencing others that utilize fear, shame, or hurtful psychological pressure are called *aversive strategies*. There are eight of them:

1. *Discounting:* The message to the other person is that his or her needs or feelings are invalid and don't have legitimacy or importance. Here's an example: "You've been watching TV all day; why do you expect me to come home and do the bills?"

2. *Withdrawing/abandoning:* The message is "Do what I want or I'm leaving." The fear of abandonment is so powerful that many people will give up a great deal to avoid it.

3. *Threatening:* The message here is "Do what I want or I'll hurt you." The most typical threats are to get angry or somehow make the other person's life miserable. Here's an example: "Hey, okay, I won't ask you to help me again. Maybe I'll ask somebody else."

4. *Blaming:* The problem, whatever it is, becomes the other person's fault. Since they caused it, they have to fix it. Here's an example: "The reason we're running up our credit cards every month is that you never saw a store you didn't like."

5. *Belittling/denigrating:* The strategy here is to make the other person feel foolish and wrong to have a particular need, opinion, or feeling. Here's an example: "Why do you want to go to the lake all the time? All you ever do is get allergy attacks up there."

6. *Guilt-tripping:* This strategy conveys the message that the other person is a moral failure, that their needs are wrong and must be given up. Here's an example: "If you don't trust me, that tells me something is very wrong with our relationship."

7. *Derailing:* This strategy switches attention away from the other person's feelings and needs. The idea is to stop talking about them and instead talk about yourself. Here's an example: "I don't care what you want to do, right now I feel hurt."

8. *Taking away:* Here the strategy is to withdraw some form of support, pleasure, or reinforcement from the other person as punishment for something they said, did, or wanted. Here's an example: John said, "I'm not really in the mood for hiking; it's boring," after his partner was unwilling to invest in a new camera (adapted from McKay, Fanning, & Paleg, 1994).

As you review this list, are there strategies you recognize from your own behavior? Think back to times you've used aversive tactics—what was the impact on your relationship? Is this something you want to change? The best way to stop aversive behavior is to observe it closely.

Exercise: Conflict Log

The following Conflict Log will help you.

work on. Review the sections in this and the previous chapter regarding skills you want to improve. Finally, make a specific plan for how you are going to change your behavior *next time.* Don't try to fix too many things because you'll never remember it all. Just focus on a few changes that might lead to big improvements. Write down specifically what you're going to do differently and in which situations.

Here's an example. Laura used the Communication Effectiveness Checklist to evaluate an angry interaction with her boss. She had asked for lighter duties because of a sprained wrist. These are the items she checked as problems.

- Denigrating *(I told him the company didn't take very good care of its employees.)*
- High emotion *(I got quickly upset and forgot some of my skills.)*
- Myths *(I feel like there's something wrong with me if I ask for anything special.)*
- "You" statements *(I said, "I feel like you don't really care what happens to people.")*
- No behavioral description of need *(I didn't specify exactly what "light duty" I was asking for.)*
- Blocks to listening *(I used judging and sparring.)*
- Mutual validation *(I didn't validate his concerns.)*
- Probing *(I never found out his concerns.)*

Laura realized she couldn't deal with everything on her list, so she decided to focus on just a few things:

- Denigrating and "you" statements
- High emotion
- Behavioral description of need
- Probing

Here's Laura's written plan:

When I discuss this with Bob again, I'm going to do the following:

1. *Be extremely careful to make no critical statements about Bob or the company—no matter how upset I get.*
2. *Do a few minutes of mindful breathing to calm down before I talk to him.*
3. *Watch out for when I feel hot or I'm raising my voice—take a couple of deep breaths to calm down then.*

6. Assertiveness problems?
   - ____ Judgments instead of facts (see page 206)
   - ____ "You" statements instead of "I" statements (see page 206)
   - ____ No specific behavioral description of what you want (see page 207)
7. Blocks to listening? (see page 212)
   - ____ Mind reading
   - ____ Rehearsing
   - ____ Filtering
   - ____ Judging
   - ____ Daydreaming
   - ____ Advising
   - ____ Sparring
   - ____ Being right
   - ____ Derailing
   - ____ Placating
8. Forgot the conflict management strategies?
   - ____ Mutual validation (see page 215)
   - ____ Broken record (see page 216)
   - ____ Probing (see page 217)
   - ____ Clouding (see page 217)
   - ____ Assertive delay (see page 218)
9. Negotiation breakdown?
   - ____ Did you forget to use RAVEN?
     - **R**elax
     - **A**void the aversive
     - **V**alidate the other person's need or concern
     - **E**xamine your values
     - **N**eutral voice
   - ____ Didn't use compromise solutions?

The Communication Effectiveness Checklist is a starting point to evaluate interactions that you wish could have gone better. Identify the problems first, then decide which ones you want to

CONFLICT LOG

Date	My Need	My Behavior	Aversive Strategy	Consequences

Old Habits—of the Passive Kind

Some old habits are of the passive rather than aggressive variety. You may have learned in your family how to shut down or surrender when there is a conflict. You can use the same Conflict Log (using "Passive Strategy" rather than "Aversive Strategy" in column four to track conflicts when you withdraw or shut down.

After keeping the log, ask these questions:

- What kind of needs or situations trigger your use of aversive or passive strategies?
- Which strategies do you most frequently rely on?
- Are you getting what you want using aversive or passive strategies?
- What are the most frequent emotional consequences for using these strategies?

The assertiveness skills in the next chapter will give you more effective alternatives to the aversive and passive responses you've typically used.

Overwhelming Emotion

A third major block to using interpersonal skills is high emotion. Sometimes your best intentions and most carefully laid plans go up in smoke when you're upset. For some people, particularly those who have grown up in abusive homes, getting angry can cause a *dissociative fugue state*. In that frame of mind, they may do or say things that, on later reflection, seem to have been done by someone else. "It didn't feel like me telling my wife to get out," one man insisted. "I felt like I was possessed, in the control of some force outside myself."

There is good evidence that angry, dissociative states are responsible for a lot of emotional and even physical violence. What can you do when overwhelming emotion threatens to unravel your hard-won interpersonal skills? There are two things you can learn to do right now. First, pay attention to the red flags that indicate you're starting to lose control. Different people have different signals. Here are some that are typical:

- Feeling hot or flushed
- Heart pounding
- Short of breath
- Tension in your hands, arms, forehead, or shoulders
- Talking more rapidly or more loudly than usual
- Feeling a strong need to win, to crush someone, to make them feel bad

COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS CHECKLIST

1. Were you clear about your goals?
   - ____ Did you know what you wanted?
   - ____ Did you know what you *didn't* want—so you could say no?
   - ____ Were you aware of your values, how you wanted to treat others, and how you'd like to be treated in return?
2. Did you use aversive strategies?
   - ____ Discounting
   - ____ Withdrawing/abandonment
   - ____ Threats
   - ____ Blaming
   - ____ Belittling/denigrating
   - ____ Guilt-tripping
   - ____ Derailing
   - ____ Taking away
3. Did you use passive strategies?
   - ____ Avoiding/withholding
   - ____ Shutting down/stonewalling
4. What were the blocking factors?
   - ____ High emotion (see page 192)
   - ____ Fear and "what ifs" (see page 193)
   - ____ Toxic relationships (see page 196)
   - ____ Myths (see page 196)
     - If I need something, it means there is something wrong or bad about me.
     - I won't be able to stand it if the other person gets mad or says no.
     - It's selfish to say no or ask for things.
     - I have no control over anything.
5. Intensity level
   - ____ Too high?
   - ____ Too low?

Conflict	Compromise
1.	a. b.
2.	a. b.
3.	a. b.

When working toward compromise, it's crucial to maintain flexibility. Holding a fixed, entrenched position makes negotiation difficult. Be open to creative, unexpected solutions. Be prepared to give something up to get something you want.

HOW TO ANALYZE PROBLEM INTERACTIONS

You need a way to figure out what happened when communications go wrong. Inevitably, problems and conflicts will show up in your relationships. Sometimes you will blow up or shut down. But the key is to learn from what happened and use that to polish your skills. No setback is completely negative if it helps you be more effective next time.

The following checklist will help you review interpersonal problems and become clearer about their causes.

Exercise: Red-Flag Feelings and Behaviors

Make a list in the following space of red-flag feelings or behaviors that in the past signaled a loss of control:

Now when conflicts arise, watch out for the red flags. If you notice them, you can use a second technique you've already learned: When you first notice that you're beginning to get overwhelmed by your emotions, start using your mindful breathing skills (see page 80). Take slow, diaphragmatic breaths, and put all of your attention on the physical experience of the breath. This will help to calm you and to disconnect the old neural pathways that made you feel overwhelmed.

Failure to Identify Your Needs

Interpersonal skills won't do you much good if you don't know what you want in a situation. If you can't clearly articulate your needs, all you're left with is frustration. The first section of the next chapter will offer you strategies for identifying what you want in terms of specific behavioral change from others. Once you can articulate a need to yourself, the sections on assertiveness and making a simple request will give you tools to say it out loud.

Fear

When you feel afraid of something, interpersonal skills often go out the window. You're just too full of catastrophic "what ifs" to think clearly. "What if I'm rejected? What if I lose my job? What if I can't stand this?" Catastrophic thoughts can scare you into using aggressive and aversive strategies. Or they can cause you to avoid a situation altogether. The net result is that you don't function well and aren't effective.

Wise-mind meditation (see page 87) can help you manage in the face of fear, as can mindful breathing. Another thing you can do is directly confront your catastrophic thoughts. There are two steps to this.

Exercise 1: Risk Assessment

Notice that the Risk Assessment/Risk Planning Worksheet on the next page is divided into four columns. In column one, write down your fear, and in column two list all the evidence you have that the fear will come true. In column three, write down all available evidence that the catastrophe won't occur. Now, after reviewing evidence for and against, write your estimate of the percentage of chance that the catastrophe will happen.

Exercise 2: Risk Planning

In the "Risk Planning" portion of the worksheet, imagine that the catastrophe you fear has actually happened. How would you cope? Do you have resources, family, or friends to help you? Do you have a plan for how you would do your best with the situation? What skills do you have to get you through?

The Risk Assessment/Risk Planning Worksheet is something you may want to photocopy and use again and again—whenever fear threatens to torpedo your relationship skills.

solution you offer addresses at least some of the needs of the other person. If you aren't sure what those needs are—ask them.

Once you've each offered several alternative solutions—without agreement—it's time to look for a compromise. Here are some classic compromise solutions:

- *I'll cut the pie; you choose the first piece.* After the divorce, Sharon divided the artwork into two groups—but Lawrence got to choose which one he'd take.
- *Take turns.* Linda and Moe alternated between going to the mountains and the beach on their vacations.
- *Do both; have it all.* Take care of both people's needs simultaneously.
- *Trial period.* Agree to a solution only for a specific length of time, after which you'll reevaluate. If one party feels the solution isn't working, negotiations are reopened.
- *My way when I'm doing it; your way when you're doing it.* Each person, as he or she deals with a problem, gets to use their own method. Sam and Katrina were partners in a small boutique. Sam thought the big "come on in" sign that Katrina made was garish. They agreed he wouldn't use it on his days watching the store.
- *Tit for tat.* Roommates Jill and Denise agreed that if Jill cleaned the bathroom once a week, Denise would dust and vacuum once a week.
- *Part of what I want with part of what you want.* Two friends and coworkers planned to travel together to a convention. One wanted to relax on the train; one wanted to get there in a hurry by air. They agreed to fly one way and take the train the other.
- *Split the difference.* This often works with haggling over a price or how much time to spend doing something.

Exercise: How to Negotiate

Recall three recent conflicts where you had very different needs from someone else. For each conflict, work out two possible compromises from the above list. Describe specifically how you would implement them.

EXAMPLE #2

Critic: You never support me when I need something.

You: It's true, there have been several times when I couldn't completely support what you were asking.

Notice how clouding steals your critic's thunder and neutralizes his or her argument. Now the door is open to real negotiation of legitimate, yet very different needs.

Assertive Delay

This technique gives you room to wait, particularly when things threaten to get hot and angry. People will often pressure you to make a decision or agree with a plan right away. Assertive delay allows you to take a break—whether for a few minutes or several hours. During the interval, you can calm down, think carefully about what's being said, and prepare a good response. "You've told me a lot, and I need time to sift through and see what I think." "Give me an hour. This is important, and I want to think carefully before I say anything."

HOW TO NEGOTIATE

When a conflict arises that requires negotiation between you and someone else, you need to start from the position that *each of you has valid needs*. The RAVEN checklist will keep you on track.

RAVEN stands for the following:

Relax. Accept conflict calmly. Take a deep breath before you say the next thing. Release tension as you exhale.

Avoid the aversive. Keep in mind the aversive strategies you might be tempted to use, and monitor what you say in order to avoid them.

Validate the other person's need or concern. Focus on a fair, mutually agreeable outcome where *both* people can get *some* of their needs met.

Examine your values. How do you want to be treated in a relationship—how do you want to treat others? What do you want to achieve, not only regarding the conflict, but in this relationship?

Neutral voice. Keep anger and contempt out of your voice.

Once you're committed to staying within the RAVEN guidelines, it's time to start the actual negotiation process. It begins by each person taking turns and offering solutions. Make sure that a

RISK ASSESSMENT

My Fear	Evidence For	Evidence Against	Percentage of Chance of Occurring

RISK PLANNING

Make a coping plan utilizing your skills and resources in the event your feared scenario comes true.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Toxic Relationships

Relationships where people use aversive strategies on you can make your interpersonal skills very difficult to use. No matter how determined you are to be assertive rather than aggressive or passive, people who blame, threaten, or belittle you can often trip you up and make you want to explode or run away.

The best solution is to get away from these folks. They're not going to change, and you'll never stop being vulnerable to their attacks. However, if these are people you can't avoid—for example, a boss or a family member—there are two things you *must* do to cope. First, you have to calm yourself before dealing with them. Use mindful breathing or wise mind to get centered. Second, based on past experience, you need to anticipate exactly how the toxic individual is likely to act, and then you need to make a specific plan—even a script—to deal with it. Planning ahead and developing a detailed response will keep you from falling back on old, ineffective patterns. See the assertiveness sections in the next chapter for the tools necessary to talk your way out of aversive traps.

Myths

The last of the major blocks to using interpersonal skills is found in the four paralyzing myths of relationship:

1. If I need something, it means there is something wrong or bad about me.
2. I won't be able to stand it if the other person gets mad or says no.
3. It's selfish to say no or ask for things.
4. I have no control over anything.

Each of these myths inhibits you from saying what you need and setting limits. Let's look at each of them.

- *Myth #1.* Every human being needs things from other human beings—whether it's attention, support, love, help, or just plain kindness. We are not sufficient unto ourselves, and our whole lives are spent negotiating with others for everything we require to survive—physically and emotionally. So needing things can't be shameful or wrong; it is basic to the human condition. In contrast to this myth, a healthy alternative coping thought is "*I have a right to want things*."
- *Myth #2.* Hearing an angry refusal hurts. Sometimes it hits so hard and suddenly that it takes your breath away. But is it true you can't stand it? Think of the rejections you've suffered in your life—they were difficult, but you survived them. Refusals hurt, there's no doubt about it, but the worst thing is living with years

Probing

The key phrase here is this:

- "What is it about (*name the situation*) _____ that bothers you?"

Just keep asking it until you get something useful.

For example, let's return to a previous example of a person who was accused of not pulling his weight. Imagine that you were criticized in that way. Here's how probing could help you.

Critic: You're not pulling your weight around here.

You: What is it about my work that bothers you?

Critic: Everybody else is working overtime. You waltz out every night at 5:00.

You: What is it that bothers you about me leaving the office on time?

Critic: The work has to be done. I'm responsible to see that it is. And you just work by the clock.

You: What is it that bothers you when I work by the clock?

Critic: Somebody else has to finish your work—often me. I want you to stay till it's done.

You: I appreciate your explaining to me.

If you wish to probe with more varied questions, review the sample queries in the Assertive Listening section.

Clouding

This technique allows you to "agree in part" with someone without accepting that everything they say is true. This calms people down and stops the win/lose arguing game.

The key is to find some part of what's being said that you can accept and then to acknowledge that the other person is right about that. Ignore the rest of their argument. One way to agree is to modify words of sheer exaggeration, such as "always" and "never."

EXAMPLE #1

Critic: You always get pissed off over little things.

You: It's true, there are times I find myself getting irritated.

we'll have a bit more when we retire. We're both coming from a reasonable place, just different."

- "*I understand* that my saying you're not pulling your weight hurt you. That would be hard for anyone—me included—to hear. *On my end*, I'm scared this project is in danger of going over budget and I'll have to answer for that. I need everyone to pull together."

- "*I understand* you're concerned about my safety, and that's why you replaced the part. I appreciate that very much. *On my end*, I've got a budget so tight I can't afford repair work that isn't literally keeping the car running. Safety isn't my highest concern right now."

Notice that each example of mutual validation includes a sentence that starts "I understand," and another one that begins "On my end." These two sentences establish that you appreciate both points of view.

Broken Record

You use this technique when someone isn't getting the message. Formulate a short, specific, easy-to-understand statement about what you want. Ideally, keep it to one sentence. Offer no excuses or explanations. Stand or sit straight, talk in a strong, firm voice. Then just keep repeating the statement as many times as necessary, varying a word here or there—but not much else.

Don't argue, don't get angry, and don't try to debate or refute anything the other person says. Don't answer any "why" questions ("Why do you want to . . .") because that just gives the other person ammunition for their arguments. Respond by saying "I just prefer it" or "That's just how I feel." Under no circumstances should you offer additional information or evidence for your point of view. Just repeat, politely and clearly, like a broken record. Here's an example:

Sam: Your tree has a large branch suspended over my roof. I'm concerned that the next big storm could bring it down on my house. I'd like you to get an arborist to cut off the limb.

Bill: It's been like that for years; I wouldn't worry about it.

Sam: I think that branch is a danger to my house, and I'd like you to have it removed.

Bill: Relax; that branch will still be up there long after we're pushing up daisies.

Sam: It's hanging over my roof, and I'm concerned about it. I'm asking you to remove it, Bill, before it falls.

Bill: Why have you gotten so nervous about it all of a sudden?

Sam: The branch is over my roof, Bill, and it needs to come down.

of pain because you never asked for what you want. In contrast to this myth, a healthy alternative coping thought is "*I have a right to ask for things—even if the other person won't give them.*"

- *Myth #3.* You may feel that it's selfish to ask for things because of messages in your early family that said your needs didn't count or that your needs were less important than the needs of others. When you examine it, is this really true? Is there something flawed or wrong with you that makes your needs relatively unimportant? The truth is that everyone's needs are valid, and equally important. It isn't selfish to ask for things or set limits. It's normal. It's healthy and necessary. Our survival as individuals depends on knowing and saying what we want. Because if we don't, folks don't pay attention. A helpful coping thought is "*It's normal and healthy to ask for things.*"

- *Myth #4.* Control is relative. You can't control the behavior of others, even though some folks go nuts trying. What can be controlled is *your* behavior. Passive or aggressive styles often have bad outcomes. People ignore your needs or get angry and resist you. That's why you feel helpless—the strategies you're using aren't effective. Assertive behavior gets better results. People—more often than not—listen and respond positively. In contrast to this myth, a helpful alternative coping thought is "*I can choose to behave in more effective ways.*"

Now start with the lowest-ranked situations and do four things:

1. Write your script ("I think … I feel … I want").
2. Rehearse your script.
3. Identify the time and place you want to use it.
4. Commit yourself to making your assertive statement on a specific date.

When you've completed your first assertive goal, evaluate what worked and what needs improvement. For example, do you need to be firmer, with less arguing or excuse making? Whatever you learned from your first step, incorporate it into the preparations for the second-ranked situation. Keep moving up the hierarchy. As you do, you'll find your confidence and skill growing. And your relationships will become gradually more rewarding.

COPING WITH RESISTANCE AND CONFLICT

We looked earlier at how to improve your ability to hear others. But what happens if someone isn't listening to *you*? The answer is in the following five conflict management skills:

1. Mutual validation
2. Broken record
3. Probing
4. Clouding (assertive agreement)
5. Assertive delay

Mutual Validation

When people aren't listening to you, one of the most common reasons is that they feel invalidated. They don't experience that they're being heard, so they keep pouring on their arguments and assertions. You can short-circuit the problem with mutual validation. Validating someone doesn't mean agreeing with them. It means, instead, that you understand their *needs*, *feelings*, and *motivations*. You get it—you see how the other person could think and feel that way.

Thus mutual validation means you acknowledge and appreciate their experience, you understand where they're coming from, and then you validate your own experience as well. Here are some examples:

- "*I understand* that it's scary to take a financial risk like this; you have every right to be cautious. *On my end*, I feel a pressure to make some higher-yield investments so

- "I can see why you want to go late, out of the hot sun, but *I'm not comfortable* trying to stay up so long after my bedtime."

Notice that the key phrases are "I'd prefer" and "I'm not comfortable." You don't offer a lot of justification for your position; you don't argue. You just validate and decline. The important thing is *not* giving the other person anything to use against you. No one can really argue with preferences or feelings.

Exercise: Building an Assertive Hierarchy

Learning assertiveness (including saying no) takes practice and willingness to take some risks. But you need to get your feet wet in low-risk situations, then work toward more anxiety-provoking encounters.

Make a list of situations where you want to make a change, say no, or set limits. Include problems with family, friends, people who work for or with you, authorities, and so on. Now rank the list from 1 to 10 in terms of risk and difficulty, with 1 being the least challenging and 10 being the most challenging situation.

ASSERTIVE SITUATION HIERARCHY

Rank	Situation

CHAPTER 9

Advanced Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

This chapter contains all the applied skills of interpersonal effectiveness. Learning and practicing these skills will change your life because you'll have far less conflict and far more rewards in your relationships. Your connections to people will feel different—more satisfying than frustrating and more supportive than depriving. In this chapter, you'll learn the following specific skills:

- Knowing what you want
- Modulating intensity
- Making a simple request
- Making basic assertiveness scripts
- Using assertive listening skills
- Saying no
- Coping with resistance and conflict
- Negotiating
- Analyzing problem interactions

KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT

Interpersonal effectiveness has to begin with self-knowledge. You need to be clear about what you feel and want. Chapters 6 and 7 on emotion regulation will give you words for the nuances

of what you feel and techniques to classify the emotion. For our purposes here, you can identify emotions through a simple decision-making process called a *decision tree.* It starts with the basic questions—is the feeling good or bad, painful or pleasurable? If the feeling is good, is it more like satisfaction, excitement, sexual attraction, love/affection, contentment, joy, pleasant anticipation, interest, or satiety? If the feeling is bad, is it more like anxiety, fear, anger, resentment, sadness, grief/loss, hurt, anger or disgust with oneself, embarrassment/shame, guilt, yearning/deprivation, or loneliness/emptiness? The decision tree looks like this:

EMOTIONS

Good	**Bad**
Satisfaction	Anxiety (for the future)
Excitement	Fear (of something now)
Sexual attraction	Anger
Love/affection	Resentment
Contentment	Sadness
Joy	Grief/loss
Pleasant anticipation	Hurt
Interest	Anger or disgust with oneself
Satiety	Embarrassment/shame
	Guilt
	Yearning/deprivation
	Loneliness/emptiness

Allan, for example, was aware that something felt wrong in his relationship with his father. When he looked at the list of feelings, the one that seemed closest was hurt—with a little bit of resentment. Allan could tell it somehow related to his father's planned visit. The man was coming to town with his new wife. Yet, in five days of sightseeing, his dad had scheduled just a single dinner with Allan. Once you can put words to what you feel, the next question becomes, what does this emotion make you want to change? And, more specifically, what is the behavior of others that you want to modify? Do you want them to do more or less of something? Do you want something to stop? Do you want new behavior that could make a difference in how you feel?

Now think about the behavior change in specific terms. When and where do you want to see this change? How often? What exactly would the new behavior look like?

Now let's condense this process into a series of steps.

LISTENING-BLOCK EXERCISE

Situation	**Blocks to Listening**
1.	
2.	
3.	

During the next week, notice how often you use your favorite listening blocks. Commit to replacing them with assertive listening (see key questions under Assertive Listening on page 211).

SAYING NO

The ability to say no is a vital part of healthy communication. Without it, any relationship is dangerous—it's like getting in a car with a gas pedal and no brakes. You have no control over what people do to you.

Saying no is simple and hard at the same time. The words are simple, but often it takes courage to say them. Let's start with the "how" of saying no. There are only two steps:

1. Validate the other person's needs or desires.
2. State a clear *preference* not to do it.

Here are some examples:

- "Action movies with a high body count are a lot of fun, but *I'd prefer* something calmer tonight."
- "I've seen chartreuse used to good advantage—it's a dynamic color—but *I'd prefer* something pastel in the bedroom."
- "I can see why you want to confront Ian (our son), but *I don't feel comfortable* with an approach that risks him turning his back on us."

Blocks to Listening

Here are ten ways that people sabotage their effective listening abilities (adapted from McKay et al., 1983). Right now, put a check (✓) by the listening blocks you're aware of using. But don't judge yourself—everybody does some of this.

____ *Mind reading:* Assuming you know what the other person feels and thinks—without asking.

____ *Rehearsing:* Planning what you want to say next and missing what's being said now.

____ *Filtering:* Listening only to things that are important or relevant to you and ignoring the rest (even if it's important to the other person).

____ *Judging:* Evaluating the other person and what they say rather than really trying to understand how they see the world.

____ *Daydreaming:* Getting caught in memories or fantasies while someone is talking to you.

____ *Advising:* Looking for suggestions and solutions instead of listening and understanding.

____ *Sparring:* Invalidating the other person by arguing and debating.

____ *Being right:* Resisting or ignoring any communication that suggests you are wrong or should change.

____ *Derailing:* Flat out changing the subject as soon as you hear anything that bothers or threatens you.

____ *Placating:* Agreeing too quickly ("I know … You're right … I'm sorry") without really listening to the other person's feelings or concerns.

Exercise: Listening Blocks

In the left-hand column of the following table, describe three situations where communications broke down between you and someone else. In the right-hand column, see if you can identify at least one of the listening blocks that kept you from hearing or understanding everything that was said.

Exercise: Knowing What You Want

Think of a recent experience where you had a bad feeling during an interaction. Getting from the feeling to a clear statement of desire would involve the following process:

1. Put the feeling into words: _____

   _____

2. What do you want the other person to change?
   - More of _____
   - Less of _____
   - Stop doing _____
   - Start doing _____
   - When _____
   - Where _____
   - Frequency _____

Now put all this information into one or more clear sentences: _____

_____

_____

_____

A woman whose sister frequently criticized how she parented a difficult child wrote this description of what she wanted changed: "I'd like Brenda to stop talking about Mike [my son] and stop talking about my 'needing a backbone' with him. I'd like her to stop it, in particular, when we're around people we know. Instead, I'd rather she ask me about other things—work, my photographs, my writing."

The problem with getting clear and specific about your desires is that it brings up anxiety. Do you deserve to ask for things? Do you dare trouble people with your needs? Are you allowed to disappoint, to annoy, to push people to make an effort on your behalf? The answer is yes. And the reason is that you are a human being who feels, who yearns for things, who hurts, who struggles with moments of pain. All of this entitles you to be heard.

Unfortunately, many people grow up in families that invalidate their needs. And all their lives they feel afraid to ask for things—as if they were bad or undeserving, as if their feelings and pain had no importance.

To remind you of your value and importance as a human being, we'd like you to review the following list of legitimate rights (adapted from McKay et al., 1983).

YOUR LEGITIMATE RIGHTS

1. You have a right to need things from others.
2. You have a right to put yourself first sometimes.
3. You have a right to feel and express your emotions or your pain.
4. You have the right to be the final judge of your beliefs and accept them as legitimate.
5. You have the right to your opinions and convictions.
6. You have the right to your experience—even if it's different from that of other people.
7. You have a right to protest any treatment or criticism that feels bad to you.
8. You have a right to negotiate for change.
9. You have a right to ask for help, emotional support, or anything else you need (even though you may not always get it).
10. You have a right to say no; saying no doesn't make you bad or selfish.
11. You have a right not to justify yourself to others.
12. You have a right not to take responsibility for someone else's problem.
13. You have a right to choose not to respond to a situation.
14. You have a right, sometimes, to inconvenience or disappoint others.

Put the rights that are most important or liberating to you on a file card, and tape it someplace where you'll see it frequently, like your bathroom mirror, in order to remind yourself.

MODULATING INTENSITY

How you ask for things depends on the situation. The intensity and level of insistence can vary based on two major factors:

1. How urgent is my need?

   Low urgency 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High urgency

I want: _____

_____

How I'll take care of myself: _____

_____

ASSERTIVE LISTENING

Everyone knows that good communication is a two-way street. But what a lot of people don't know is that listening is an active rather than passive process. It requires a full commitment to really understand what the other person thinks and feels about the problem, and wants to do to change it. In other words, the same three things you're learning to express assertively, you'll also need to listen for and elicit with questions.

If, while listening, you have any uncertainty about the other person's feelings or wishes, ask a direct question. "I'm not really sure how you feel about that—could you tell me more?" "What do you think we should try to change in this situation?"

The more active your questions, the more you learn and the better equipped you'll be to find solutions and compromises that serve both people's needs. Key questions to ask others are as follows:

- "What's the central problem, as you understand it?"
- "How do you make sense of the situation? What do you think's happening?"
- "When you're struggling with (*name the problem*) _____, how does it make you feel?"
- "When you're dealing with (*name the problem*) _____, what does it make you want to do?"
- "What do you think needs to change?"
- "What would you like me to do to help with this?"

For example, Ron noticed that a coworker seemed irritated with a new order-processing system Ron had just initiated. When Ron asked, "What do you think needs to change?" he got a wealth of helpful feedback, and the whole emotional climate changed.

Assertive listening is extremely valuable, but remember—just because you found out what someone needs, it doesn't mean you have to give it to them.

Now let's turn this knowledge into actual scripts:

PROBLEM #1

I think: _____

_____

I feel: _____

_____

I want: _____

_____

How I'll take care of myself: _____

_____

PROBLEM #2

I think: _____

_____

I feel: _____

_____

I want: _____

_____

How I'll take care of myself: _____

_____

PROBLEM #3

I think: _____

_____

I feel: _____

_____

2. How vulnerable is the other person or the relationship?

   Very vulnerable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Not vulnerable

Notice that you can assess each of these variables with a ten-point scale. The higher the total number, the more forceful it's appropriate to be. The lower the number, the more moderate and gentle you should be.

Exercise: Modulating Intensity

Think of some recent situations where you've needed another person to change. Evaluate them using these two key questions and the scoring method. What can you learn about the appropriate level of intensity and pressure? Did you use too much—or too little—in certain situations? Imagine what might have happened if you'd adjusted the intensity of your request based on (1) the urgency of need and (2) the level of vulnerability criteria.

Ask yourself these two questions during every situation where you need to express yourself. While you may not always have the time or inclination to use the 1 to 10 rating system, remembering "how urgent?" and "how vulnerable?" can help you make split-second decisions about how much strength, hardness, and volume to put into your voice.

During this exercise, Rachel evaluated some problematic discussions with her husband. One, in particular, had been very frustrating because she wanted him to attend a parent-teacher conference that was scheduled for 3:00—a time when he'd have to miss work. Her husband refused. But their son was having reading problems, and Rachel rated the urgency at an 8, while her husband's vulnerability was rated 7—not very vulnerable. Rachel realized that her gentle, easygoing approach had been a mistake.

MAKING A SIMPLE REQUEST

The skill of making a request is necessary to taking care of yourself. Asking for directions, asking to change tables at a restaurant, asking your mechanic to show you the parts he replaced on your car, asking someone not to smoke in your house—these requests are all about self-protection and quality of life. If you have trouble making such requests, you can easily end up feeling helpless or resentful.

There are four components to a brief request:

1. *A brief justification (optional).* Explain in one sentence what the problem is. "It's hot in here … These bags are heavy … It's a long way to walk … These seem a little tight." Many situations don't need any justification; when they do, keep it simple.

2. *A softening statement.* This is an important piece because it establishes you as a reasonable person who's polite and nondemanding. Softening statements often start like this.

- "Would you mind if …"
- "It would be helpful if you could …"
- "I'd appreciate it if you would …"
- (Said with a smile) "Could I have …"
- "Hi, I was wondering if …"

Notice that these openers are disarming. They're far less likely to encounter resistance than a hard-edged demand.

3. *A direct, specific question.* You say what you want clearly and exactly. Leave any charge or emotion out of your voice. Say what you want in a flat, matter-of fact-way. Don't blame or imply that anything's wrong with the other person. Present your request as normal and reasonable—something that anyone would be glad to accommodate. Keep the question to one sentence if you can—the more you elaborate and explain, the more resistance you'll tend to run into.

4. *An appreciation statement.* This reinforces the behavior of the other person saying yes to you. It makes them feel that you value what they're doing. Here are some examples:
   - "This will really help me out."
   - "Thanks for your effort with this."
   - "This will make a real difference."
   - "This is much appreciated."

When the components are strung together, simple requests can look like these:

- *In a restaurant:* "The sun's really bright. Would you mind lowering the shade a little? Thanks so much."
- *In a subway car:* "It's a bit tight here. Could you please move your briefcase off the seat to make some room? I really appreciate it."
- *Driving with a friend:* "I'm nervous to drive this close, especially at this speed. Would it be okay with you to leave a little more room between us and the car in front? Thanks for indulging me on this one."

Exercise: Developing Your Own Assertiveness Scripts

Now it's time to practice developing your own scripts. Start with identifying three situations in which something feels wrong and you want things to change. Write the information down in the space provided.

PROBLEM #1

1. The problem: _____

2. What I want changed: _____

PROBLEM #2

1. The problem: _____

2. What I want changed: _____

PROBLEM #3

1. The problem: _____

2. What I want changed: _____

- "If you can't leave for the party on time, I'll take my own car."
- "If you can't help with the cleaning, I'll hire a maid and we'll divide that expense."
- "If you can't find a way to keep the party noise down, I'll ask the police to help you."
- "If you want to drive without insurance, I'll transfer the title to your name and you can take over the payments as well."

None of these self-care solutions are designed to hurt the other person; they're about protecting your rights and taking care of your own needs.

Integrating the Components of Being Assertive

Now, let's integrate the components of an assertive statement so you can see how they fit together. Here are some examples:

EXAMPLE #1

I think: *It's been three years since we've had a cost-of-living raise, and prices have increased more than 10 percent in that time.*

I feel: *I feel left out, because the company's doing well and I'm not participating in that.*

I want: *I'd like a 10 percent cost-of-living adjustment soon so my income can keep pace with inflation.*

Self-care: *If we can't work this out, I'm going to have to look for something else so I can better support my family.*

EXAMPLE #2

I think: *I've been working against a deadline tonight and haven't had time to cook dinner.*

I feel: *I'm pretty anxious and overwhelmed that I might not get this done.*

I want: *Could you whip something together from leftovers so I can keep going?*

Self-care: *If that doesn't work for you, I can order a pizza.*

One way to use your self-care solution is to hold it in reserve—only using it if the other person refuses your preferred solution. Saving the "big guns" for later is often an effective strategy.

Exercise: Making a Simple Request

If you sometimes find making requests challenging, you can practice in lots of everyday situations. Try some of these suggestions:

- *On the street:* Asking for the time, for directions, where someone bought a particular article of clothing, for change.
- *In stores:* Asking to examine merchandise, for information (for example, a return policy), to see something less expensive or in a different color, for advice regarding a purchase (for example, "Do these colors go together?"), for change.
- *At work:* Asking for information, for a little bit of help, for an extended deadline, for a moment of someone's time, for an opinion.
- *At home:* Asking for a change in schedule, for assistance, for time together, for help changing the environment ("Would you mind if we moved this chair to the kitchen?").
- *With friends and family:* Asking for a favor, for time, for a ride, for someone to stop something that's annoying.
- *With a teacher or therapist:* Asking for information, for help with a problem, for advice.

If you plan to work on this skill, choose *one* of the above options (or develop ones of your own) to work on *each day.* Either at breakfast or just before going to bed, identify the next day's challenge. Decide on the time and situation in which you plan to practice. Write it in your calendar to help you remember. Then do it.

ASSERTIVENESS SCRIPTS

As you read in the last chapter, assertiveness is a critical skill to maintaining healthy relationships. Without it, you'll be forced into passive or aggressive patterns that destroy the fabric of trust and intimacy.

Assertiveness is most easily learned by using a simple script. It will help you give structure to what you want to say and keep you focused. A script also has the advantage of permitting you to develop a statement in advance, practicing it by yourself or with someone you trust, and finally (at a time you choose) delivering it with greater confidence.

There are three basic components to an assertiveness statement and one optional component.

1. *"I think."* This part focuses on the facts and your understanding of what's going on. It should *not* include judgments or assumptions about the other person's motives. It should *not* in any way attack. "I think" is a clear description of events and experiences that you need to talk about—and perhaps change. Here are some examples:

   - "I think we haven't spent much time together lately—two nights last week, one the week before."
   - "You've billed me for a repair I didn't authorize."
   - "Looking back at the recent past, I think you've been late for the majority of our meetings."
   - "I'm getting back from the airport late—around 11:00 o'clock—and …"

   Notice that there isn't much hint of emotion in these statements, and there's no disapproval in the statement of facts.

2. *"I feel."* This is an optional component that you'd likely use with a friend or family member but not with your garage mechanic. The purpose is to give a brief, nonpejorative description of any emotion triggered by the situation. Communication specialists call this component of assertiveness the "I" statement. That's because it's about you and your particular feelings. Appropriately, any sentence about your emotions should start with "I."

   - "I feel scared."
   - "I feel lonely."
   - "Lately, I feel sad about us."
   - "I feel hurt, with a twinge of giving up."
   - "I feel kind of lost and invisible and more and more disconnected."
   - "I feel rejected."
   - "I feel hopeful but nervous."

   Each example, while naming feelings of varied complexity, never makes the other person bad or wrong. That doesn't work—it just makes people defensive and less willing to give you anything. Accusations and blame statements often start with the word "you"—so they're called "you" statements.

   - "You're hurting me."
   - "You don't care about us."
   - "You're always late."
   - "You're ruining our business."

   Some people dress up "you" statements to *look* like "I" statements. This charade is usually obvious because the sentence starts, "I feel that you …"

   - "I feel that you're selfish."
   - "I feel that you're never home."
   - "I feel that you manipulate me."

   Notice that a judgment, not a feeling, forms the core of such communications. It's certainly safer than an "I" statement—because the speaker is less vulnerable—but it communicates nothing about your emotional experience.

3. *"I want."* This component is the whole point of assertiveness, and you need to think it through carefully. Here are some guidelines to follow:

   - *Ask for behavioral, not attitudinal, change.* You can't reasonably expect someone to change what they believe or feel just because you don't like it. Beliefs and feelings aren't usually in voluntary control. But you *can* ask someone to change how they act and what they do.
   - *Ask for one change at a time.* Don't give a laundry list. That overwhelms people and makes them feel pressured.
   - *Ask for something that can be changed now.* "The next time we go on vacation, I want you to …" is a poor "I want" statement because it'll be long forgotten when the next vacation finally arrives.
   - *Be specific and concrete.* Vague requests like "Be nicer" don't get you anywhere because nobody has a very clear picture of what they mean. Describe what new behavior you expect, and say when and where you'd want it to occur. Asking someone for twenty minutes of help doing research on the Internet is more effective than requesting "technological assistance."

4. *Self-care solution (optional):* Just asking for things isn't always enough. Sometimes you need to give people encouragement (reinforcement) before they're motivated to do something for you. The encouragement that works best is a fourth (optional) component of your assertive script called the *self-care solution*. This amounts to nothing more than telling the other person what you'll do to take care of yourself if they don't comply with your request. The self-care solution isn't the same thing as threatening someone or punishing them. Its purpose is to give information and show that you're not helpless, that you have a plan to solve the problem. Here are some examples.