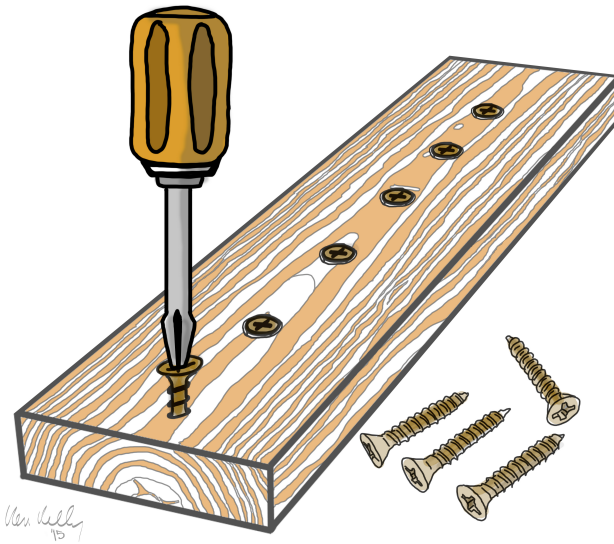


## CHAPTER SIX



### ASSERTIVENESS & FLOW

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Immersing ourselves in something we love is healthy and life-changing. This however cannot happen unless we create personal boundaries to protect us and find non-violent ways of asserting our needs and aspirations.

## Being in Flow is Healthy

'Flow'<sup>1</sup> or 'Being in Flow' describes the ability to involve ourselves intensely with something we love doing. This is very healthy as it increases dopamine and serotonin activities in the brain, which fortifies our immune system and promotes optimism. Boredom and inactivity tend to produce anxiety which has the opposite effect.

Flow describes the state of being all-absorbed and challenged to use many of the skills within our reach without it being so difficult that we cannot manage.

Living in Flow, loving what we do, at least some part of the day is important as we could otherwise tend to get defensive, or be jealous of other people who are fully engaged in what they do.

## So Why Don't We 'Flow'?

One reason for not living in flow is a fear of criticism and failure. Daily holding on to these fears, often unconsciously,

produces unproductive stress which over time compromises our immune system. The stress hormone cortisol gets trapped in the body<sup>2</sup> due to inactivity and can shorten our life-span through cancerous growths, heart disease or general wear and tear on all the organs. Cortisol is good in small doses for sudden protection and strength to act, but it is unhelpful to live in a permanent state of arousal.

## **We Need Assertiveness to Live Happily**

Many of us adjust our behaviour so as not to upset others and get into trouble. While this can be good as there must be give and take in every walk of life, taken too far it can be completely debilitating.

Individuals, who do not know how to protect their own selfhood or personality, who allow other people to dictate every part of their lives, often end up with physical<sup>3</sup> or mental difficulties<sup>4</sup>. Similarly being dominated by a bully is detrimental to our well-being.

**Angela, a young mother explains how an unhealthy relationship dynamic took away her freedom to be herself.**

*When I was with my ex boy-friend he was very jealous so I changed who I was in order not to upset him. He didn't like me talking to other people.*

*It is only after the relationship was over that I realised how unhappy I was as I was unable to be myself. I became extremely moody and felt I was treading on egg-shells every time I talked to someone. I became very insecure around him, and then he doubted me even more.*

People who are well and happy use a measured amount of assertiveness to empower themselves in their search for positive involvement and relationships. Being overly assertive and not caring about other people's feelings or thoughts alienates others but ignoring our own thoughts and feelings and running away from who we are is equally destructive.

**Imelda started studying but found that she could not go on even though her grandmother insisted that she should:**

*I experienced a lot of negativity towards my decision to discontinue my studies. I had to continually ask myself 'which is most important, is it what is best for me? Or is it what others want me to do?' I felt I should stay on the*

*course because my nanny had paid for it, but I wasn't getting anything out of it. I had no reason to stay.*

*I was taking the bus, walking for half an hour and then standing outside the college and crying my eyes out. I finally asked myself why I kept doing that. It is a weakness of mine not to trust my own judgement. So I stopped it. As it turned out I wasn't the only one who found it too difficult.*

We might be naturally assertive in some areas of our lives but there are areas for most of us, where we need to create more space for what is important and meaningful to us, for what facilitates 'flow'.

## **Assertiveness and Courage**

Being assertive involves courage because we are risking rejection and criticism. However, when we do overcome our fears and reveal our feelings and thoughts we might be pleasantly surprised by the positive reactions we get. Once we do not pressure others to think, feel or do what we do, most people will react positively and respect us. Most people, once given some time, will come around to, if not accepting, at least respecting our ideas and interests.

## Taking Our Rightful Place

We tend to relax with people who know what they want and share what they think, while the silent unknown sometimes can feel threatening or confusing<sup>5</sup>.

We can be afraid of offending others with our pursuit of 'Flow' but people who are assertive about their goals and pursue their 'dreams' and are happy are more likeable and trusted by others.

Coaches, nurses<sup>6</sup> and bosses who, without being 'bossy', are assertive about letting people know what is expected, create more trust and get better results than unassertive quiet authority figures<sup>7</sup>.

In order to pursue 'Flow' and develop our own skills and interests we will have to set up boundaries. We have to learn to say 'no' to certain activities or people in order to give enough time and attention to what we love.

**Self-harm has been linked to a lack of assertiveness** as this investigation shows:

*A group of women in Japan were in treatment for wrist-cutting. Many of these women revealed that they felt disempowered. Wrist-cutting was an attempt to gain some sense of control and release<sup>8</sup>.*

*However, fifteen minutes assertiveness training every second week over 1-4 years empowered these women:*

*One of the women revealed how she had always sacrificed herself for others and went along with what others wanted. She learned to be calmly assertive and explain to others how she felt, especially to her mother who she sensed did not accept her for who she was. As she learned to be clearer about what she wanted she no longer felt a need to cut herself.*

*Another woman in the group learned to stop criticising herself and to say 'no' to others in a respectful manner when she needed to do something for herself rather than for others.*

**Are you giving other people licence  
to ignore  
what you think,  
feel and want?<sup>2</sup>**

By not speaking or standing up for what is important to us we give an impression of not having any particular thoughts, feelings or needs. Others tend to assume that we will want to go along with their plans, unless we tell them otherwise.

Assertiveness is  
found somewhere in  
the middle between  
passivity and  
aggression:  
calm and kind,  
yet firm and direct.

There are ways of getting our message across.

Being aggressive about our personal needs or opinions only sidetracks the issue.

Even when our point of view is valid, loudness or negative outbursts result in other people not really hearing what we say. Most people interpret anger, irritation or whinging as an attack and will try to get away rather than relax and listen to what we are trying to say. Assertiveness however is respectful and kind.



## **Being clear about what we want to say**

It is not always easy to know what we feel or want. Assertiveness is linked to being comfortable connecting to one's own self as well as to other people. Processing our feelings and thoughts in a constructive manner enables us to clarify exactly, what it is we want and do not want. Researchers have found four dimensions of assertiveness:

- To express positive feelings. Being able to give and receive praise and compliments<sup>11</sup>.
- To express one's opinion on something.
- To be able to express negative feelings calmly and clearly such as defending one's rights in a public situation or withstanding peer pressure to over-indulge in alcohol, drugs or sex<sup>10</sup>.
- To express feelings of insecurity and inadequacy, acknowledging one's mistakes and coping with criticism. This sometimes involves asking for help.

## Assertiveness

### Tools

These are four ways of raising our Assertiveness and helping to increase our 'Flow':

- 1 [Establish a Personal Space](#)
- 2 [To Know and Ask for What You Need](#)
- 3 [Receive and Divert Criticism](#)
- 4 [Assertiveness in Closer Relationships](#)

## BRAIN TRAIN

### 1. Create a Personal Space of Freedom

It is important to have boundaries around what is private and sacred to us otherwise we might find ourselves putting our lives on hold to cope with other people's demands. This is similar to leaving our door open and letting all the heat escape, or allowing anyone suddenly to walk in without notice.

We need to be clear on how much 'heat' we need to be comfortable, and how much privacy we need to feel safe.

When someone keeps demanding our attention and making suggestions on how we should behave and think we can be tempted to go along just for the sake of peace. While this is okay now and then, we need to focus on what is important and meaningful to us personally, otherwise we can end up not knowing who we are or what we want.

Many people stay helplessly disconnected from their real self because they do not take time and courage to build a strong fortress around their own safety and well-being. They allow authority figures or close family members to run their lives. This can be seriously damaging to their sense of freedom and well-being.

The sooner we take control of our personal well-being the healthier we will be and the more respect we will get for ourselves and others. We need to become our own best friend rather than being desperate to please others or measure up to other people's expectations.

Our lives can be put on hold by a heightened sense of defensiveness, a negative interpretation of ourselves or a denial of our own needs<sup>4</sup>.

## Establish a Personal Boundary where You Feel Safe<sup>4</sup>

This is a mind/body visualization recommended by Terry Lynch, a GP in Limerick who has helped a number of people to restore a personal sense of safety and space.

### BRAIN TRAIN

While standing, stretch out your arms and slowly turn full circle while **imagining a blue circle of light surrounding you** at arms length.

Imagine this blue light as **a protective shield** that stops you from getting hurt by other people's actions or words.

Place all the frustrating and confusing messages and people outside this shield.

You can still be kind but **you decide who you feel safe enough to allow inside your shield.**

**Keep placing anything and anybody that makes you feel unsafe outside the circle and enjoy your chosen inner circle of freedom and love.**

A guided 'SAFE SPACE' meditation can be downloaded and listened to on [www.HappinessSkills.ie](http://www.HappinessSkills.ie).

This visualization can be done several times a day to establish a personal space where one can befriend and mind oneself.

We are often much safer than we imagine ourselves to be.



We hear about the one plane that crashed and forget about the tens of thousands of planes landing safely. By choosing which information to allow inside our private circle we empower ourselves to not worry about events and people we cannot change.

Instead of focusing on the one criticism from someone we can 'rest' inside our safe circle in the memory of all the positive connections we have made over the past days with supportive people, nature, a pet, or the heroic deeds we have observed in inspiring films or stories.

## **Boundaries in the Family**

Clear boundaries on what is allowed and what is not help everyone to feel safe, but allowing each other the personal space necessary to develop our personalities is also important. Children or young people who are less conformist because they have interests outside the societal mainstream may become victims of bullying unless they are helped to feel safe enough to be true to themselves.

## **Boundaries in the Classroom**

Children do not learn when they feel threatened by criticism or are pressured to conform. Children with a weak sense of personal space are more open to being bullied. Guiding children through the Mind/Body Boundary visualization can help them to develop a greater sense of safety and assertiveness:

Have children spread out in the classroom so everyone can stretch out their arms and slowly turn around without touching anyone.

As you invite them to slowly turn with their arms outstretched guide them in imagining a blue circle of light all around them at arms length. See a sample script next.

### SAMPLE MEDITATION SCRIPT

Inside your Imaginary Blue Circle you can learn to become your own friend. You can talk to yourself, think about life, about good things that happen.

You can push negative criticism of yourself outside the circle unless you think it is helpful.

You decide what and who to keep inside the circle, which friends are allowed in, who you feel safe with and who to keep at a distance.

Not that they are bad, not that you need to tell them, but you just know that right now you do not feel comfortable including them in your personal circle of peace and happiness. And that is okay.

If you wish you can connect with a loving Caring Creator who will look after you and mind you. You decide who you want near you, who you find supportive and caring.

## Boundaries in Friendship

Having a sense of personal space and power is crucial to feeling safe enough to explore and learn about ourselves, what we love, what we think, what we feel and want.

### Angela explains how she needs to be careful:

*If I hang around with people on social welfare who are not doing anything to get work, then that becomes normal for me. I would lie in bed all day. I would go out with my friends in the evening, drive around the town and then go drinking.*

A good friend is someone who helps us to increase our sense of personal space. It is someone who respects us and encourages a positive way forward.

## BRAIN TRAIN

### 2. To Know and Ask for What You Need

Feelings come and go so why is it important to know them and to express them? The problem is that we may act on our



feelings but without knowing exactly why, or what we really feel. Acting on personal feelings without reflection can be damaging to ourselves and others; for example when we feel angry or disappointed and start blaming and trying to change other people's behaviour instead of discerning, what is really going on for ourselves. Knowing what we feel gives us the option of looking at our own needs, rather than trying to change what has happened.

## BRAIN TRAIN

### To Know

#### Your Feelings

By naming our particular feeling and examining the need/s behind it, we can learn to become more tuned in to what is going on within us. We gain control over a situation by realising what we need and then start expressing that to others.

#### My Feeling:

*I feel*.....  
 .....  
 .....

(EG. I feel that my friend is gossiping about me behind my back, I feel hurt, angry and disappointed)

**My Need/s:**

*I need .....*  
.....  
.....

(EG.I need a friend I can trust, I need to feel loved and safe)

**When I know my Needs**

**I can reflect on My Options:**

*One option would be to.....*  
.....

(EG. I can explain to my friend how I need to know I can trust her to keep my secrets)

*Another option would be to .....*  
.....

(EG. I could look out for someone else who I think might be more trustworthy)

*A third possibility would be to.....*  
.....  
.....

(EG. I can make a decision to say nothing and give my friend a second chance to prove herself trustworthy as I could have misunderstood the situation)

There are a number of possible actions to take, but I might not be aware of these, until I take responsibility for my personal needs instead of expecting other people to know them, without me explaining or discussing it with them.

## **To Communicate Your Needs**

When we learn to tune in to what is really going on within us and match this with specific needs, we can start looking for constructive ways of fulfilling those needs. Sometimes we can do it on our own, but often we need the support of other people for our needs to be fulfilled. Below are ways of getting other people onboard, whilst still respecting their feelings and needs.

When we express our needs we are setting an example to others, that it is okay to look for our needs to be fulfilled and it does not have to be by bullying or manipulating others. We invite and persuade, but respect the other person's freedom to refuse.

## **The 'Broken Record' Technique**

The broken record technique is useful when something is important to us and we feel that others do not get this.

Sometimes a person in authority is not inclined to help us unless we specifically ask.

Sometimes a shop owner who has sold us faulty goods does not want to take them back or re-imburse us.

Sometimes a family member does not pull their weight

Sometimes a person holds on to something which we need.

When something is truly important to us, we need to do our best to persuade others to give us our fair due, both for their sake and ours.

**The Broken Record technique consists in  
clarifying again and again what we would like,  
without nagging or turning aggressive or irritated.**

When we repeat our request we do it as if we are doing it for the first time (no judgement).

**Example:**

*'I would like for us as a family  
to find a way to go on holiday together'*

or

*'I would like to go away for a week  
with a friend'*

Even though other family members do not seem keen, by repeating my request they will understand that this is important to me. On the other hand keeping quiet about this ensures, that nobody knows how much I would like this.

The BROKEN RECORD techniques would be most suited to situations where the other person does not really hear or acknowledge our request.

Keep repeating your request in an ever so friendly way.

You are not scolding anyone or demanding, you are calmly stating what you would like, until you are satisfied that you have been heard.

You might be amazed by how often people are willing to give you what you want, once you are clear and direct but friendly about it.

## How Important Is It to You?

To use the broken record technique, it is crucial to be sure that what we ask for is important to us, otherwise it might not be worth the energy it takes to keep asking for what we want, when someone tends to dismiss us. Once we know it is important, if necessary, we can write out a script beforehand and rehearse it.

## Winning back a relationship

*George Hook<sup>14</sup>, a well-known radio presenter, reveals in his auto-biography how his wife was ready to leave him, but how he kept repeating that he loved her and that he would do anything to make the marriage work.*

*It took time but he convinced her by repeating this over and over and then doing what she asked of him.*

## BRAIN TRAIN

### Role-playing:

Role-playing the Broken Record technique can be very helpful because we get an experience of what it is like to ask for what we want.

Here are **some situations** that can be **acted out with one another** (alternatively choose your own scenario):

- **Someone keeps using up all the milk**
- **Getting a refund in a shop**
- **Getting wages on time or getting a raise**
- **Getting someone to do the washing-up**
- **Getting a loan**
- **Pursuing an interest**
- **Getting money for something important**
- **Getting time off for personal reasons**

**Person A** makes the request while **Person B** plays the **contrary but fair-minded opposition** who is open to say 'yes' but reluctant to do so.

Afterwards **Swap Roles**.

## **In Friendship**

A friend can help us to clarify whether a request is reasonable and important. Rehearsing the situation with a friend can prepare us better if we are not used to expressing to others what we would like or need.

### 3. Recieve and Divert Criticism

This technique comes into play when someone criticises us. Rather than defending ourselves we look for something we can agree with and then move on to what is more important.

*CRITIC: You are always late, you don't care do you?*

*YOU: You're right I'm late. I'm very sorry. Now did you bring...*

*CRITIC: Don't try to change the subject*

*YOU: Sorry, I got caught in traffic, I should have left earlier. Now regarding that..... how far....?*

It is not easy to agree with criticism as we tend to become defensive when someone is critical, especially when they exaggerate our shortcomings.

But rather than attacking the person we show that we are bigger than that.

It can be helpful to call to mind how some people can feel very irritated or have problems and take that out on us. Unless it is a close friend (turn to [page 242](#) regarding assertiveness in a



closer friendship) it is more helpful and energising to go with the flow and somehow agree with what we can, and then divert everyone's attention back to the work at hand.

## BRAIN TRAIN

### To Divert Criticism

#### Role-play in twos

**Person A:** criticises person B for one of the following:

- being arrogant
- bullying behaviour
- weakness
- selfishness
- telling tales or
- something of one's own choice

**Person B:** agrees as much as possible without losing dignity and then changes the topic of conversation to something interesting.

**Afterwards: swap over** and give B a chance to be criticised and finding something to agree with.

## 4. Assertiveness in Closer Relationships

Honesty and open communication about what we feel and need in a relationship is crucial in building a supportive and positive relationship with each other.

When we keep something important to ourselves for too long suddenly it may be blurted out in an inappropriate or hurtful manner.

When we keep all our needs and upsets to ourselves because we do not want to upset the other person or lose the relationship we might suddenly explode or implode.

The good news is that there is a wonderful, simple formula that creates a win/win situation. This formula has been taught in schools<sup>12</sup> and to US soldiers and their spouses. It has been widely proven to be of great value<sup>13</sup>.

### BRAIN TRAIN

#### To be Assertive in Closer Relationships

**1. Think about what you feel and what you want.**

.....  
.....

(EG. I feel other work is getting in the way of writing my book)

**2. Ask humbly and directly (no blaming) for what you want.**

*I feel bad that ..... and I  
wonder if.....*  
.....

(EG. I feel bad that I am getting behind writing my book. I would like to get some time off to finish it.)

**3. Take responsibility for your feelings and needs.**

*I know that .....but I  
think if you could let me.....*  
.....

(EG. I know there is a lot of work here but I think I can catch up even if I take a few days to write my book.)

**4. Repeat the request and explain how great it would be for you if the other person fulfilled that request.**

*I would really appreciate if you could let me.....  
.....It would make a big difference to  
me.....*

(EG. It would mean a lot to me to take a few days off to finish my book. I will catch up with the chores when I return. Could you give me the three days off?)

If a relationship is good, more than likely the other person will respond positively or at least think about it.

If not, it may be time to have a chat about more underlying problems or revert to the Broken Record technique.

*If the other person says 'Feeling bad is your problem!'  
You respond: 'I know feeling bad is my problem but I  
wonder would you be willing to help me to feel better  
by not ..... or by .....?'*

It can be difficult at first to change the habit of criticism and argument to an honest plea for kindness or consideration but it is well worth the effort and time as this creates a more caring bond between ourselves and the other person.

## **Assertiveness Gives Others a Chance of Knowing Us Better**

If you want people to support you and get to know you it is important to speak up about what you need but in a way that invites good relationship and open communication between you and the other person. Asking for something does not

always mean that we will get it, but at least we have asked and can move on. If it is really important we can either discuss it again or look for other ways of dealing with the situation and getting our needs met.

## BRAIN TRAIN

### In a Group or Classroom

Sometimes we assume that other people know what we need or feel, especially close friends or family, but mostly it is only when we articulate a need that other people really get it, even in close relationships.

In pairs role-play a situation using steps 1-4 on page [243](#). Alternate so both people get a chance to use the formula.

#### Sample situations:

- A friend is making noise that upsets me
- A friend borrows something without asking
- Someone keeps arguing
- Someone expects me to do their work
- Someone ignores me when we are in a bigger group
- I need help with some work/ someone to listen
- I need a new phone/ money for my phone

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