

# ASSERT YOURSELF!



## Module Seven

# How to Deal Assertively with Criticism

Criticism	2
Types of criticism	2
Why do we respond the way we do?	2
How do you respond to criticism?	3
Passive responses to criticism	3
Aggressive response to criticism	4
Assertive responses to criticism	4
Unhelpful beliefs about criticism	4
Responding Assertively to Criticism:	
More helpful thinking about criticism	5
Dealing with constructive criticism	6
Dealing with destructive criticism	7
Additional tips for dealing with criticism	9
Giving Constructive Criticism	10
Module summary	13
About this module	14

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## Criticism

All of us have been criticised at some point in our lives. Being able to accept criticism assertively is one of the most important tasks we face on our journey to maturity. The word criticism comes from an Ancient Greek word describing a person who offers reasoned judgement or analysis, value judgement, interpretation or observation. So to accept criticism maturely we need to be able to accept feedback in the form of analysis, observation or interpretation from other people about our behaviour.

## Types of Criticism

Criticism can be either constructive or destructive. Constructive criticism is designed to provide genuine feedback in a helpful and non-threatening way in order that the person being criticised may learn and grow in some way. The feedback is typically valid, that is, it is a true criticism. For example, “I really liked the way you wrote your report; I think it could be even better if you focused more on improving your spelling”.

Destructive criticism is criticism that is either not valid or true or criticism that if valid is delivered in an extremely unhelpful way. It is often given by someone without much thought or can be designed to embarrass or hurt. For example, “This report is atrocious, your spelling is appalling”.

## Why do we respond the way we do?

How we accept criticism is largely based on our experiences with criticism as a child. If we did not experience any criticism as a child then when we first experience it as an adult we may be devastated. If we received very constructive criticism as a child we may cope well with criticism as an adult. If we were criticised harshly and punitively then we may see criticism as hurtful and rejecting.

This latter case often occurs when our whole person was criticised rather than just our behaviour. For example, if we made a mistake as a child and were told “you are stupid”, this implied that it was us as a whole person who was stupid. The criticism feels like a rejection and we can feel hopeless about how to change. On the other hand if we were told “that

was a silly thing to do”, then our behaviour and us as a person, are seen as two separate things. It is the behaviour that is stupid not us. Therefore, we have the power to change that behaviour.

## How Do You Respond to Criticism?

How do you respond to criticism? Some of the common non-assertive ways of responding to criticism are:

- Becoming confused
- Becoming defensive
- Acting silly
- Ignoring it and hurting inside
- Internalizing anger and stewing over it
- Retaliating with anger and blame
- Shutting down
- Withdrawing
- Running away

Take a minute and think of the last time you were criticized. Now jot down the situation and how you reacted.

The Situation: \_\_\_\_\_

How I reacted:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Now read the following descriptions and see if you can identify which one best describes how you reacted.

### Passive Responses to Criticism

If we are predominantly passive it can be difficult to respond well to criticism. We may just run and hide and feel hurt and confused. We may tend to just agree with any criticism whether it is valid or not. Then we reproach ourselves for it. For example, “Yes you’re right

I am....., I'm useless, and I've got to stop". We can tend to see a criticism of our behaviour as a rejection of ourselves. This type of response can lead to depression, anxiety and low self esteem. We feel like the world is a critical place and we agree with all the criticisms!

Alternatively, we may laugh it off and criticize ourselves even more with the attitude "If I criticize myself more and make it a joke then no-one will know I am hurt". In the long run this has the same effect as agreeing openly with the criticism.

## Aggressive Responses to Criticism

If we tend to respond aggressively then we will tend to hear criticism as a personal attack. Feeling attacked we will then become defensive and may go on the attack ourselves. For example, "How dare you, I'm not late. You're the one who is always late." This type of response can then lead to conflict and increased aggression, which in turn can lead to depression and low self esteem.

## Assertive Responses to Criticism

When we respond assertively to criticism we can identify the difference between constructive and destructive criticism and respond appropriately (see the skills below describing how to respond to criticism assertively). We can see that criticism about our behaviour is not necessarily saying anything about us as a person. We don't get defensive, angry, blaming, hurt or run away. We stay calm and accept the criticism without negative emotions.

## What Keeps us From Responding Assertively to Criticism? Unhelpful Beliefs about Criticism

As with other unassertive behaviours there is often some unhelpful thinking underlying the behaviour. Some of these are listed below:

- If I am criticised it means I am stupid.
- They criticised me, they mustn't like me anymore.
- They are right, I did get it wrong, I can't do anything right. I'm a failure.
- I can't criticise them because then they won't like me.

- How dare they tell me I've done something wrong. They have no right.
- They're an idiot anyway. I'm not going to listen to them.
- If I criticize myself more and make it a joke then no-one will know I am hurt

Can you identify any other unhelpful thoughts that may stop you from responding to criticism assertively? List them below.

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## Responding Assertively to Criticism: More Helpful Thinking

Here are some more helpful and assertive thoughts to challenge any unhelpful thoughts you may have. Remember you can also use Thought Diaries and Behavioural Experiments (see Module 3) to help you come up with more helpful and assertive thoughts.

- If there is something wrong with what I've done it doesn't mean anything about me as a person. I need to separate the behaviour from me.
- What can I learn from this criticism? Most criticism is probably based, at least in part, on some truths. Criticism may appear negative. But, through criticism we have the opportunity to learn and improve from their suggestions. Always ask yourself "What can I learn?"
- I have the right to let someone know if their behaviour has hurt, irritated or upset me.
- Giving direct feedback can be loving and helpful.

See if you can think of any other assertive thoughts about being criticised. If you identified your own unhelpful thoughts see if you can identify more helpful thoughts to challenge these.

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## Responding Assertively to Criticism: Dealing with Constructive Criticism

We all need to be able to accept constructive criticism. Depending on the way the criticism is presented to you, you can respond in a number of different ways.

### 1. Accept the criticism

If the criticism is valid then just accept it without expressing guilt or other negative emotions. Accept that you are not perfect and that the only way we can learn is to make mistakes, see what we need to change and move on. Thank the person for the feedback if appropriate. See the criticism as a gift.

### 2. Negative assertion.

This technique involves not only accepting the criticism but openly agreeing with the criticism. This is used when a true criticism is made to you. The skill involves calmly agreeing with the criticism of your negative qualities, and not apologising or letting yourself feel demolished. For example, someone may say:

Criticism: *“Your desk is very messy. You are very disorganised”*.

Response: *“Yes, it’s true, I’m not very tidy”*.

The key to using negative assertion is self confidence and a belief that you have the ability to change yourself if you wish. By agreeing with and accepting criticism, if it is appropriate, you need not feel totally demolished. This type of response can also diffuse situations. If someone aggressive is making the criticism they may expect you to become defensive or aggressive back. By agreeing with them the tension in the situation is diffused.

Another way of using negative assertion is to own up to your mistakes before they are pointed out. For example, if you arrive late say: *“Hi, I’m late.”*

### 3. **Negative inquiry.**

Negative inquiry consists of requesting further, more specific criticism. If someone criticises you but you are not sure if the criticism is valid or constructive you ask for more details. For example:

Criticism: *“You’ll find that difficult won’t you, because you are shy?”*

Reply: *“In what ways do you think I’m shy?”*

If the criticism is constructive, that information can be used constructively and the general channel of communication will be improved. If the criticism is manipulative or destructive then the critic will be put on the spot.

## Responding Assertively to Criticism: Dealing with Destructive Criticism

Unfortunately we are all going to encounter destructive criticism at some point in our lives. This can be more difficult to deal with than constructive criticism. If we practice the techniques below, we can become skilled at dealing with these difficult situations. As with all skills remember it will take practice and some time to feel confident using these skills. You will notice that some of the skills are the same as for dealing with constructive criticism.

### 1. **Disagree with criticism**

The first technique for dealing with destructive criticism is simply to disagree with it. It is important that you remain calm and watch your non-verbal behaviours including tone of voice as you do this as it is easy to become aggressive or passive when disagreeing. Keep your voice calm, your eye contact good. For example

Criticism: *“You’re always late”.*

Response: *“No, I’m not always late. I may be late occasionally, but I’m certainly not **always** late”.*

## 2. **Negative Enquiry.**

As described above, if someone makes a comment you may not be sure if it is constructive or destructive criticism. We need to check what is meant. If the criticism is destructive then we can either disagree with it as above, or we can use one of the defusion techniques described below.

## 3. **Fogging aka Clouding aka Defusion.**

The three names above all refer to the same techniques. The idea behind the techniques is to defuse a potentially aggressive or difficult situation. You can use this style when a criticism is neither constructive nor accurate. The tendency for most people when presented with destructive criticism is either to be passive and crumble or be aggressive and fight back. Neither of these are good solutions.

Essentially what the techniques do is find some way of agreeing with a small part of what an antagonist is saying. By staying calm and refusing to be provoked or upset by the criticism you remove its destructive power.

There are 3 types of defusion: you can

- a) *agree in part,*
- b) *agree in probability or*
- c) *agree in principle.*

### **a) Agreeing in part.**

In this technique you find just one accurate part of what the critic is saying and agree with that.

### **Example 1:**

Criticism: *“You’re not reliable. You forgot to pick up the kids, you let the bills pile up until we could lose the roof over our head, and I can’t ever count on you to be there when I need you.”*

Response: *“You’re certainly right that I did forget to pick up the kids last week after their swimming lesson.”*

**Example 2:**

Criticism: *“You haven’t got a job, you’re completely unproductive.”*

Response: *“Yes, it’s true, I don’t have a job”.*

**b) Agreeing in probability.**

With this technique you can still say something may be possible even though you really think the chances are likely to be a million to one. So you agree in probability.

**Example:**

Criticism: *“If you don’t floss your teeth, you’ll get gum disease and be sorry for the rest of your life.”*

Response: *“You’re right I may get gum disease.”*

**c) Agreeing in principle.**

In this technique you acknowledge the person’s logic without agreeing with what they say.

**Example:**

Criticism: *“That’s the wrong tool for that job. A chisel like that will slip and mess up the wood. You ought to have a gouge instead.”*

Response: *“You’re right; if the chisel slips it will really mess up the wood”.*

## Additional tips to remember when being criticised:

### 1. Respond to the words not the tone of the criticism.

It is important when you are being criticized to separate the suggestions in the criticism from the way that they are being spoken to you. Often when people are giving criticism they can come across as confrontational, even aggressive. This may mean that we dismiss what they are saying despite the fact that the criticism may be a useful one. We need to practice

separating the criticism from the style of criticism. Even if people speak in an angry manner, we should try to detach their emotion from the useful suggestions which lie underneath.

## **2. Don't Respond Immediately**

It is best to wait a little before responding. If we respond with feelings of anger or injured pride we will soon regret it. If we wait patiently it can enable us to reflect in a calmer way.

## **3. When Feeling Criticised**

1. Stop - Don't react until you are sure what is going on.
2. Question – have you really been criticised? Are you mind-reading?
3. Check if you need to by asking the other person. For example, you can say:  
“What did you mean by that?”
4. Once you have worked out if it is really a criticism, decide if it is valid or not and respond using one of the techniques above.

## Giving Constructive Criticism

So far we have talked about skills to deal with receiving criticism. There are also skills to learn when giving criticism so that the person is more receptive to what you are saying. You have a right to request a change in someone's behaviour if it hurts, upsets or irritates you in some way. Remember that requesting change doesn't mean that the person will change. However, if you push your resentment down and don't express it, it could cause further problems with the relationship.

Giving direct feedback to others about their behaviour can be both loving and helpful. This feedback can be negative or positive. It shows you value the other person and your relationship with them.

Try and follow the guidelines below when giving constructive criticism.

1. Time and place. Make sure you choose a good time and place. If you are giving constructive criticism about something that has led to you having a strong emotional reaction wait until you are away from the situation that is bothering you and have calmed down before criticising. Don't wait until the next time the situation occurs to confront the behaviour.
2. Describe the behaviour you are criticising rather than labelling the person. For example: "You made a mistake in the report" rather than: "What are you, an idiot?"
3. Describe your feelings (using "I" statements) without blaming the other person. For example: "I feel angry when..." rather than: "You make me angry".
4. Ask for a specific change. If you just make a complaint without giving alternative suggestions you don't give the person any help in knowing how to change the behaviour. For example rather than saying: "I can't stand your loud music" you might say: "I find the loud music really disturbing could you please turn it down after 8.00pm?"
5. Specify both the positive consequences if the person does meet your request for change and negative consequences if they don't make the changes.
6. Be realistic in the changes you are suggesting and the consequences if they do not. Do not make empty threats. For example you wouldn't say: "I will kill you if you don't turn the music down".

7. Ask the other person how they feel about what you have just said. Being assertive is about having an equal interaction. Be careful this doesn't end up as an exchange of criticisms.
8. Try and end on a positive note. If appropriate add a positive statement of your feelings towards the other person.

## Module summary

- We all get criticised. Learning to accept constructive criticism is an important skill. Criticism can be constructive or destructive.
- How we respond to criticism can be influenced by the type of criticism we received as a child.
- As with other unassertive behaviour how we think about being criticised can lead us to respond in a passive or aggressive way. We can change this thinking to more assertive thinking.
- Skills for dealing with constructive criticism include accepting the criticism, negative assertion and negative inquiry.
- Skills for dealing with destructive criticism include disagreeing with the criticism, negative inquiry and fogging (also called clouding or defusion)
- Additional tips include paying attention to the words not the tone of the criticism and not responding straight away.
- When giving constructive criticism it is important to pick an appropriate time and place, criticise the behaviour and not the person, be specific about what you want to change and how you want it to change, and end on a positive note.

Coming  
up:

The next module introduces how to deal with disappointment assertively

## ABOUT THIS MODULE

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We would also like to thank Paula Nathan for her contribution to these modules

### BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

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