

RELATIONSHIPS · PRINTABLE GUIDE

Assertiveness Bill of Rights

The basic personal rights that give you permission to speak up, say no, and ask for what you need without guilt.

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What this tool does

Behind every assertiveness skill sits a quieter question: do I even have the right to speak up. For many people the honest answer, learned early, is no, or only if it does not bother anyone. The Assertiveness Bill of Rights, popularized in assertiveness training by Manuel Smith and built on by Alberti and Emmons, makes those rights explicit. It is not a license to be selfish. It is a correction to the mistaken beliefs that keep people silent, over-apologetic, and resentful.

Each right has a flip side: a common assumption that quietly overrides it. The right to say no without guilt corrects the belief that saying no makes you

selfish or unkind. The right to change your mind corrects the belief that you must always be consistent to be taken seriously. Seeing the right and the mistaken belief side by side is what makes this more than a feel-good list. It targets the exact thoughts that block assertive behavior.

Reading these rights is not the same as believing them, and that is fine. The ones that feel uncomfortable or even wrong are the most useful, because they show you where your own permission is missing. Returning to the list, and acting on one right at a time, is how the belief gradually shifts from theory into something you actually live by.

How to use it

- 1 Read the list slowly**, one right at a time, rather than skimming for the gist.
- 2 Notice your reactions**, the rights that make you flinch or argue back are pointing at the exact beliefs that keep you silent.
- 3 Pick the one that feels hardest to accept**, and write down the old rule it contradicts, something like saying no makes me selfish.
- 4 Act on one right this week**, in a small, low-stakes situation, before testing it anywhere harder.
- 5 Keep the printed list somewhere visible**, and reread it before conversations where you tend to fold.

Your basic assertive rights

- You have the right to express your feelings, opinions, and needs.
- You have the right to say no without feeling guilty.
- You have the right to ask for what you want, knowing the other person can also say no.
- You have the right to change your mind.
- You have the right to make mistakes and not be perfect.
- You have the right to say I don't know or I don't understand.
- You have the right to be treated with respect.
- You have the right to put yourself first sometimes.
- You have the right to your own feelings, even if others disagree with them.
- You have the right not to justify or explain every choice you make.
- You have the right to ask for time to think before responding.
- You have the right to set your own priorities.

The right vs. the belief it corrects

The right

I can say no without guilt.

The belief it corrects

Saying no is selfish, and I have to keep everyone happy.

Another pair

The right

I can change my mind.

The belief it corrects

If I change my mind, I'm unreliable and no one will trust me.

How to use this

Notice which rights are hardest to accept. Those are the beliefs holding your assertiveness back. Pick one right this week and act on it once, even in a small way. Rights become real through use, not agreement.

Sources

- Smith MJ. When I Say No, I Feel Guilty. Bantam Books; 1975.
- Alberti R, Emmons M. Your Perfect Right: Assertiveness and Equality in Your Life and Relationships. 10th ed. Impact Publishers; 2017.

Struggle to give yourself permission?

A therapist can help you build genuine, guilt-free assertiveness. Free to search our directory. Start at psychology.com/therapist.

This guide is an educational self-help tool, not therapy or a diagnosis. If difficulty asserting yourself is tied to anxiety, low self-worth, or a difficult relationship, consider working with a licensed professional. If you feel unsafe with someone, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233. In an emergency, call your local emergency number or, in the US, call or text 988.