Contents

Foreword vii
Introduction 1
1 What Does It Mean to Be Assertive? 9
2 Attachment, Emotions, and Assertiveness 29
3 Barriers to Assertive Communication 55
4 Self-Reflection: Exploring Your Relationship Patterns 71
5 Self-Awareness: Identifying Emotions 91
6 Self-Soothing: Mindfulness and Emotional Management 105
7 Self-Expression: Doormat, Sword, and Lantern 129
8 Self-Expression: Setting Strong Boundaries 145
9 Self-Expansion: Holding the Lantern 183
Acknowledgments 193
Recommended Reading 197
References 199
As human beings, we have an ingrained desire to make meaningful connections with each other and form enduring bonds. It’s been said that our very survival is dependent on healthy, nurturing, and secure relationships. How do we form quality connections to others? Decades of research conclude that communication is a major factor. But as we all know, there are many ways to communicate, and some are more effective than others. So is there a magic formula? No. Is there a magic wand? Nope. But there are specific skills that you can develop and practice that are key to creating healthier relationships. And it begins with assertiveness.

So what is assertiveness? If you’ve picked up this book, you likely have some idea of what assertiveness means—because you think you don’t have it, or don’t have enough of it, or find it hard to use it when you need to. All of us have difficulty at one time or another with asserting ourselves—at work, with family members, with our significant others. Some of us need
occasional help being assertive in critical meetings or when our children are particularly challenging. Others experience difficulty with assertiveness so often that we feel like no one ever hears us or understands us on a daily basis. No matter where you fall on the spectrum, this book can help!

Assertiveness is generally defined as a way of communicating that is clear, confident, and self-assured. It enables you to express your thoughts, feelings, needs, and wants without infringing on the rights of others. Assertiveness skills help you articulate your unique sense of self while maintaining your connection with others and allowing them to have an experience that is different from yours. At its core, assertiveness is about the courage to express difference.

While this book is titled an assertiveness guide, it’s really about much more. It’s about deepening your understanding of yourself and what makes you tick. It’s about looking at how you relate to people—from the attachments made when you were a child to your current relationships as an adult—and making sense of the many communication styles you’ve likely encountered. This book will teach you how to develop emotional awareness and to allow your feelings to guide you but not overwhelm you. You will gain the tools to effectively expand beyond unhelpful communication patterns. You’ll learn tips on what to say, how to say it, and when to say it so that your message gets across. When you can stand up for yourself, you can transform your relationships!

Experiencing difficulties with assertiveness is certainly not gender specific. However, from my graduate studies and my clinical and personal experience, I have come to believe that women have some unique challenges when it comes to taking a stand and speaking up for themselves and for others. Girls are generally socialized to be nice, compliant, and relationship-oriented, while boys are often socialized to be independent and
strong, and they’re encouraged to speak up. Girls and boys are treated differently in families and educational settings in ways that frequently discourage girls from having and expressing strong emotions and opinions. Societal expectations have historically taught women that they should, above all, take care of others and be self-sacrificing. While these cooperative ideals are vital for families and communities to flourish, if not balanced with permission to assert thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs, these expectations can become barriers to a woman’s ability to express herself, create intimate relationships, experience personal effectiveness, and have emotional health and well-being.

Although this book focuses primarily on what women can do on an individual level to learn and implement change in their own lives, it is not my intent to minimize the pervasive societal factors that often leave women feeling minimized and powerless to assert themselves. The larger systemic problems of income inequality, high poverty rates among women and children, rigidity of gender role expectations, and institutionalized violence against women play a large part in shaping the experiences of women, both as individuals and as a group, when it comes to gender and assertiveness. All too often, women have needed to silence themselves in order to survive, or at least to not worsen their situation. Although these gender inequalities are real and powerful, they are not the focus of this self-help guide.

The primary focus of this book is sharing what women themselves can learn and do to make it more likely that their feelings, thoughts, needs, and wants will be heard and responded to in positive ways. By developing awareness of relationship styles (also referred to as “attachment styles” in this book), enhancing awareness and management of emotions, and learning viable skills to put assertiveness into practice, you can
empower yourself and get your needs met—while simultaneously developing empathy for, sensitivity to, and validation of the experiences of those around you.

Why This Book?
Three primary things make this book different from other books on assertiveness: First, it is specifically written for women by a woman, and second, I use a more encompassing definition of “assertiveness” that involves not only the clear communication piece but also how to know what you feel, think, want, and need in the first place! I focus on relationships dynamics in this book because assertive communication doesn’t happen in a vacuum—it takes at least two to communicate! This book will help you gain a deeper awareness of yourself and your relationships. As a result, you will learn to be a better communicator and improve the bonds of those with whom you associate.

The third element that makes this book stand out from others is that it comes from both a personal and professional place. I have personally experienced the struggle to be assertive and express my feelings, thoughts, needs, and wants. It took several years for me to develop a deep awareness of my internal experiences, to accept my differences, and to gain the skills to effectively communicate them in my relationships. This realization materialized out of sessions with a counselor when I was a teenager. Our talks were life-changing and opened up a new way of viewing the world; I finally started to understand some deeper sources of my pain, and I learned skills to help identify and manage my emotions. It was this experience that inspired my future career choice as a therapist; I wanted to help others have the same emotional insight and personal transformation
Introduction

that I gained, along with the positive changes and sense of empowerment that I had experienced.

In my first few years of college, I was introduced to the concept of attachment: how we are wired to connect with other human beings in order to survive—emotionally and physically—and how we develop a default relationship template based on our interaction with our primary caregivers. These early attachments inform our senses of self and safety, our expectations in future relationships, and how we manage emotions. In other words, our early attachment styles inform our emotional development—our core beliefs about ourselves and the world—and create a template of what we can expect in future relationships.

In my twenty-plus years of clinical practice as a psychotherapist I have witnessed firsthand the pain and frustration of many women who felt they were unable to be assertive—that is, to identify their feelings and thoughts, needs and wants; to make clear and strong requests of others; and to set strong boundaries in their relationships. I have seen the damaging consequences of women not being willing (due to a sense of poor self-worth), not being able (due to lack of knowledge and skills), or not feeling safe enough (due to gender socialization, past relationships patterns, and current relationship choices) in their relationships to act assertively and create the life they want.

It has been more than thirty years since I sat in my first therapy session as the client. Since then, I have continued to learn more about the connection among attachment, emotions, and assertiveness through graduate school studies, clinical practice, attending my own therapy, readings, and professional trainings. The skills presented in this book really work—they have worked for me personally and also for hundreds of my clients. By learning these concepts and skills, I have been able
to be far more effective in all aspects of my life, particularly in developing a deep sense self-worth, creating and maintaining satisfying relationships, and in achieving my professional aspirations. Although my name is on the cover of this book as an “expert,” I view myself as a fellow journeywoman trying to untangle the complexities of life, emotions, and relationships while continuing on a path of growth.

How This Book Will Help You

Learning how and when to be assertive will bring more joy and fulfillment in your relationships with others, as well as peace and confidence within yourself. Period. If you are willing to do the numerous exercises in this book and practice the skills herein, I promise you will develop a greater sense of:

- **Clarity** about yourself and others through *self-reflection*—the ability to reflect on your history to understand your current patterns
- **Confidence** through *self-awareness*—the ability to identify your feelings, thoughts, needs, and wants
- **Calmness** of mind/heart/body through *self-soothing*—the ability to calm yourself down so you can access your awareness and communication skills
- **Connection** through your *self-expression*—the ability to clearly communicate and make requests, and to take action so you can speak and act confidently and congruently in ways that will improve your relationships
- **Compassion** for others whose experiences differ from yours by inviting *self-expansion*—the ability to stand firmly on your own two feet while “holding the lantern”
that illuminates a situation, or holds space for another person’s view, even when it’s different from yours

Chapter 1 introduces my definition of assertiveness as a willingness and ability to express your feelings, thoughts, needs, and wants—even when they differ from those around you. This chapter also outlines the five aspects of assertiveness.

Then we’ll move on in chapter 2 to explore the roots attachment theory and the three basic attachment styles, discuss the idea of differentiation, and consider how attachment and differentiation relate to your assertiveness challenges.

In chapter 3, we’ll take a brief look at some of the family and societal influences that have worked against women finding and using their voices. We’ll then move on in chapter 4 to self-reflection and exploring your past relationship history and relationship patterns.

Next, chapter 5 focuses on self-awareness, particularly on identifying and naming your feelings, and developing emotional intelligence. Building on the idea of emotions, chapter 6 outlines specific self-soothing and emotion management strategies to help you calm yourself down during intense situations so you can communicate more effectively.

Chapters 7 and 8 center on self-expression by outlining the three stances of communication—the Doormat, the Sword, and the Lantern. Self-expression skills are introduced, including how to focus on setting strong boundaries and how to reclaim your right to say no. Also offered are simple formulas for assertive communication, making requests, and incorporating compassion in your communication—all with the objective of increasing the likelihood that you’re assertiveness will be heard and understood.

Finally, in chapter 9 we’ll go into detail about self-expansion, the Lantern stance, and ways to illuminate difficult situations
and assert yourself. I’ll also tie together how the skills in this book will lead to more *clarity, confidence, calmness, connection,* and *compassion*—characteristics that will enable you to transform your life. I’ll bring it all together and then offer additional resources to help you on your journey of growth.

The goal of this assertiveness guide is to encourage you to look back, tune in, and then learn to speak up in your relationships in such a way that you can create authentic connections with others and transform aspects of your life that have left you feeling dissatisfied. My objective is for you to view yourself as a self-aware, powerful, and effective communicator in personal and work relationships by understanding what assertiveness is, what barriers are in the way to your speaking up, what your emotions and attachment style are, and how to confidently share your differences in ways that can strengthen your relationships.

The bonds of relationships are a perfect way to conclude this introduction because they represent our core need as human beings: to feel connected to ourselves and to each other. I hope that this book helps you on your path of discovery and growth to improve your understanding of yourself and your relationship patterns. I hope the skills you learn will improve your personal well-being and enrich your ties to others. “Being the ‘best you can be’ is really only possible when you are deeply connected to another. Splendid isolation is for planets, not people.” (Johnson, 2013)
Take steps to a more fulfilling life and order your copy of The Assertiveness Guide for Women.

Available August 1!