

# PASSIVE COMMUNICATION 101

Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT

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**“They will think I’m a  
bitch”**

Just a reminder: if you are assertive about what you  
need or what is right & someone thinks you are a bitch  
it’s because

**Something was stirred in them**



When I posed the question “what makes it hard to be assertive?”, I received hundreds of responses. It was AMAZING to read everyone’s answers- and one of the most common responses?

“They’ll think I’m a bitch”.

It resulted in such a high number of responses that I needed to address it.

Our fear of being seen as a “bitch” is deep. Definitely based in misogyny.

Here is the thing, if you are expressing your needs & beliefs with integrity and people think you are a bitch then it says a lot more about what it stirred within them. They were called to question their own actions and were unable to fully sit with themselves and question their actions or impact.

Calling someone a “bitch” when they say something with confidence or assertion is a cheap shot. It’s a way to put the burden on the other person to placate you rather than challenge you. I am not talking about aggression here - it’s also not okay to walk around saying things in harmful ways and then saying “whatever it’s on them if they feel uncomfortable” because aggression is ABOUT making someone uncomfortable. So, it’s also on you if you made them uncomfortable.

But, if you’re goal is to protect your needs and to respect the self while respecting the other than it’s important to work through the fear of being a bitch.

You’re not a bitch, you’re not uptight , you don’t have a stick up your ass. You have a backbone and you can have that with an open heart.

And if someone calls you that? It’s potentially more important to question what it means to be in a relationship with a person that isn’t okay with you speaking up and shames you for it.

### YOU MIGHT BE A PASSIVE COMMUNICATOR IF...

You belittle your own views

You seek approval

You have hesitant or tentative language

You struggle to commit to your views

You say yes too quickly or when you want to say no.

You put other people ahead of your wellbeing



Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT

People pleasing or “passivity” can be a useful strategy now and then. As I have mentioned before, people pleasing has its merits.

However, if it’s the only way you approach life it will become problematic.

It’s important to cultivate an assertive voice so that your needs are met, your thoughts are considered, and so that you feel connected to yourself.

Are you doing any of these things habitually?

- ❖ You put down your own views.
- ❖ You seek approval.
- ❖ You have hesitant or tentative language.
- ❖ You struggle to commit to your views.
- ❖ You say yes too quickly or when you want to say no.
- ❖ You put other people ahead of your well-being.

## ASSERTIVENESS TIP

**GENTLE START UP**

" **When** (insert issue) **happens**, **I feel** (insert emotion DON'T insert a belief or criticism veiled as an "i statement") **I need** (insert need)

Swipe to see examples



Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT



Here is a tip for using assertiveness in your intimate relationships.

Use gentle start up.

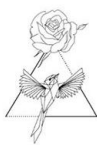
The Gottman Institute found that the first 3 minutes of a conversation predict where it is going to go.

Using gentle start ups improves the likelihood that the conversation will go in the right direction. It reduces both criticism and defensiveness.

## ASSERTIVENESS TIP

**GENTLE START UP**

When I get home from work & the dishes are in the sink, I feel so stressed. I really need us to figure out a solution.



Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT

## ASSERTIVENESS TIP

**GENTLE START UP**

Hey babe, can we talk about last night? When we are on a date and I see you use your phone, I feel neglected. I need more time for uninterrupted connection in our life.



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## ASSERTIVENESS TIP

**GENTLE START UP**

"Hey mom, can we chat? Recently you've been asking me a lot of questions about my brother. It makes me feel overwhelmed and uncomfortable. I need you to ask him directly and I need us to talk about other things"



Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT

The "template" for a gentle start up is:

- When (this thing happens)  
I feel (insert emotion)  
I need (insert positive need - see previous post for what that means).

A note on "I feel" statements:

- ❖ many people use "I feel" statements to continue to veil criticism or to talk about their opinion - "I feel like you don't care about our house", "I feel like you are being rude" - those are not feelings. Those are your opinions.
- ❖ A true "I feel" statement is followed by a feeling and a period. "I feel sad".

## ASSERTIVENESS TIP

**GENTLE START UP**

"I need to share something with you. Recently, I've noticed that a lot of the things we schedule end up getting cancelled. I feel really frustrated about that. I need to know if hanging out is something you still want to do"



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**96 % of the time you can predict the outcome of a 15 minute conversation within the first 3 minutes.**

\*according to John Gottman's Research



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The Gottman Institute's study on married couples shows that you can predict the outcome of a 15 minute conversation by watching the first three minutes of the interaction.

If a conversation begins with sarcasm, blame, criticism, or contempt it is unlikely to go well. This is known as a "harsh start up".

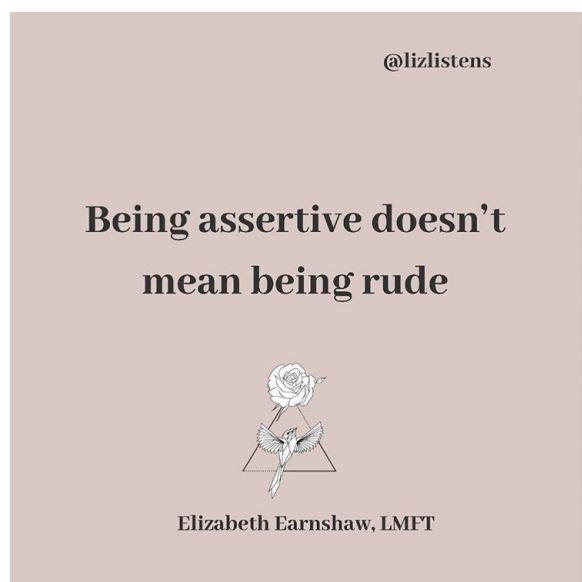
Starting a conversation harshly immediately puts the other person on the defense and begins the cycle of what I like to call Four Horsemen Ping Pong.

You'll begin to serve criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, or contempt back and forth to each other.

If you and your partner have a repetitive cycle of conversations that devolve into a \*4 Horsemen "Ping Pong" it's likely that harsh startup is used during tough convos.

The solution? Recognizing harsh start-ups as a form of aggressive communication and moving towards what John Gottman calls the "gentle start up" - which closely resembles what we've been calling assertiveness in some of the previous pages.

\*For More on the 4 Horseman:  
<https://rory.teachable.com/p/understanding-the-four-horsemen>



- ❖ “It’s rude to talk that way.”  
“If you’re assertive you’ll get fired.”  
“It’s not polite to start out a conversation assertively.”

Those are just a few comments from my previous pages.

If you’re truly assertive and someone says “you’re being rude” it’s because they’re benefitting from you either

- ❖ A. Being a doormat
- ❖ B. Flying off the handle so they can later say you were out of control and not take responsibility for their part.

If the only way you know how to be polite is to be overly passive, I’d like to tell you that there are so many ways to be polite and to be direct.

Instead of: “I’m so sorry to bother you Jeremy, but I just wanted to check in on the message I sent. No worries if you didn’t get it yet!” you can say “Hi

Jeremy, How was your weekend? I hope it was lovely. Last Friday I sent you an email and I need a response by today. Let me know if you have any questions”. Still polite. But direct. Assertive.

Want a raise?: “I am so sorry to take up your time talking about this. I don’t even know if it’s in the books or if I should ask this but I was wondering if...” is fairly passive and indirect.

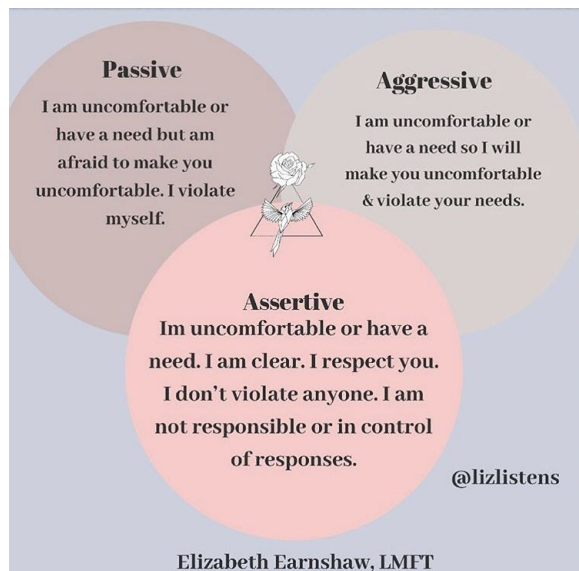
Instead: “Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about this. I appreciate it. I’m here to talk about my salary...” is assertive.

Don’t check emails on weekends? On Monday you can send something like this: “Hey! Thank you for sending this. I saw it was sent on Friday and I’m sure you’re eager for a response. I will get back to you by 5 PM today”.

Not being able to take on another task?: “Lana, I just saw the request to join a new project. I have a few concerns about whether or not this is the right fit and I can give it the energy it deserves. Can we set up a time to chat?”

When a friend always picks the restaurant that you hate: “Let’s get Indian tonight instead. I’ll make the reservations, does 8 PM work for you?”

Being assertive IS polite - it lets everyone know what each person needs, it creates transparency and levels the playing field.



The differences between passive, assertive, and aggressive communication.


→ **Passive Communication:** This comes from a belief that the other person cannot handle your needs, requests, or discomforts. Therefore you feel as if you need to protect them by being overly accommodating, keeping it to yourself, or being vague. In a sense this is controlling. It's an attempt to control and decide for the other person whether or not they get to respond.

→ **Aggressive Communication:** This occurs when you're uncomfortable and have needs but you're unsure of how to have them met without making the other person feel badly or by violating their needs (for things like respectful language, etc). This is also controlling. It's an attempt to control the feelings and comfort of another person.

→ **Assertive Communication:** This is - "I can be clear and direct about my discomforts, requests, or needs and still be "kind" if I want to be. I can get my needs met without violating myself or the other person. I can use language that allows other people to be successful with me rather than let me down. I cannot be responsible or control their response". This is not controlling. It's allowing people to freely choose their responses.

There are, of course, moments where any of these might be necessary. Perhaps, you truly do need to be protective of someone at a moment in time. Perhaps, you're being threatened and you do need to become aggressive.

However, the overall aim is to get close to the center in our everyday interactions and to be assertive.

Passive Communication	Assertive Communication
"I just wanted to check..."	Just say what you want directly. You don't have to apologize, you can say what you do want instead of what you don't want, it is okay to take up space.
"I feel like..."	
"I don't want..."	
"I am sorry to bother you..."	
"I know you're busy but..."	
"This is silly but..."	
 <p>Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT @lizlistens</p>	

This is what a lot of my emails used to sound like when I was asking for something I needed.

What would change for you if you started communicating more directly? If you took out the emojis that soften your message. If you said what you do want instead of what you don't want. If you knew it was okay to take up space and speak your mind and didn't use the words "just" or "sorry" as much when bringing something up?



Asking for help is necessary when you're overburdened with household tasks but it can also be a form of invisible labor.

It means you had to notice something first.

Sending you love if your're feeling exhausted by asking for "help".



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Learning to ask for help is incredibly important. Everyone needs to lean into saying "hey, I don't know how to/can't /don't want to do this thing - can you help?"

But, I also want to validate that having to ask your partner for help around the house over and over again is a form of invisible labor in itself.

It means you still had to carry the mental load of noticing the issue and then distributing the task.

- ❖ Can you help with Tommy's bath time?
- Hey, can you help me with the dishes?
- Can you help make the doctor's appointments next week?
- Can you help with holiday shopping?

I want to validate that it can be exhausting, overwhelming, and lonely.

If this is something you are struggling with I am sending you love.

## 5 ways to soften a conversation

### 1. Offer an apology

"I was getting critical. I am sorry. Let me try again."

### 2. Express feelings

"I am starting to feel criticized/sad/etc"

### 3. Use humor

Laugh at yourself when you say something ridiculous.

### 4. Take a break

"I think we need a time out."

### 5. Be affectionate

"I need a hug", "Can I hug you?"



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If you're in an intimate relationships you will have conversations that become "heated".

There are two types of couples - "the disasters" and "the masters".

- The disasters: These types of couples have heated conversations that escalate and do not reroute. They struggle to do what we call "repair".
- The masters: These types of couples notice when things have gone off track and offer "repair attempts" frequently. They also accept attempts to repair (deescalate).

A few examples of "master" repair techniques are offering apologies, expressing feelings, using humor, taking a break, and being affectionate.

When people offer these things it often brings the escalated energy down. An important component of this is also recognizing when your partner uses these things AND accepting them with another repair technique. Rejecting the repair attempts actually escalates the interaction further.

Here is an example of a "master" convo:

- Partner 1: "I'm so sorry. I think I got out of control. Let me try to say it again".
- Partner 2: "I appreciate that apology. Can we have a break? I'm a little overwhelmed."
- Partner 1: "I'm feeling overwhelmed with this conversation".
- Partner 2: "I'm sorry. Can I give you a hug?"

### The Stress Reducing Conversation

What upsets you the most about this?

What do you feel about it?

What do you think?

What do you wish for?

What do you need?

\*wait to problem solve or offer suggestions



Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT  
@lizlistens  
John Gottman

{Relationship Tip}: When people are upset they do not want your advice, solutions, or feedback.

At least they don't until they are fully understood!

When someone is stressed, upset, or worried they need a listening ear and some really good (yet simple!) questions.

Sometimes, we make listening to the people we love harder than it has to be.

You can use the list imaged to help you reduce the other person's stress. Asking these questions in a warm tone, with eye contact, head nodding, and some "mmhmms" here and there can really help.

Before offering solutions, ask the other person if they have ideas first.

Remember, offering solutions before letting the person talk about it actually increases their stress AND suggests you aren't listening and don't think they can do it on their own.

So, wait until you've really heard them and then ask if they'd like solutions or feedback.

**When you feel like you “go blank” in conversations it is because you are physiologically flooded.**

Your heart rate reaches 100 BPM

Your stress hormones are released

& this leads to a physical inability to communicate



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When people are overwhelmed in conversations with others it's possible they get physiologically flooded.

This means that their heart rate goes to 100 BPM or more and that stress hormones are released. It's called Diffuse Physiological Arousal or DPA.

When this happens, the communication centers in your brain are blocked and having productive conversations becomes impossible.

If you notice yourself having a fight or flight moment in a conversation look at your fit bit/Apple watch and check your BPM's. If you notice that they're high, it means you need a break.

It takes about 20 minutes of self soothing prior to having the ability to come back and be an effective communicator.

You can read, take some deep breaths, a walk, paint, etc.

Come up with a break plan with your partner.

After the break is over, you can re-engage with the topic.

It will make a world of difference.

Instead of this:	Do this :
<b>Criticism</b>	Start your conversations by saying "when this happens, I feel, I need..."
<b>Defensiveness</b>	Take responsibility for your part or validate.
<b>Stonewalling</b>	Learn to self soothe. Take at least a 30 minute break
<b>Contempt</b>	Express how you feel.

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If the "four horsemen" signal doom in your relationship, their antidotes can help you to turn things around.

The Gottman Institute has found in their research that the 4 communication styles on the left signal the eventual demise of a relationship if they go unchecked. In fact, it can be predicted with 93% accuracy that these behaviors left unchanged result in divorce.

Learning to replace them with what The Gottman Institute calls their "antidotes" can help redirect the relationship into something that's healthier and more fulfilling.

- ❖ Criticism occurs when you have a problem and you attribute this problem to your partner. "You never do the dishes! You never care about me or our house!"

→ The antidote to criticism is called gentle startup. It sounds like this "When I come into the house and the dishes are still in the sink I feel stressed and angry. I need you to help with the dishes".

- ❖ Defensiveness often occurs in response to a perceived criticism. When people are defensive they respond by explaining themselves, playing a martyr, or punting criticism back. "Well, you never help me with the yard!"

→ The antidote to defensiveness is responsibility taking. Even for the smallest part of your contribution. "You're right, the dishes are a mess and I haven't been doing them lately."

- ❖ Stonewalling this is when a person withdraws, shuts down, and closes off from the other person because they are overwhelmed or physiologically flooded (heart rate over 95 BPM). It looks like someone that isn't listening. They build a "stone wall" between themselves and their partner. They will respond with evasiveness.

→ When someone is flooded it is impossible to continue a conversation. The antidote is stopping the conversation, self soothing, and returning no less than 20 minutes later.

(Continued...)

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- ❖ Contempt is the king of the horsemen. It is criticism supercharged. Not only does the person find flaws in their partner, they begin to state it from a space of "superiority". This results in belittling, scoffing at, making fun of, mimicking, eye rolling, being mean, name calling, and sneering.

It is the number one predictor of divorce. It conveys disgust.

Contempt sounds like "I learned to wash dishes at 5 years old. Who taught you? Eye roll, laugh".

- ➔ The antidote to contempt is first learning to own your feelings and needs. You have to be vulnerable enough to do this because contempt is the opposite of vulnerability. Saying "the dishes are really upsetting to me. I don't understand what's happening here but we need a solution" is a better way to express your frustration. The longer term goal here is to begin redeveloping a sense of appreciation, admiration, and respect. You can do this by focusing on what you like about your partner and letting them know this frequently.

\*For More on the 4 Horseman:  
<https://rory.teachable.com/p/understanding-the-four-horsemen>

Everything that comes before “but”  
was BS and everything that comes  
after is ego.



-Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT  
@lizlistens

“Everything before **“but”** is **BS** & everything after it is **ego**.

- ❖ “I’m really sorry about last night **but** I have to mention you weren’t that nice either”.
- ❖ “I hear what you’re saying **but** I think the experience was totally different than you’re saying it is”
- ❖ “You’re right, I did lie, **but** you didn’t make it easy to tell the truth.”

When you follow up an apology or validating statement with **“but”** you’ve negated the apology or validation.

You’ve also refocused the issue on yourself and a need to be right, explain further, or discuss a caveat to your apology. Or, perhaps, to even explain to the person why you’re not really sorry and they actually did something wrong. This is **ego**.

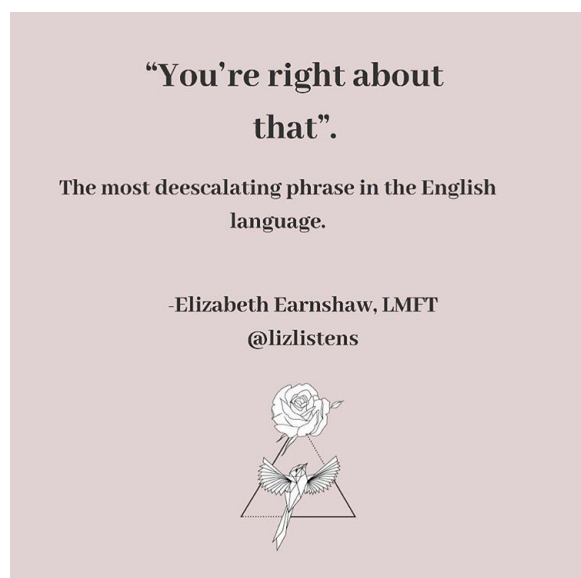
The ability to say sorry or to validate someone’s experience and put a period at the end of the sentence is emotional maturity.

When you catch yourself saying **“but”** just stop yourself there.

You can address whatever you wanted to say at another time.

Let your apologies stand.





This morning, on the drive home from dropping my son off at school, I came to an intersection where a large trash truck was trying to turn onto my road.

I stopped the car and then saw that they weren't going to be able to fit around my car. I pulled forward to make space and as I did they also pulled forward. We almost hit each other.

The driver rolled down their window and called me some combination of stupid and careless and asked where I learned to drive. They kept going on about the stop sign while blocking my car.

They weren't threatening me. They were in full on contempt mode (the urge to shame people when we feel embarrassed/uncomfortable/nervous is so strong!).

I could have gotten into it with them. But, I took a deep breath and the next time they said "you need to stop at a stop sign!", I responded with my favorite disarming statement "you're right about that."

When people are being unreasonable they don't want to be reasonable with you. They don't care about your intent. They're likely in fight or flight.

They want to shame you and bait you into a greater argument with them. This wastes your energy. Plus, they'll never walk away with any real insight or lesson from you.

Don't go there with them. They want to shame you and not understand you. When people are in that space they just want to be right.

Guess what they did I after I said that? Stared at me completely confused and then said "Well. Okay." Then drove away.

Learning to be non defensive to people's criticism will help you to get out of gridlocked and unwinnable fights.

\*This is not saying you co-sign their behavior or accept it. It's simply a very handy way to de-escalate and protect your own energy.