



## Reflections from our Training Participant

### 1. In the space below, please describe your own specific attacking and avoiding behaviours, and what triggers them.

I have discovered that I have the tendency to display a range of attacking and avoiding behaviours depending on the context of the situations. I realised that I displayed more of the attacking behaviours when dealing with my family. For example, a huge trigger is when my siblings have not done certain tasks like buying gifts for our parents' birthdays even after repeated reminders, I tend to resort to nagging them and telling them how annoying it is for me to pick up the slack. Sometimes, the nagging then triggers me to explode with anger as well and I end up shouting at them, that they never get anything done on time. At the same time, I have also become aware that after the display of attacking behaviours, I move on to display avoiding behaviours such as sulking and complaining about my siblings and their lack of initiative, usually to my parents. In this context, the triggers are the lack of initiative, commitment and drive from my siblings and me feeling like I am not being heard or respected.

Outside of the family situation, in public environments, when I feel like I am being challenged, I have discovered that I will usually try to practise some assertive behaviour. However, if the person/s I am speaking with start to become aggressive or passive aggressive, my behaviour quickly changes into that of avoiding. For example, one major trigger is when I am speaking (in a group discussion) and someone interrupts me or tries to overpower me because they have a louder voice or more gregarious personality. When this happens, I have noticed that I avoid speaking up for myself and I start to withdraw from the conversation. I also tend to be polite but inside I am feeling resentful of the situation and of my behaviour. I also do this because I dislike confrontation and being made to feel like my views are not important. As a result, I shy away but this in turn causes me to feel unhappy and debilitates me from expressing myself. It seems that while the triggers in both the family (more private) and the public contexts are similar – that of feeling like I am not being heard or respected / valued, how the triggers affect me differ and I do believe this is because of the level of comfort I feel in expressing myself in a family situation as compared to a public situation. Of course, I am aware in both situations, the resulting behaviours are not ideal.

### 2. Identify patterns in your use of voice, body and space related to these behaviours.

When I am displaying attacking behaviours, I know I have the tendency to raise my voice especially if I am dealing with my family. I confront them more readily and I am standing upright and strong with my body in an open stance, indicating that I use the space much more.



There is a tendency for my body to feel more tension and that tension is usually held more in my throat, my face and shoulders. I usually feel my throat tightening and my voice is softer; my face is not as expressive and is more tense and my shoulders will feel more tight and closed into my body. I am aware that I also tend to speak much faster when I am displaying attacking behaviours.

Interestingly enough, I have come to notice that in the moments where I have tried displaying assertive behaviours, for example, telling someone that I have not finished speaking when they interrupt me, I display similar patterns as described above but to a much lesser degree. There is still tension in my body as I stand up for my rights and assert my needs politely and with conviction; I do not retreat into my body by making myself smaller. My voice is also steadier while there is tension as I am doing something that makes me slightly nervous.

When I am displaying avoiding behaviours, I have the tendency to not speak up hence there is an immediate shut down of my voice. I also tend to move a lot less in space – I am just standing or sitting in the same spot and / or making very small movements. I am able to reflect that this is probably because of the fact that I do not want to draw attention to myself anymore because I have already been made to feel unwelcomed. Sometimes the way I use the space is to remove myself from the space completely. During the workshop there was one moment during a group work situation, where I felt like I was ‘told’ what to do instead of being asked for my opinion. However, instead of speaking up and expressing how I felt about how we approached the task given, I simply agreed and carried on with what I was ‘asked’ to do. I became silent and almost started to resent the task at the moment. I felt that the persons I was surrounded with were more dominating and my views would not have made a difference. This was clearly my perception. I occupied a small space on the floor while doing the task and my body was very closed off to the rest of the group. It was fascinating for me to have a very real and immediate experience of how I expressed myself through avoiding behaviours and to be able to reflect upon them.

### **3. Identify perceptions you hold that lead to attacking or avoiding uses of voice, body and space.**

I grew up very much in a matriarchal household and was influenced by how verbal my mother could be when asserting her rights. I believe that because of this and also how she brought me up to stand up for my rights, I asserted myself more at home because I felt like I had the permission and the safe space to do so. I do realise that though, that those assertions sometimes manifested as attacking behaviours. At the same time, my parents, media and teachers in school also taught me that as a girl, I needed to be gentle, sit ‘properly’ and speak softly. I studied in an all girls’ school for the first ten years of my life and we felt like we had more of the liberty to ‘not behave’ like a girl and be more ‘tomboyish’. While the general



perception of girls from an all girls' school was that they were more boisterous, there was also the subliminal messaging by the schoolteachers that as girls, we needed to be more demure. I believe such messaging has led to me trying to assert myself but at the same time, in the public situations, to retreat into myself because being demure, quiet and gentle was better than losing my temper and more becoming of a woman.

Another messaging I received when I was in my early twenties was that I was 'too intimidating' and hence that was why men were afraid to approach me when it came to dating. I believe this caused me to perceive myself as having the potential to be too aggressive when I am expressing my views and could have led to a subconscious need of wanting to avoid rather assert my views. I understand that I carried with me some struggle of wanting to stand up for my rights and at the same time be seen as 'demure' and 'gentle'. When the struggle was too much, my response was to shut down and become silent, use as little space as possible and physically shy away from the situation.

In a similar vein, I have found myself apologising when I did actually speak up as if I felt shameful for taking up the space and using my voice that it warranted an apology to make things better. I apologise because I am not performing my gender, that of being a woman when I take up the space to voice my opinions. Sometimes after practising asserting behaviour, I would feel guilty about my decision and agonise over whether I did the right thing. For example, in a recent dating situation where I decided to express my needs to the other person and while I felt like I was heard and that the conversation went well, my thoughts after that were about second guessing my decision and whether I had 'screwed' things up further by opening up about my feelings.

I am also recently aware of how keenly entrenched in gender attacking and avoiding behaviours are. Attacking behaviours are often associated with being male and avoiding with female. When I display attacking behaviours, my perception is also that I am being more male like in my interactions and that it is generally frowned upon.

#### **4. Analyse the consequences of these behaviours on your relationships in a range of contexts.**

When dealing with my family, my attacking behaviour either causes my family members to also display attacking behaviours (usually mom) and avoiding behaviours (siblings). Ultimately, nothing gets resolved which explains why the patterns of behaviour and the fights are repeated. It does put a strain on the relationships and it makes me feel under appreciated and unhappy. It also causes some fear that my family members will not approach me calmly because they might think that it would never work although I have tried to explain that I only



do explode with anger when I have repeatedly tried to achieve better communication and there was no progress.

There is a definite power struggle in such dealings. My mother wants to retain her power as the matriarch and so she responds with attacking behaviours. Being the oldest child, I want to maintain my power as the responsible one taking care of things around the house and when dealing with my siblings, try to exert that and they in turn, display avoiding behaviours. In the public sphere, by not speaking up in instances where I should I end up bottling a lot of emotions and this is unhealthy in the long run.

Another consequence is the growing lack of confidence that tends to build up when I do not speak up. Sometimes there is also a general apathy towards speaking up that I feel – where I feel that I will not be able to achieve anything even if I did speak up because the situation will not change. For example, I remember a time when I was co-running a theatre project in Northern India and was talked down to by a man in power about the scheduling of performances for the summer camp. I remember trying at first to assert myself but very quickly gave up after noticing his slightly aggressive tone and behaviour as I perceived it as a situation in which my co facilitator nor I would not win. Hence we both kept silent, retreated back into our chairs and accepted the limited time for the performances we were given. This resulted in us feeling angry with ourselves later on but not having much of recourse. At the end of the day, we just ended up feeling very disempowered and helpless which is not a great feeling to have. This reaction then also prevented us from having any fruitful dialogues with the man in authority as we felt that it would not make any difference. It did not help to move the relationship forward to a more positive place and instead left it on a negative note.

In another situation at a place I work in, I repeatedly feel annoyed when a fellow colleague who is also a supervisor, continues to play loud music and then gets annoyed with people when he gets told off about it. Instead of having a chat about it and using assertive behaviours, I tend to avoid the confrontation. I notice that this then puts a strain in the relationship because I also tend to avoid speaking to him or wanting to have as less interaction with him as possible.

The reflections I have been doing have made me keenly aware that the process of change is gradual and takes time and involves risk. When playing some of the games in the courses, I realised I took risks easily when there was not much to lose but not otherwise. Understanding where the behaviours might have come from has also helped not to place blame but to recognise triggers, perceptions in an attempt to shed light on the situation and to be able to move forward with new knowledge.



**5. Give details of at least two ways that you are practising using your voice, body and space in more confident, assertive and empowered ways.**

Recently in a professional situation, I perceived that my needs were not being met. When I had the chance to list it down in an email, I used assertive words and ensured that I expressed why I wanted certain things to be done a specific way and why that was important for me. That sparked a phone conversation between this said person and I and it went amicably and wonderfully. While this person has never before displayed any attacking behaviours, I myself was worried that what I was asking for was too much when it was just about scheduling about work and clarifying. However, it was important for me to assert my rights and views and through the conversation I felt I was heard and my views respected.

I am, in small ways, using my body to take up physical space and not feel apologetic about it. For example, in the tube, I have become comfortable placing my elbows on the arm rests whereas before I always gave way and even felt I could not do such a thing. This is allowed me to use my body and the space around me in a non-aggressive and amiable way to feel empowered.

I was recently triggered when a close friend I worked with started expanding on how much more money she was making and the opportunities she was getting. While I have not quite gotten to the stage where I feel like I can speak to her and tell her that sometimes when she speaks like, it does make me feel like I am not being heard, I was able to congratulate her on her achievements without being passive aggressive. I was aware that my feelings stemmed from my own insecurities and that I did not want to let my resulting behaviours enslave me instead of empowering me. That small moment of acknowledgement helped me to feel more empowered.

Another major way that I am trying to practise using my voice in a more empowered way is to catch myself when I apologise when there is no need to and express that. For example, a few days ago I was purchasing some cosmetics and the salesperson informed me about a discount and then asked me to move to another area to pay. For some reason I apologised for having to move. I caught myself and said out loud, "wait, why am I apologising? I am not sorry!" I do think the salesperson was fairly amused but kept silent. I am keen to continue catching myself out on these behaviours so that I can become more empowered for myself and for others.



**6. Reflect on your own strengths and weaknesses in the process of changing your behaviour (to be completed no sooner than four weeks after the course ends).**

Over the past few weeks, I have become more aware of my interactions with people and where I was displaying different types of behaviour between assertive, attacking and avoiding. I discovered that I mostly displayed avoiding behaviours and that for me feels like a weakness. One weakness that became more apparent was that I lacked in self-confidence when there was a need to display assertive behaviours. While I eventually got round to doing it, my initial reaction was that of avoidance and a lack of confidence in my ability – I was fearful of the repercussions and wondered about the consequences too much. I also was aware that such feelings arose because changing behaviours was a risky thing to undertake and that it definitely requires practice.

In the same professional situation I had expanded on in question 5 previously, there was another incident where I felt I was being forced to take up work that I did not want to. I had also been hearing different standards when I had spoken to other colleagues working for the same organisation. I also felt that the emails I had been receiving seemed passive aggressive and there was no option for discussion because of the power dynamics that existed. My avoiding behaviour manifested when I put off writing an email back to ask for clarifications and to state my position. I had spoken about the situation with a few colleagues who then gave me some encouragement. With that, I realised I had the tools and knowledge to write an email with assertiveness and get my points across. Once I made the decision to do it, I was aware that my strengths were in the fact that I knew how to work the email in a confident manner, alerting the management to the contractual facts and stating my position clearly and the reasons for it. Not only did the management come back to me stating that they understood my position but also committed to helping me manage my schedule so that it would work out for all parties involved. This was definitely a step in the right direction and I was very proud of myself; for being firm so that my rights were respected and for addressing a problem that was affecting me, even though I hesitated in the beginning.

I discovered that my strengths also lay in being able to be aware of my behaviours and also in taking the time away to formulate my thoughts before returning to the situation. For example, in a personal relationship, I noticed that I was triggered when my friend informed me that I needed to be more self – confident in my abilities, I took it very personally and felt that it was more of a criticism instead of the person trying to encourage me. I took some time out and composed myself and realised the judgement I had stemmed from my own insecurities. I returned to the conversation and explained my trigger and that I appreciated the note. My friend was also able to hold the space for me to open up about my insecurities



and we ended up having a lovely and amiable conversation about steps to take to increase our levels of self- confidence.

In another situation, with the same close friend I mentioned in question 5, I was aware of how she again started to brag about how much money she had saved when I started mentioning about finances. Instead of letting the situation control me and avoiding it, I approached the conversation with more assertive behaviours, which was a personal improvement for me. Previously, when this happened, I would sulk on the inside and would be polite to her but feel anger inside. This time, I sincerely acknowledged her keen and smart ways of handling her finances and asked her if she could share some tips with me. I even went further to suggest that if she could sit with me and look at my own spread sheets, it would most useful. My friend then tried to downplay her own strengths, saying how she is not that good but was willing to help me out. For me, this was again a successful conversation in which I learned from my past avoiding behaviours, was able to notice them when they arose again and was able to move past them by employing assertive behaviours instead.

In the situations I described above, experiencing a successful outcome after I have tried assertive behaviours have given me more confidence in continuing to try these assertive behaviours in my personal and professional relationships. I have found that the relationships are still in tact and that they are affected positively after I tried assertive behaviours. I know I still have a long way to go and that this is a constant journey but I feel equipped with the knowledge and experience now to keep on trying assertive behaviours in my life where needed.