

Having my Voice

“I can’t seem to say what I want”

“I just go quiet when I know I should say something”

“They just roll right over me and don’t listen”

It seems to be a basic human need to be heard, in whatever way is important

to us. To communicate and to be listened to. Some people confuse this with being agreed with, but other people do have the right to hear us and disagree with us; sometimes they may not listen, but we all have the right to have our say.

Case Studies (names have been changed)

Sheila has been trying to get her husband to hear her for years. She is able to tell me what’s wrong with their marriage – the spark went ages ago and now it simply feels like going through the motions. But she’s unable to tell him. She does try, but he clearly doesn’t really want to hear, and so changes the subject whenever she gets near it. And she lets him, gratefully avoiding what she knows is the truth but which will bring their pain out into the open. And so they continue, both knowing things aren’t right but unable to talk about it.

Julie works for a bully. She constantly criticises her work, pulling her up on small things and blowing them all out of proportion. Whenever Julie tries to stand up for herself, her boss raises her voice and Julie goes quiet. She takes the stress home instead and suffers in silence. She worries about her future at the company, but more than that she blames herself for not being able to – in her eyes – do better. Sometimes she even sounds like her boss as she castigates herself cruelly.

Why does this happen?

When we’re under stress, our fight/flight reaction kicks in and adrenaline floods our brain and body. This means that we can’t think straight, and often revert to ‘old’ ways of thinking that we were taught when we were young – ‘be good, be quiet, behave’ being one. Or ‘don’t talk back’ or

‘anger is dangerous’ or ‘don’t upset anyone’. We lose touch with our adult selves and behave in ways which we know aren’t helpful, but we can’t seem to stop ourselves. Sheila and Julie both know they need to be more assertive but, in the moment, are unable to do so. Julie, in addition, has turned her boss’s critical voice into her own, inside her head and is doing it to herself as well.

What to do about it?

One the things we learn as adults which we forget under stress, is that we have a right to be heard. In fact, we have a number of rights:

1. I have a right to my opinion
2. I have a right to say what I think
3. I do not have to take being put down
4. I have a right to ask for what I want or need

and some things are ok:

1. It’s ok to make a mistake
2. It’s ok to change my mind
3. It’s ok to feel emotional
4. It’s ok to take my time to respond to something.

A Practical Tool

Before the stressful situation (if possible):

1. Plan what you are trying to say.
2. Remind yourself of your rights and reassure yourself of what’s ok
3. Get some support from someone else if it would help

During the stressful situation :

1. Remember to breathe deeply (we all need oxygen and it calms the fight/flight response)
2. Say what you have prepared to say (or as near as you can)
3. Repeat yourself if necessary to make sure the other person has heard it
4. Do your best to listen to the other person and stay open to them

After the stressful situation :

1. Get some support from someone else if you need it
2. Do something to reward yourself if you'd like to

And remember – some things can take a lot of practice! Especially if you're trying to overturn a lifetime's 'training' in being a certain way.