

Handout 1.2: Empowering Yourself: Self-Advocacy Strategies

Client Initials: _____ Date: _____

To recover fully from the effects of trauma, it is in your best interest to become your own strongest advocate. This handout lists twenty-five self-advocacy strategies that will promote your best interest and empower you. If you embrace and come to live by these statements, your recovery from trauma will go forward at a rapid pace.

After each set of statements, please write down what you believe about that set of statements. Also indicate how important or relevant each self-advocacy strategy is for you (that is, how important it is for the ideas expressed to become true for you, or how important it would be for you to adopt that strategy as a guideline for living your life).

1. Getting my wants and needs satisfied is more important than satisfying the needs of someone else. It is in my best interest to advocate for my needs and wants as a top priority. Advocating for my best interest means doing things and making decisions that promote long-term happiness and quality of life for me (and my children).

2. Getting my wants and needs satisfied belongs at the top of my daily to-do list. If I don't put myself first, who will? If I get my needs satisfied, I will have more energy to satisfy the wants and needs of others.

3. It does not promote my long-term happiness to think or talk about things I cannot change, such as dwelling on the unfairness of the system or past injustices. The time I spend on such things is time I can't spend working on things I can control, change, or do something about. In business, they call this an opportunity cost. Time spent doing things of little value costs us the opportunity of spending that time doing something more worthwhile. In other words, spending time on things I can't change does not belong on my daily to-do list!

4. To get my needs met, it is in my best interest to tell people how I feel (for example, "I'm upset" or "My feelings are hurt") and what I want (for example, "I would appreciate it if ..."). Other people can't read my mind and won't know how I feel or what I want unless I tell them.

5. It is in my best interest to stand up for my rights and not allow myself to be taken advantage of. I not only deserve respect, I must demand respect. To demand respect means not tolerating disrespect.

6. It's a good idea to make decisions based on what is in my best interest (and my children's best interest). It is in my best interest to stop doing things because I think I should. The question to ask myself when trying to decide what to do is "What course of action is most likely to promote my long-term happiness or quality of life?"

7. When I do something or make a decision in order to get immediate relief from painful feelings, chances are good that I'm not acting in my best interest.

8. If a decision will lead to either guilt or resentment, go with guilt! (Because this means it's more likely I will be acting in my best interest rather than someone else's.)

9. Strong feelings associated with thoughts or ideas are not evidence that those ideas are correct (or incorrect). It is not in my best interest to make important decisions based on how I feel about things; important decisions should be made on the basis of the evidence and an intellectual analysis of what is in my best interest.

10. If I'm in a high state of distress (anxiety, worry, dread, depression, and so on) about an important decision I think I have to make, any course of action that will give me immediate relief from this distress is not likely to be in my best interest. It has been said that "when anxiety goes up, IQ goes down." If I achieve a state of calm before making important decisions, I will be more objective and think more clearly.

11. Just because somebody says that I have negative qualities does not mean it's true. However, I do not have control over the words that come out of other people's mouths. It is in my best interest to remember that words are just sound waves (not fists or baseball bats).

12. Just because someone blames or blamed me does not mean it was my fault.

13. Just because someone apologizes to me for some wrongdoing does not mean I am obligated to do what that person wants or to go back to the way things were, whether or not I forgive the person.

14. If I never say “could have” or “should have” again, I will be a happier person.

15. Tearing myself down with put-downs, such as “I’m worthless (stupid, never going to be happy, and so on),” makes me feel depressed and want to give up or go away. It is in my best interest to treat myself with the same respect that I would like to get, and deserve to get, from others.

16. When talking about things I don’t like about myself, it’s much better to say “This is the way I have been (or have done things) in the past,” rather than “This is the way I am (or what I always do).” The second wording implies that this is the way I am always going to be; the first implies that I can do things differently in the future.

17. Just because I think a thought or have an idea does not mean the thought or idea is true. It is in my best interest to stop automatically believing everything that comes into my mind. Some thoughts may just be superstitious habits. It is in my best interest to evaluate the evidence for some of the “weird” or “crazy” ideas that pop into my mind.

18. It is in my best interest to stop saying “I feel” with words that aren’t emotions (for example, stuck, obligated, overwhelmed, and so on). Instead, ask myself what the evidence is for *thinking* that I’m stuck, obligated, overwhelmed, and so on. If I evaluate the evidence for these negative ideas, I may realize I’m not really stuck, obligated, overwhelmed, or whatever.

19. It is in my best interest to stop asking why. Knowing why will not change what happened, and it keeps me stuck in the past.

20. I may have been helpless and out of control when I was abused by my partner or as a child, but I am not powerless or out of control now!

21. If I focus on possible solutions to my problems, I may solve them. If I focus on reasons why my problems can't be solved, my problems will only be solved if I get lucky.

22. I am an innocent survivor and am likable and lovable. I also deserve to be happy!

23. When a woman says "I feel sorry for him," she is making the other person's problem *her* problem. If I "feel sorry" for my abuser, I may believe that I'm supposed to do something about it—something he would like me to do, such as go back to him or stay in the relationship. This is faulty thinking! If I do something he wants because I "feel sorry" for him, I may be putting his wants above my own (and my children's) best interest. It's important to act in my best interest whether or not I "feel sorry" for him.

24. When a woman says “I had to,” it usually means she chose to. Ordinarily, only children, slaves, prisoners, and people threatened with violence have to comply. In most cases, when I do something that I think somebody expects when I don’t want to, I *choose* to do it, rather than have to do it. This distinction is important because when I have choices, I have power and am in control. When I perceive myself as not having choices, I think I’m powerless and out of control. For example, when I say someone is taking advantage of me, it usually means that I’m allowing that person to take advantage of me. This latter way of looking at the situation implies that I can do something to stop the “unfair treatment” and prevent it from happening in the future.

25. When I get out of bed tomorrow, who is going to decide whether or not I’m going to have a good day? Me? Or someone else? Of course, I *want* to be the one who decides. However, I may put others in control by hoping that they won’t ruin my day by treating me in a certain way or by saying something I don’t want to hear. In that scenario, someone else is deciding whether or not I have a good day. If I’m worried that someone might ruin my day by acting in a certain way, I’m only going to have a good day if I get lucky. This is like being in a rudderless boat and hoping or praying that a friendly wind will blow me ashore rather than out to sea. On the other hand, if I know I’m going to have a good day no matter what somebody else says or does, I am in control of my well-being.

Overall comments on how these self-advocacy strategies can have a positive effect on my recovery or quality of life:
