

Constructing I-Statements

Good communication is an essential to the health of any relationship. And I-Statements are an effective form of communication because they maintain a respectful attitude toward the receiver and also place the responsibility for change in that person. Constructed properly, they also avoid the destructive "put-downs" inherent in blaming, criticizing, judging, shaming, ridiculing and name-calling.

In reality, I-Statements can take many forms. And as you become more skilled in constructing them, you will most likely find yourself coming up with many variations. However, when you first begin working with them, it is helpful to have an initial template to use in constructing them. The following is such template. It has four parts, stated in the following order:

1. "I"
2. what YOU feel or want
3. the event that evoked your feeling(s) or desire (typically something you BOTH can agree on), and
4. the effect the event has on YOU.

Combine these pieces to form a sentence as follows: "I feel _____#2_____ when _____#3_____, because _____#4_____."

EXAMPLE: "I feel (2) very scared (3) when you are late home from work, because (4) I worry that something might have happened to you."

Common Errors in Constructing I-messages:

Avoid Inserting "that" or "like"

The phrases "I feel that...."-or "I feel like...." are really expressions of thought, often an opinion or judgment. The use of "I feel" should always be followed by a feeling such as "sad," "glad," or "afraid."

Avoid Disguised YOU-Statements

These include sentences that begin with "I feel that you...." or "I feel like you...." Again, they immediately put the listener into a one-down position.

Avoid Accentuating Your Negative Feelings

Some people spend a lot of time focusing on communicating their negative feelings and forget to communicate their positive feelings. Expressing your joy, happiness, relief, etc. when your partner has done something that elicits these feelings in you is equally important.

Avoid Undershooting the Intensity of Your Feelings

When individuals first start working with I-Statements, it is common for them to at first send a message that minimizes the intensity of their feelings and consequently their attempt to communicate has less impact on the receiver. Remember: It is very important to match the message you send to your level of feeling.

And Finally, Some Thoughts about Using I-Statements to Express Anger

When I work with couples who are highly reactive and are just beginning to learn more effective communication styles, I often will recommend that they NOT use I-Statements to express anger. This is because it often takes several weeks of practice before individuals become skilled at I-Statement construction AND listening to anger without taking offense and reacting. During these weeks, statements starting with "I'm angry..." can put one's partner into an immediate defensive (and sometimes reactive) stance, making it easier to slip back into old patterns of relating that are shaming or hurtful. It is also very easy to end up with a "YOU-Statement" when attempting to express anger.

It is much easier to hear the primary feelings (of hurt or fear) expressed than it is to hear the secondary feeling of anger. (For an explanation of primary and secondary feelings, review "[What is Anger?](#)" and "[Time-Outs](#)" on the RagePage.)

For example: Take a partner or spouse who has prepared a special anniversary meal and has been sitting home waiting for their significant other (who is two hours late and hasn't called) to return. It may be very tempting to greet that individual with some form of "I'm angry at you now because you didn't call me and now dinner is ruined."

Consider this alternative which expresses the primary feeling of fear: "Honey, I was really scared when you were late and didn't call because I feared that you'd been in an accident." Hear the expression of love and concern here?

And in another situation where the primary feeling is disappointment: "Honey, I'm feeling really disappointed right now because when you didn't call to let me know that you were going to be late -- that set my timing off on cooking this special meal for us. I'm really disappointed because I wanted this evening to be special for us." Hear the love here?

Now, if you were the person arriving home late and you hadn't called, which of these examples would you find easier to hear?