

## Using "I" Messages to Get Your Point Across and Be Heard

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Developing and restoring communication skills is one of the most important aspects of any healthy relationship. However, communication can be hindered by how we choose to communicate with our loved ones. One tool that dramatically improves communication is using "I" messages.

There are many benefits of using "I" messages, including eliminating the adverse effects of "you" messages. With practice, the ease at which you can incorporate "I" messages into your communication routine will be apparent. "I" messages are a simple yet effective way to communicate your thoughts, feelings, and intentions to your loved ones. Using "I" statements takes the focus away from the other person and puts it back on yourself. "I" messages allow you to take responsibility for your feelings, decisions, behavior, and experiences. This approach increases your chances of achieving your communication objective and getting your message across to the other person.

In contrast, couples with marital distress often use "you" messages, defining each other as "the problem." This type of communication focuses on the other person, blaming them for the issues in the relationship. "You" messages are usually cleverly disguised as dirty fight tactics and serve as roadblocks to effective communication. They tend to contain labeling, blaming, defenses, and bypassing or ignoring feelings altogether. "You" messages project responsibility onto the other person for our emotions, decisions, and behavior. By doing this, we are not taking responsibility for our communication and are therefore not experiencing the benefits of effective communication. "I" messages allow us to describe ourselves and our experiences without blaming others. In the process, we gain more awareness and insight into our thoughts, feelings, behavior, and intentions. Using "I" messages involves a certain amount of risk, as we are putting

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ourselves out there and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to another person. However, with "I" messages, we are more likely to be heard and understood, non-defensive and non-judgmental. People often use "you" messages because they feel less vulnerable. However, with these indirect statements, the other person may not understand what we are trying to communicate. "You" messages often label the other person as "not good enough" or a failure. This type of communication creates a hostile atmosphere and reduces the probability of effective communication.

Using "you" messages establishes a verbal and conceptual fog that continues to plague the relationship in future interactions. "You" messages tend to be accompanied by absolutes, such as "always" and "never." Many people stop listening when they hear "always" or "never," immediately thinking of the one time that makes this statement untrue. The general contents of what was said are dismissed or negated. The direct approach of "I" messages also has no guarantee of protection. When we take an assertive approach with "I" messages, the other person is more likely to understand what we are trying to say, but they are still free to respond with "I don't care" or "I don't want to." The directness of "I" messages leaves us feeling vulnerable. Ego defenses do not work as well to protect ourselves from hurt and rejection when we know we are heard and understood, but the other person is not interested in what we want, need, or feel.

Yet, "I" messages are more effective. To improve your communication, try using these "I" messages. Write them down and post them on your refrigerator beside your Fair Fighting Rules. Saying "I want...", "I feel...", "I need...", and "I will..." changes the way that you communicate with the people in your life. They are a cornerstone to building a new foundation for effective communication and powerful problem-solving skills.

Using "I" messages is an effective way to improve communication in all relationships. They help reduce defensiveness, increase the likelihood of being heard, and allow us to take ownership of our thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, using "you" messages is damaging and often leads to strained communication, hurt feelings, and misunderstanding. Try using

"I" messages in your conversations and relationships and see how effective they can be. With practice and patience, using "I" messages can lead to a deeper understanding and connection in your relationships.

For more information on "I" Messages, check out my Brief Lesson,



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