



April 2012

FC/Relationships/2012/01pr

Effective Communication Skills: “I” Messages and Beyond

Jana Darrington, MS, Extension Assistant Professor, Utah County
Naomi Brower, MS, CFLE, Extension Assistant Professor, Weber County

Communication is something we do on a regular basis. As young children we initially learn ways to communicate as we observe our parent, sibling, and family interactions. Throughout our lives our communication patterns evolve and are reinforced by our experiences at home, in school, and through interpersonal interactions. Most of us recognize that communicating in loving and caring ways is more effective than communicating with resentment, anger, and frustration. However, even with a genuine caring attitude, communication still can be unclear, inept, or misunderstood. This is where *skill* enters.

Research shows that certain communication behaviors enable us to send messages more accurately and effectively. In turn, this may result in more satisfying communication and better problem solving with a joint effort to find solutions that work for both parties. Individuals and families who use good communication skills to resolve conflict and differences build stronger, longer-lasting relationships (Lund, 1999; Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2001). One of the skills we need in order to communicate effectively with others is being able to share our thoughts in a clear, honest, assertive way using “I” messages.

What Is an “I” Message?

Introduced in the 1970s, “I” messages are commonly referred to and encouraged in marriage and family relationship education and marital therapy (Burr, 1990). “I” messages are most simply explained as a way of expressing our thoughts and emotions about a specific experience or interaction using a soft voice and a statement that often begins with, “I feel...” Other examples include: “I’m upset because...” “I get angry because...” “I am excited that...” This style of communication tells the listener that what is being said about the situation is based on personal experience and is not necessarily objective fact, leaving room for discussion. When used, “I” messages can be an effective tool in de-escalating defensiveness and improving communication within relationships. In contrast, statements that begin with “you” tend to evoke defensiveness and an escalation of emotions rather than a desire to compromise and problem solve (Miller & Miller, 1997; The Phoenix Institute, 1982). By using “I” statements, we take responsibility for our thoughts and feelings rather than blaming them on our partner.

Identifying Thoughts and Feelings

An important part of “I” messages is being able to express our own thoughts and emotional experiences with the issue at hand. In the heat of the moment, it may not be easy to logically identify what we think and feel, and we may need to take some time away from our partner and the situation to calm down and think rationally about our emotional responses. Taking the time to reflect and accurately identify our thoughts and feelings helps us more accurately express them to others, and in turn, we can better discuss issues and manage conflicts in our relationships.

Model: Using “I” Messages to Discuss Issues and Conflicts in Relationships

The best way to get a point across in a clear, direct, and honest way without evoking defensiveness from others is through using “I” statements (The Phoenix Institute, 1982). A complete assertive “I” message can be easily created by completing the following statements:

- **I think** _____ (your thoughts about the situation). **I feel** _____ (be sure to state an *emotion* rather than a thought. For example: excited, frustrated, concerned, etc.).
- **because** _____ (provide the specific reason you are feeling this way, preferably with an example).
- **I want** _____ (provide a suggestion on what you think could resolve the situation).

Sample “I” statements:

- Unequal distribution of chores:
I think that the housework is divided unequally. I feel overwhelmed and frustrated because I spend so much of my time doing housework after working all day. I want to talk about how the housework is divided and find a better way to distribute the chores.
- Distractions during family meal time:
I think dinner time is an important time to spend as a family. I feel frustrated and concerned that some

of our family text friends or watch TV during meals because I think dinner time is a good opportunity to talk to each other. I want to have all electronic gadgets turned off during dinner so we can reconnect with each other.

Although we only have control over our own words and actions, using “I” messages can help decrease misunderstandings, defensiveness, and the potential to belittle or demean our partner while discussing conflicting points of view (Lund, 1999; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001; The Phoenix Institute, 1982). After sharing your thoughts and feelings, encourage open communication by asking the other person what they think and feel about the situation. Aim for an exchange of ideas from all individuals involved and look for win-win solutions.

Beyond “I” Messages

While using “I” messages is a useful skill, it is also important to remember that communication is more than just the words we speak. According to Dr. Albert Merhabian (1972), there are three elements of communication: words, tone of voice, and body language/facial expressions. Additionally, his research showed that non-verbal cues are particularly important when communicating about feelings and attitudes. As we communicate with others, it is important to ensure that the components of our communication are congruent, or we may be sending a double message that can be confusing and misleading. For example, saying you are “fine” when you look and/or sound upset (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001) leads your partner to believe that everything is not okay, but he or she may or may not have the communication skills necessary to get to the real meaning behind the words. This can lead to frustration for both partners.

Depending on an individual’s communication skills, it is possible to express thoughts and emotions using a soft voice and talk about conflicting opinions in a time and place away from the escalated emotions. In doing so, we can use our calm demeanor and tone of voice to help melt away our partner’s possible negative emotions and exchange solutions that will best meet everyone’s needs.

For many individuals, talking about heated issues in person can be very challenging since body language and tone of voice sometimes get in the way of the words, confusing the message we intend to share. In these situations, it may be better to communicate some of your thoughts and feelings through words only – by writing a letter or by talking on the phone. In this way, we may be more effective using “I” messages to convey our thoughts and emotions with specific reasons why we are feeling this way, and begin the process of seeking solutions.

Seeking Solutions

Having a difference of opinion does not mean that your relationship is broken. It is normal to have irresolvable conflicts in relationships; in fact, Gottman and DeClaire (2001) cite research that indicates approximately 70% of marital conflicts never go away. This may sound disheartening but it’s not. It simply means that we need to keep talking with each other about how we see, understand, and experience various situations. In doing so, we can find shared meaning and reach common ground. In looking for answers, both partners should try to see the situation according to their partner’s viewpoint and seek a solution that is best for everyone involved. Consider these steps as you work toward possible solutions:

- **Consider how you would feel in a similar circumstance.** Try to imagine how you would feel and react to a similar situation. Can you see the situation from your partner’s viewpoint?
- **Validate your partner’s emotions.** Whether or not you can understand and empathize with the way your partner is feeling, it is important to acknowledge and validate his or her emotions. Use a gentle touch and a simple, but meaningful, “I’m sorry you felt that way” or “It sounds like you were really angry/frustrated/upset about this.”
- **Be willing to compromise.** This doesn’t mean that you will always have to give in or change your thinking to mimic your partner’s. But it does mean that you should consider ways you can be more flexible on the issue. Is there something you can

change that will help resolve the issue? Ask your partner to do the same. Individually compile a list of possible solutions and then share them with each other. Are some more acceptable than others? Move forward with solutions that are similar or in agreement in some way.

- **Decide it is okay to disagree on this issue.** In some situations, you have to agree to disagree and move on. It doesn’t mean that you don’t love or care for your partner any less. Be sure to express your love and appreciation for your partner if you decide to disagree, then let it go.

Conclusion

While people have been communicating for centuries without communication training, people have also been miscommunicating for centuries! Learning and implementing a few simple skills can help you maintain positive relationships with others. Practicing “I” messages can help you to de-escalate situations, collaborate to resolve issues, and ultimately build stronger relationships with your partner, family, and others around you.

For more information or for classes and workshops:

- Go to <http://strongermarriage.org> for tips, articles, and find relationship education classes near you.
- Check out your local Extension Service for relationship education classes and events.

References

- Burr, W. (1990). Beyond I-statements in family communication. *Family Relations*, 39, 266-273.
- Gottman, J. M., and DeClaire, J. (2001). *The relationship cure: A 5 step guide to strengthening your marriage, family, and friendships*. New York, New York: Three Rivers Press.

Lund, J. L. (1999). *How to hug a porcupine: Dealing with toxic and difficult to love personalities (11th printing)*. Salt Lake City, Utah: The Communications Company.

Markman, H. J., Stanley, S. M., & Blumberg, S. L. (2001). *Fighting for your marriage: The best selling marriage enhancement and divorce prevention book*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

Mehrabian, A. (1972). *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes*.

Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Miller, S., & Miller, P. A. (1997). *Core communication: Skills and processes*. Evergreen, Colorado: Interpersonal Communication Programs, Inc.

The Phoenix Institute (1982). *The assertive workbook: A guide to assertive behavior (4th printing)*. Salt Lake City, Utah: The Phoenix Institute.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities.

This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle E. Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.