

I Statements Reading 25
Resolving Misunderstandings & Small Interpersonal Conflicts.
[Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)

People in close relationships will have misunderstandings and conflicts, and reach impasses, all of which are normal. When there is a conflict or a misunderstanding, we can say or do nothing and keep our feelings to ourselves, we can react and say things without thinking (e.g., a “You Statement”) that makes the situation worse, or we can clearly communicate what we are feeling and why, and what our needs are in the situation. Relationships usually worsen and sometimes end when people don’t attempt to work through misunderstandings, problems, and conflicts, or when they cannot do so satisfactorily. If we hide our feelings, our concealment can sicken the relationship. The energy we pour into hiding adds to the stress in the relationship and dulls our awareness of how we feel.

The Problem With Keeping Things In and Not Addressing a Misunderstanding or Conflict

1. Nothing changes
2. We use excessive energy to keep our feelings down.
3. We cannot keep things in; they come out in other ways about other issues (usually smaller ones), or we go off on them.
4. We assume others know how we feel, but they don’t because we have not told them. People are not mind readers.
5. We resent the other person. If something bothers me about you (I feel disappointed, hurt, frustrated, angry, etc., with something you have done or not done), there is a conflict in the relationship. If I don’t initiate a conversation, I keep information about the relationship to myself that you don’t know about. I am being dishonest because I am not sharing my feelings with you and not allowing you to change. How can you change if I have not told you how I feel, what is happening, and my needs? Over time, I may resent you, which is unfair because you don’t know what is happening. I am not telling you, and I am not giving you a chance to change. Resentment eats away at the relationship, and I may start pulling away and/or start being short or picking fights with you about other minor issues.

Communicating Assertively

It is essential to communicate assertively when working through a misunderstanding or conflict or trying to get our needs met in relationships. To communicate assertively (vs. passively or aggressively) we must be self-aware. We need to know and accept our feelings and thoughts and why. We need to be aware of our values and needs and accept that our feelings about relationships are valid. It is also important to believe that we have a right to our feelings, needs, thoughts, values, and perspectives and that we have the right to stand up for ourselves, not to be taken advantage of, to ask for what we want and need, and to express ourself openly and honestly in a respectful manner. Being assertive does that.

When communicating, we can be passive, aggressive, or assertive. When we are passive in our communication, we disregard our feelings, needs, values, and opinions or believe they are less important than the other person's. We may keep our feelings and needs to ourselves, or if we communicate them, we do so passively by averting our gaze or looking down and/or communicating with hesitancy or self-dismissal in our voice. Passive communication shows a lack of respect for oneself and gives up control to the other person, thus making it difficult, if not impossible, for our needs to be met. Nonverbal passive communication behaviors include using a quiet, hesitant, or meek voice, self-dismissal, and averting gaze or looking down.

Aggressive communication is characterized by nonverbal behaviors such as fist-clenching, scowling, crossing one's arms, and being sarcastic, condescending, blaming, using a raised voice or shouting, threatening, finger-pointing, or using put-downs. Aggressive communication is controlling and possibly manipulative, showing a lack of respect for the other person. When people are aggressive in their communication, they are also less likely to have their needs met unless that other person is intimidated and does so only out of fear. Being aggressive usually harms the relationship. "You Statements" are a form of aggressive communication.

Assertive communication is a way to clearly communicate our needs and what we are feeling (and why) nonjudgmentally. Being assertive demonstrates self-respect and respect for your and the other person's feelings and needs. Being assertive increases our chances of getting our needs met, increases the chances of effectively and satisfactorily working through misunderstandings and conflicts, and usually strengthens relationships. Nonverbal assertive behaviors include using a firm voice with appropriate volume (neither too loud nor too soft), direct eye contact, and an open, relaxed, and cooperative tone and posture.

"I Statements" are a way to assertively communicate what we are feeling and thinking and why, as well as our perspectives, values, and needs in a relationship. They do so in a non-judgmental way without assigning blame. Using "I Statements" increases the chances that others will want to listen to us, try to understand us, suspend their reaction, consider what we are saying, and possibly change their behavior to help us meet our needs. When two people can communicate effectively and satisfactorily work through misunderstandings and conflicts, their relationship becomes stronger.

"I Statement" avoid being critical, judgmental, threatening, or angrily asking why. "I Statements" nonjudgmentally communicate how we feel, why we feel this way, and our needs in this and future situations. We are not saying that we are right or correct, or that they are wrong or bad; we are saying how we feel and our needs, and why and how we would like them to be in the future. We are telling them the impact their behavior has on us. The other person has a choice of how they want to behave in the future. People who care about us will usually consider what we say if we communicate clearly and effectively. "I Statements" communicate clearly and nonjudgmentally.

Using I Statements can be difficult for a variety of reasons. They include:

1. Lack of trust
2. Unwillingness to self-disclose
3. Fear of rejection
4. Fear of making the situation worse
5. In the past, the other person has communicated that they are not receptive to listening to you and/or resolving a conflict with you.
6. There is a power difference, and the other person has communicated in the past that they are not receptive to resolving conflicts.
7. Fear of finding things out about ourselves, such as our contributions to the conflict or other things about ourselves we don't want to know or acknowledge.
8. Fear of finding things out about the relationship we don't want to know or acknowledge.
9. Our style of conflict resolution is to deny, accommodate, or withdraw. We aren't skillful at being assertive. We are not skillful at using "I Statements."
10. The belief that our feelings, needs, and values aren't really important or that the other person's feelings, needs, and values are more important than ours.
11. Most people don't like conflict, but if there is one, no amount of denying it will make it go away.
12. Using "I Statements" can be scary because we don't know how the person will respond. What happens next is out of our control.

Things To Avoid When Using I Statements:

1. Blaming
2. Assigning Bad Intentions
3. "You Statements"

You Statements

“You Statements” usually make people feel attacked, criticized, blamed, and defensive. When people feel defensive, they are more likely to attack and less likely to listen, try to understand, suspend their reactions, consider what we are saying, and change their behavior to help us meet our needs. “You Statements” more than likely create a feeling of hostility, which tends to escalate conflicts, or cause the other person to shut down or tune out, which stifles communication and problem-solving.

Examples of you statements” include:

Preaching.

You should...(be on time)

Judging.

You are...(rude)

Put Downs

Can't you do anything right?

Criticism

You never do anything right, or you are always...

Giving Solutions

In the future, you should...

Threats

If you don't... then I will...

Asking Why in a Hostile and Judgmental Tone.

Why did you do that or why are you...?

Saying “you never...” or “you are always...” is likely inaccurate. People will usually come up with an exception. For example, their response to “You are never on time” or “You are always late” might be: “That’s not true. Remember two weeks ago, I showed up early to your house, and you weren’t ready.” Saying “you never” or “you always” is criticism. As a result, they probably feel a need to defend themselves and thus are less likely to hear your actual needs, concerns, and feelings and even less likely to change their behavior to meet your needs.

“I Statements” Have The Following Parts:

Use the pronoun “I” and state what you feel or felt.

“ I feel...when you...”

“When you...I feel...”

Tell why you feel or felt that way.

“ I feel...when you...because...”

“When you...I feel...because...”

Telling someone how you feel and why may be all the situation needs if it is clear what you want or need going forward. You will likely need to communicate what you want or need in the future. The 3rd step is to communicate how you would like the person to be in the future.

Say how you want them to be in the future or how you would like things to be in the future.

“In the future, I would appreciate it if...”

“In the future, I would prefer...”

“In the future, I would like...”

“In the future, I would like both of us to...”

“In the future, I need...”

“In the future, I wish we...”

There are times when you may want to get a commitment from the other person. In those situations, ask them if they are willing to do what you are asking.

Say: “Are you willing to do that?”

Avoid Using You Statements Disguised as I Statements

When using an “I Statement,” make sure that you actually state what you are feeling. People sometimes make the mistake of saying they feel something when they are really using a “You Statement.”

Examples of “You Statements” Disguised as “I Statements”

“I feel that you should be on time.”

“I feel you are rude.”

“I feel like you aren’t considerate of my feelings.”

An Example of a Complete “I Statement”

Let’s use the example of a friend who is chronically late. Whenever you agree to meet up with a friend at a time you both agreed to, they are usually 10-20 minutes late. It doesn’t matter if they are coming over to your house or you are meeting them somewhere in public. You feel frustrated and stressed because it is important to you to be on time when meeting up with friends, and you hate feeling rushed. In addition, if you are going to a movie, you hate to walk in late and/or get a bad seat. You have not spoken with your friend about this, so they have no idea how you feel, and that being on time is important to you. In addition, you remember reading that people have different concepts of time. Some people believe that meeting at 7 PM means meeting promptly at 7 PM, whereas others think it means around 7 PM, so meeting 10 or 20 minutes later is actually on time for them. You decide to have a conversation with your friend when you have had time to collect your thoughts and can clearly communicate how you are feeling without reacting in anger. The next time you are with your friend, start the conversation by saying you need to talk about something important to you, and ask if now is a good time. If they agree, using a complete “I Statement,” you say the following:

“When you are late when we have both agreed to meet up at a specific time, I feel frustrated and stressed out because I worry that we will be late meeting up with friends or late to wherever we are going. Being late stresses me out. In the future, I would appreciate it if we agree to meet at a certain time, we both meet at that time.” Are you willing to do that?”

Broken Down Into Its 4 Parts, A Complete “I Statement” Looks Like This:

1. Use the pronoun “I” and state what you feel or felt.

“When you are late when we have both agreed to meet up at a specific time, I feel frustrated and stressed out”. “Being late just stresses me out.”

2. Explain why you felt that way.

“When you are late when we have both agreed to meet up at a specific time, I feel frustrated and stressed out because I worry that we will be late meeting up with friends or late to wherever we are going. Being late stresses me out.”

3. Say how you want people to be in the future. Say, “I would appreciate it if...”

“When you are late when we have both agreed to meet up at a specific time, I feel frustrated and stressed out because I worry that we will be late meeting up with friends or late to wherever we are going. Being late stresses me out. I would appreciate it if you would be on time in the future.”

4. Ask them if they are willing to do what you are asking. Say, “Are you willing to do this?”

“When you are late when we have both agreed to meet up at a specific time, I feel frustrated and stressed out because I worry that we will be late meeting up with friends or late to wherever we are going. Being late stresses me out. I would appreciate it if you would be on time in the future.”
Are you willing to do that?”

By using an “I Statement” in the example above, you avoid being critical, judgmental, threatening, or angrily asking why. You are nonjudgmentally telling your friend how you feel, why you feel this way, and your needs in this and future situations. You are not saying that you are right or correct, or that they are wrong or bad; you are just saying this is how you feel, what your needs are, and why and how you would like them to be in the future. You are telling your friend the impact their behavior has on them. Your friend then has a choice of how they want to behave in the future. People who care about us will usually consider what we say if we communicate clearly and effectively. “I Statements” do that. Since most people want to please those they care about, they will hopefully change their behavior in the future if it is not too difficult to do so. In this case, it would be easy for your friend to make every effort to be on time now that they know how important it is to you. In instances of misunderstanding or minor conflicts, “I Statements” can usually resolve the situation.

What If They Are Unwilling To Do What I Am Asking?

If they are unwilling to do what you are asking, the best thing would be to use another “I Statement” and let them know how you feel about the fact that they are unwilling to go along with what you are asking. More than likely, you feel disappointed, hurt, or frustrated. Become aware of what you are feeling and share that. For example: “I feel disappointed that you are unwilling to... I was hoping you would do that for me.” Then, end the conversation. Don’t act out of anger, attack the person, blame them, or use a “You Statement”. It may be that the person is feeling defensive, which is why they are not agreeing. If you end the conversation without reacting in anger, blaming them, or using a “You Statement,” they may later consider what you said, come around to your way of thinking, and change their behavior. Some people take longer to process things. If you react out of anger, blame them, or use a “You Statement” because they didn’t agree, there is little likelihood that they will consider what you have asked and thus change their behavior.

What If An “I Statement” Is Not Enough Because The Conflict Is Larger

It is possible that the conflict is more significant than you initially thought. A single “I Statement” is best for misunderstandings and minor conflicts. A more complex conflict that requires a negotiated resolution requires more sophisticated skills. See the **Conflict Resolution Skills** section. However, being skillful in using “I Statements”, asking genuine inquiry questions, being an effective passive and active listener, and avoiding the use of “You Statements” are all essential skills needed to resolve complex interpersonal conflicts.

Stages in Learning New Social Skills

When we learn new social skills like being an effective passive and active listener, skillful in asking genuine inquiry questions, and using “I Statements,” it is important to remember that these are complex skills that we were not born with, and that, as important as they are, many people “do not talk like this.” As with any new social skill, most people go through the following stages before becoming proficient.

- Feeling self-conscious and awkward.
- Feelings of phoniness while using it. “This isn’t me”.
- Skilled but mechanical.
- It becomes automatic, and we don’t even know we are doing it. We use it effectively; we have internalized it.