



SPEAK FROM “I”

Trying to send a message to someone who feels under attack is like trying to chat about the weather with a person whose house is burning down. That person has other priorities. We might as well save our breath.

When people feel attacked, they instinctively become defensive. And when they’re defensive, their first priority is to protect themselves. Most people find it tough to feel attacked and to listen at the same time.

In situations in which people are on the defensive, there are probably some “you” messages lingering in the air: “*You* always use that excuse.” “*You* are a slob.” “*You* make me feel like dirt.”

“You” messages blame, shame, and label people.

There is a way to send messages that reduce defensiveness: Move from “you” to “I.”

Experiment with the concept of an I-message, originally developed by Thomas Gordon. This way of speaking is especially useful when tensions are running high and people are in conflict.

Besides reducing tension, I-messages help us focus on aspects of a situation that *we* can control. Using I-messages can help stop us from being victims of circumstance.

I find that it often helps to list the five basic elements of an I-message. The first three of these elements (observations, feelings, and wants) I consider to be essential. The last two (thoughts and intentions) I view as optional, and I recommend using them with caution.

Describe observations

We can start I-messages with a statement of what we observe—“just the facts, ma’am”—not an interpretation of the facts. For instance, “I left three messages for you yesterday and have not heard back from you” states a verifiable fact. “You don’t care about me” is an interpretation of that fact, and it may not be the most accurate interpretation.

When stating observations, remember a useful guideline: Stick to what you see and hear. Think of observations as being what a video camera and microphone would record.

It’s possible to send an I-message even when we don’t have specific observations to offer. When this is true, we can state our interpretation or judgment and label it as such. For example, we can say, “My interpretation is that you’re angry with me.” Or “Right now I think that you’re ready to fire me.”

Describe feelings

Including the dimension of feelings adds emotional impact to an I-message. Yet many people who want to state their feelings actually end up sharing their thoughts and interpretations instead.

Feelings include basic emotions such as anger, sadness, and fear. “I feel afraid” is part of an I-message that reveals a feeling.

Now consider the statement “I feel like we’re not getting along.” Because this statement starts with the words “I feel,” it suggests that the following words will reveal an emotion. Actually, the words “we’re not getting along” reveal an interpretation.

To increase your level of self-responsibility, consider leaving out the word *because* in reference to your feelings. This word tends to shift blame to others for the way we feel. An example is “I felt angry because you were late for our session.” This statement blames another person for our anger. It can be more accurate and more self-empowering to say, “You were late for the session, *and* I’m feeling angry.” This statement includes two facts without assigning any blame.

State what you want

A third useful element you can add to I-messages is a statement of what you want. Often this means including phrases such as *I want*, *I request that*, and *I’d like you to*.

Statements about what you want are usually more useful when you request an observable behavior. “Please be on time for the next meeting” is more effective than “Please change your attitude about being on time for meetings.”

State thoughts and intentions cautiously

Stating what you think can sometimes enhance an I-message—for instance, “I fear for our relationship, and I think we could both gain from seeing a marriage counselor.” Be careful, however, since the words *I think* can easily lead to judgment or interpretation, such as “I think our relationship is sick and that we need to see a therapist.”

You could also state your intention: “I fear for our relationship, and I intend to get counseling.” When used inappropriately, intentions can sound like threats and generate defensiveness in other people: “If you won’t come with me to see a marriage counselor, then I intend to file for a divorce.”

Remember that the main point in using I-messages is to reduce antagonism and increase your personal responsibility. With this purpose in mind, you can create I-messages that promote loving relationships and help you get more of what you want in life.



Practice saying "I"

Think of a situation in your life right now that involves conflict with another person—or the potential for conflict. Name that person and describe the conflict in the space below.

Now practice your intention to use an I-message the next time you interact with this person. Along with your intention, write at least three I-messages you could use the next time you speak to this person. Feel free to write and rewrite until you create several effective I-messages.

Come back to this journal entry whenever you find yourself in conflict with other people and want more practice saying "I."



Teach people how to treat you

You can “train” other people how to treat you. Say, for example, that another person consistently interrupts you. If you neglect to point this out, you are in effect sending a message that says “It’s OK for you to interrupt me.”

To illustrate this point, list two people who don’t treat you well. Also describe at least two ways these people mistreat you. Be specific. Describe something that each person consistently says or does.

I discovered that _____ mistreats me by ...

I discovered that _____ mistreats me by ...

Now play with the idea that you taught these people to treat you in these ways. Know that you are a very clever person and you might have taught them without realizing it. Finish up by writing goals. Describe what you will do to “retrain” these people so that they will treat you differently.

When relating to _____, I intend to ...

When relating to _____, I intend to ...
