

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

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

It is important to communicate with "I" messages for the obvious reasons. The most immediately obvious advantage is that "I" messages are not as likely to elicit defensiveness. With this communication change, we are more likely to be heard and more likely to actually accomplish our communication goal. When using "I" statements, we are describing ourselves, teaching the other person about ourselves, disclosing our thoughts, feelings, and intentions. In the process messages we are becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and intentions. With putting ourselves out there, we are taking ownership of them.

When we are using "you" statements, there is a tendency to label, blame, defend, and bypass feelings altogether. With "you" statements, we make the other responsible for our feelings. When we reveal ourselves with this straightforward statement about self, our listener has an opportunity to hear and deal with our feelings, thoughts, and intentions. They are able to hear about the issues that are going on with us in the present. They are able to deal with messages that get at the actual issues.

With "You" statements, the other person has to hear and deal with our opinions and judgment of them. They often receive opinions about their past failures and expectations of their future failures. With "you" statements, we are saying things that immutably sets their set their identities (i.e., you are...). They would have to do a lot of sorting through all this verbiage to get to our issue, which is transitory. Instead, they receive hear criticism and blame.

The real statement is embedded within "you" messages and usually pretty hard to find. The listener may never actually get to know and understand the real issue that we are trying to communicate. These projections of blame and responsibility are often accompanied with absolutes, like "always" and "never". The use of "Always" and "never" virtually guarantees that you will not be heard. When people tell us that we "always do [this]" and "never do [that]", we immediately think of the one time that we did do [this] and didn't do [that]. We either completely dismiss the general content of what they just said, or negate it. Don't handicap your communication with these words (always, never).

Most people use the indirect "you" rather than the direct "I" because it feels safer to do so. With the direct approach we are more vulnerable. With this indirect, projective stance, we feel more protected and safe. We are much more likely to be misunderstood with the indirect approach. With a direct approach, the other person will understand what we are saying and they will be free to say, "I don't care", or "I don't want to." It's harder to protect ourselves from hurt and rejection when we know, in fact, that we were heard and that someone that we love is not interested in what we want, need, or feel. Nevertheless, we are still more vulnerable with the indirect approach because it creates an environment of hostility and self-protection in the other person.

An argument is much more likely to ensue with indirect rather than direct approaches. Try these "I" messages, to see improvement in communication in your house. Write them down. Post them on your refrigerator next to your Fair Fight Tactics.

I want... I feel... I need... I will...

Change the way that you communicate with the people in your life if you want to be understood and if you want to move to the next level of

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effective problem solving. "These "I" messages are a cornerstone on which to build a new foundation for effective communication, then ultimately to building powerful problem solving skills.

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