

## **“I-Statements” for Couples**

### **Introduction**

When an adult relationship has been soured by misunderstandings, distrust, and hurt feelings, it's hard to communicate with each other effectively. Tools are needed to help rebuild trust and cooperation with our partner. One of the most basic and important skills for open, non-defensive, and positive communication is the “I-Statement.” It sounds easy, but it is actually tough to really master, so practice and patience (with yourself and your partner) is needed. I-Statements not only help us communicate clearly, they help us feel more secure with ourselves and with others at home, work, school, socially, and even in day-to-day interactions. Being able to identify, develop, and effectively use I-Statements is also a part of what is sometimes called Assertive Communication. Assertive Communication is a way of communicating (and being) which is neither meek and passive nor demanding and aggressive – it is simply a way of knowing, respecting, and expressing yourself appropriately in a given situation.

### **What are I-Statements and You-Statements?**

I-Statements give our partner information about us, and they do it in a way that's far less threatening than the alternative: You-Statements. They form the bedrock for cooperation because they connect people, build trust, and create healthier, more open, and honest relationships. I-Statements and You-Statements trigger predictable responses from others, time after time.

Let's try an experiment. Here's a list of You-Statements. Imagine that your partner is saying them to you. What kind of emotional responses bubble up inside of you as you hear them?

- You're crazy...
- You should be ashamed...
- You're just angry all the time...
- You always say that...
- You just want your own way....
- You never answer....
- You're not listening...
- You don't know...
- You are smarter than that...
- You can perfect...
- You could do better...

Chances are you felt uneasy, resistant, ashamed, distrustful, and/or guilty. Feelings like these aren't good building blocks for mutual respect and cooperation. Even the compliments may have made you suspicious (more on that in a minute).

You-Statements create defensiveness and emotional resistance.

In extreme cases, our partner feels so emotionally unsafe that he or she just shuts down like a nuclear power plant during a meltdown. At that point, our partner won't hear another word we're saying. No progress is possible until the emotional meltdown has been contained, the nuclear emergency is over, and our partner once again feels safe.

Our emotional response to I-Statements is radically different. Here's a list of I-Statements. Imagine that your partner is saying them to you. What emotional responses do you have this time?

- I feel happy.
- I'm frustrated but I'm not sure why.
- I'm not comfortable doing that.
- I'm furious.
- I feel confident.
- I feel very insecure.
- I'm feeling unworthy.
- I'm too afraid.
- I want you.
- I love you.

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## What I-Statements Do

**I-Statements help us express what we know about ourselves** — rather than what we assume about others. Most of us don't like someone telling us who we are or what we are thinking or feeling or how we "always" are. Even stable couples who have been together a long time are often wrong or partially wrong in their assumptions, especially when in conflict. And, even if your partner IS often angry (or greedy or messy or meek, etc.) you have probably found that reminding them of this over and over has not helped remedy the situation!

**I-Statements make us stop and identify our own responses to our environment.** This sounds simple, but it is far more than changing around our sentences. Especially in conflict or under stress, we often tend to focus on the faults of others or how they are failing us, rather than on identifying our own deepest feelings and needs.

**I-Statements require healthy self-disclosure and self-disclosure requires vulnerability.** If you are actually fighting in a war, or defending yourself from a rabid bear, or competing in a chess match, showing vulnerability may not be prudent. However, in working to re-build or strengthen a relationship with a partner, knowing and sharing our true selves in the moment is probably the most effective measure for reducing relationship conflict and strife.

It is also very difficult to blame others when we're using I-Statements. They force us to take responsibility for what we're thinking and feeling, which protects others from our blame, guilt, and judgment. I-Statements de-fuse rather than fuel arguments. **It's easier to stop arguing and begin a discussion when both people are using I-Statements; it's very difficult to stop an argument when both people are using You-Statements.**

Ironically, complimentary You-Statements like "You're a great artist!" can also elicit a defensive reaction, subtle though it may be. That's because we intuitively know that accepting someone's "judgments" about us is a two-edged sword. Anyone who can decide that we are a brilliant artist can also decide that we don't have the sense God gave a lug nut. And since most of us don't have much self-confidence anyway, we may doubt our admirer's credibility: "I'm convinced what I did wasn't any good, so he must not know what he's talking about" or "He's just saying that to be nice."

In contrast, when an admirer uses I-statements they are talking about themselves instead of judging us. With an I-Statement like "Wow, I love the way this small dark area offsets the larger bright areas in the painting!" there is no two-edged sword because we aren't being judged. And since our admirer is talking about his or her own reactions rather than directly about us, their credibility doesn't suffer. That's why most You-Statement compliments are deflected by the listener, and most I-Statement compliments are actually received.

## **You-Statements and I-Statements in Disguise**

Be aware of disguised You-Statements and disguised I-Statements.

A disguised You-Statement can be prefaced with "I think that..." or "I feel that...." For example, "I feel like you are being mean," is just a You-Statement masquerading as an I-Statement. And unfortunately, even though it's disguised as an I-Statement, i.e., it starts with "I feel," it is still a You-Statement "you are mean" and evokes the same resistance in our partner. The actual I-Statement might be more along the lines of "I am hurt" and/or "I don't want to be spoken to that way."

**Disguised I-Statements also occur when we use a generic "you" when we are in fact talking about ourselves.** For example, "Women only want you for your money" or "You can never trust men" are both Disguised I-Statements because they are really describing our own experiences. Try switching the next time you catch yourself using Disguised I-Statements, and see how much more vulnerable the real I-Statement feels. "I feel I have little to offer a woman of substance" or "I seem to choose untrustworthy men."

Real, undisguised I-Statements contain actual truths about us without camouflage and while they may feel more vulnerable to say, they actually help us feel more grounded and lead to real emotional intimacy far faster than Disguised I-Statements do. Real I-Statements allow our partner (and ourselves) to understand us at a deeper level, and that's what genuine intimacy is built on.

## **Tips in Using I-Statements**

There is an art to creating really effective I-Statements. Here are some suggestions:

1. Be specific. "When women clam up, I feel angry," triggers more resistance than "When you don't speak to me during dinner, I feel angry." The first statement is just begging for an emotional reaction because we're lumping our partner into the generic category of Women, rather than treating her as the individual she is.
2. Avoid "oughts" and "shoulds." Criticisms like "You should be on time!" usually hide our own feelings about a situation beneath a veil of self-righteousness. Try saying something like, "I feel angry/insecure when you are late." This allows us to live in the moment with our feelings.
3. Avoid labels. Labels like "bitch," "crazy," "rigid," "control freak," etc., tend to categorize people and blame them. Expressing our feelings directly works better than categorizing ourselves or others.
4. Avoid the phrases "I feel like" and "I feel that." The sentence "I feel that you are over-reacting," is a Disguised You-Statement, not an I-Statement. When we disguise our true meaning, we're still hedging and not letting our partner know who we are.

5. Include your feelings, not merely your thoughts. If we want to be close to someone emotionally, we need to understand and express our emotions.

### **When to Use I-Statements**

**We can use I-Statements almost all the time--whenever we want to connect with others, build intimacy, or let others get to know us better. They are the bricks and mortar that build solid relationships.**

**I-Statements are also particularly helpful in learning to cope more effectively with people in our lives who are considered “difficult” or “toxic,” e.g., the relative who is manipulative, exploitive, domineering, etc.** In these situations, mastering I-Statements results in far more than improved communication – it helps us understand the nature of the relationship and to gently change the entrenched dance steps we have been repeating.

**Understand that You-Statements in and of themselves are not necessarily bad or wrong. They do not always cause problems in relationships or indicate that a person is out of touch with their own feelings.** And You-Statements can be very helpful and appropriate when our partner wants our feedback and we've already built a solid level of trust. But when we're trying to build or rebuild close, intimate relationships and reverse patterns of conflict, we'll be more successful by using more I-statements and fewer You-Statements.

**Even though it's difficult to break our culturally-reinforced habit of using You-Statements, whatever work we put into learning to use I-Statements will be richly rewarded.**