

Assertive Communication

Listed below are some of the key features of the three main communication styles:

Passive	Aggressive	Assertive
Apologetic	'You' statements	'I' statements
Overly soft or tentative voice	Loud voice, shouting	Firm voice
Looking down or away	Staring or glaring	Looking directly (without staring)
Stooped posture, excessive head nodding	Stooped posture, excessive head nodding	Relaxed posture, smooth and relaxed movements
Makes body smaller - stooped, leaning, hunched shoulders	Makes body bigger - upright, head high, shoulders out, hands on hips, feet apart	Open, welcoming stance
Careful to avoid conflict	Seeks conflict	Works to resolve conflict
Unwilling to express opinions, expectations, needs	Expects others to agree with opinions and satisfy expectations, needs	Happy to express an opinion but also willing to listen to others Willing to compromise and recognise that others may have different expectations and needs
Underlying belief: <i>"My needs are less important than yours"</i>	Underlying belief: <i>"Your needs are less important than mine"</i>	Underlying belief: <i>"My needs are important and your needs are important"</i>

'I' & 'You' statements

At times when we communicate our feelings about something, or what we want from others, we make 'you' statements. These statements imply some kind of fault or blame directed at the other person.

Here are some examples of 'you' statements –

- a. "You're late and the dinner is ruined"
- b. "Look at that broken vase... you are so clumsy"
- c. "You never want to do anything with me"
- d. This place is a dump, what have you been doing all day?"

These kinds of statements usually elicit reactions such as defensiveness from the other person, which can provoke a counter attack. Instead of real communication occurring, chances are things will develop into an argument.

Does this sound familiar? How can we change this pattern?

The first thing to consider is what the person making the statement wants to **communicate** or **achieve**. Sometimes it might be that they just want the other person to pay attention to how they're feeling.

So, looking at example a) above, by saying *"You're late and the dinner is ruined"*, the person may have been trying to communicate *"I went to a lot of trouble and I'm really disappointed that we didn't get to eat dinner together"*.

Example b), above, may have been stated in order to achieve a change in the other person's behaviour. What they could have said instead was *"That vase was really important to me and I'm upset that it got broken. Please take care with my things"*.

Notice when the statements are changed to more closely reflect what the person wants to communicate or achieve, they are no longer blaming or accusatory. The new statements are much less likely to produce a defensive or argumentative response, and much more likely to facilitate real communication.

Making 'you' statements can be a way of avoiding having to acknowledge our own feelings and placing the responsibility for how we feel onto someone else. 'I' statements make it clear how we feel. For this reason they can be perceived as exposing us or making us more vulnerable, and using them can take a bit of getting used to. However, after a while 'I' statements can become quite liberating, as they're a useful tool in communicating more assertively.

They do carry risk, though, because they involve asking the other person for what you want. Which, of course, means the other person is free to say **"no"**.

'I' statements are made up of four parts:

1. **"I feel ..."** (taking responsibility for your own feelings)
2. **"when you ..."** (stating the behaviour that is a problem)
3. **"because ..."** (what it is about the behaviour or its consequences that you don't like)
4. **"I would really like it if ..."** (offering a preferred alternative or compromise)

Using this formula, the statement **"You never want to do anything nice with me"** can be reframed as:

1. **"I feel sad and insecure** (taking responsibility for your own feelings)
2. **"when you don't go out with me"** (stating the behaviour that is a problem)
3. **"because I want to spend time with you and be close"** (what it is about the behaviour or its consequences that you don't like)
4. **"I would really like it if we could do something together that we both enjoy"** (offering a preferred alternative or compromise)

This statement can be useful in opening up further conversation about the things you might enjoy doing together.

Common errors in constructing 'I' statements

Avoid inserting "that" or "like"

The phrases *"I feel that ..."* or *"I feel like ..."* are really expressions of **thought**, often an opinion or judgement. They are often followed by the word **"you"**, as in *"I feel that you don't care about me"*. The use of **"I feel"** should always be followed by a **feeling** such as **"sad"**, **"glad"** or **"afraid"**.

Avoid disguised 'you' statements

These include many sentences that begin with *"I feel that you ..."* or *"I feel like you ..."* If they haven't been preceded by some honest disclosure of the speaker's actual feelings, they're likely to put the other person on the defensive.

Avoid accentuating your negative feelings

Some people spend a lot of time focusing on communicating their negative feelings and forget to communicate their positive feelings. Expressing your joy, happiness, relief, etc. when the other person has done something that elicits these feelings in you is equally important.

Avoid undershooting the intensity of your feelings

When individuals first start working with 'I' statements, it is common for them to at first send a message that minimises the intensity of their feelings. Consequently their attempt to communicate has less impact on the receiver. Remember, it is very important to match the message you send to your level of feeling.

It is very easy to end up with a 'you' statement when attempting to express anger.

It can be useful to think of anger as a secondary emotion, usually masking a more vulnerable emotion such as fear, insecurity, hurt and sadness. Being angry is how we cope or deal with the primary emotion. When talking to someone close to you it is much easier for them to hear the primary feelings (of hurt or fear) expressed, than it is to hear the secondary feeling of anger.

For example:

Take a partner or spouse who has prepared a special anniversary meal and has been sitting home waiting for their significant other (who is two hours late and hasn't called) to return. It may be very tempting to greet that individual with some form of statement like "I'm angry because you didn't call me and now dinner is ruined".

*Consider this alternative which expresses the primary feeling of fear: "I was really scared when you were late and didn't call because I feared that you'd been in an accident". **Hear the expression of love and concern here?***

*And in another situation where the primary feeling is being unappreciated: "I'm feeling really unappreciated and undervalued right now because you didn't call to let me know that you were going to be late. I wanted this evening to be special for us and I feel like the work I put into cooking this fabulous meal has been wasted." **Hear the honesty here?***

This isn't to say that anger isn't a legitimate emotion. It is. However, it takes practice and care to be able to communicate anger in a way that doesn't cause defensiveness in another person. A good way to start is to follow the expression of anger with an 'I' statement.

For example: *"I'm angry because I feel let down".* This is probably a better way of starting a discussion than *"I'm angry because you are late".*

The bottom line is no one can argue with your feelings, or disprove them or say they didn't really happen. People can argue, however, with different interpretations of facts or behaviours.

Consider the following exchange:

Initial statement

"You're always late and you disrespect me."

Response

"No I'm not, and I don't disrespect you. What about that time I [insert respectful behaviour here]...? And the other day you really disrespected me."

What's happening now is an argument about who is really disrespectful. Does this help?

Compare it to the following example: *"I'm angry because I feel disrespected when you're late. It makes me feel like spending time with me isn't important to you".* How can anyone argue with that?

Assertiveness Techniques

Being assertive, rather than passive or aggressive, takes practice. Here are a few techniques:

1. Broken record

Repeat your main point in a calm tone of voice. You can also rephrase the message. Try not to provide new information, as this allows for more discussion or argument.

For example: *"It's just not possible for me today ... I can't do it for you today ... another day maybe, but not today"*

2. Disagree

Simply say *"I disagree"* or *"I don't agree"*. If someone wants to keep arguing, say *"Let us just agree to disagree"*

3. Emphasise feelings

Repeat your statement of how you felt, emphasise that this is important to you.

4. Agree ... but

Admit the other person's point of view but repeat that yours is different.

For example: *"I see what you are saying but it's not how I interpret things"*

5. Dismiss detours

Ignore attempts to sidetrack on to other points or issues, or point out that they are not relevant.

6. Redefine

Don't accept other people's negative labels. Restate your positive interpretation of your behaviour.

7. Question

Don't accept vague criticism. Ask for clarification.

For example: *"In what way exactly did you think I was being stupid?"*

Drink & Drug refusal skills

Assertive techniques can also be used when someone offers you alcohol or other drugs:

Five steps to refusing drugs or alcohol

1. Say "no thank you"
2. Make eye contact with the person offering you drugs/alcohol
3. Speak firmly and convincingly
4. Change the subject, or suggest an alternative activity
5. Use an 'I' statement – explain how you feel and ask the person to change his/her behaviour

"No thank you ... I don't use anymore"

Remember your rights

- *You have the right to refuse drugs/alcohol*
- *You have the right to refuse drugs/alcohol without feeling guilty*
- *You have the right to stand up for yourself*
- *You have the right to manage your own life*
- *You have the right to be the final judge of your own behaviour, and you are responsible for your behaviour*
- *You do not have the right to deprive others of their rights*

Source: U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services (2005)