

I-messages and Active Listening

Sometimes we are angry at particular people or situations and we need to do more than just write about it. Sharing the metaphors that occur to us in the “How Do I Feel (HDIF) when I think about ...” technique might be too threatening, especially if trust is an issue. In this case, it can be very helpful to learn how to communicate our feelings with anyone, in safe and respectful ways. Using *I-messages* can be very helpful in sharing how you feel, no matter what your emotion – positive or negative.

I feel _____ **when you** _____.
(name your emotion) (describe the action or problem)

For instance, you might say,

“I feel angry when you don’t call and let me know where you are.”

“I feel frustrated when you interrupt me.”

“I feel worried when you come home so late.”

“I feel appreciated when you bring me flowers.”

“I feel thankful when you take out the garbage.”

“I feel happy when you share your feelings.”

You start with “I feel” and then express an emotion. The emotion could be any one of hundreds of options, including:

Angry	Frustrated	Confused	Guilty
Sad	Hopeless	Depressed	Grateful
Happy	Encouraged	Hopeful	Peaceful

Once you have expressed the emotion you are feeling, you are free to describe the situation (i.e., “when you..”). You cannot name call or insult the other person or go into a long-winded history of the problem. An I-message is just one sentence, preferably no more than 15 words.

Sending *I-messages* is usually a very safe and powerful way to communicate. But many people have never been taught HOW to do this, or they do it wrongly. In the examples below, see if you can tell what is incorrect about the statements on the right side of the chart.

I-MESSAGES

CORRECT	INCORRECT
"I feel angry when you don't call and let me know where you are."	"I feel that you are inconsiderate when you don't call me and let me know where you are."
"I feel frustrated when you interrupt me."	"I wish you would let me finish speaking!"
"I feel worried when you come home so late."	"I feel that you should not come home so late."
"I feel appreciated when you bring me flowers."	"I can't believe that you brought me flowers!"
"I feel thankful when you take out the garbage."	"I'm glad to see you doing something around the house!"
"I feel happy when you share your feelings."	"It's nice to know how you are feeling."

Often people believe that if they start their statement with "I feel" and then put in a "you are" that this makes an "I-message". It doesn't. When my children were growing up, they thought that "I messages" were "Eye messages" – Look at the person in the eye and say whatever you wanted to, like "Give me back my toy!!!" Eventually they DID learn, but it is easy to misunderstand how to give a proper I-message. You must begin with "I feel" and then add the word to describe your EMOTION. Only then, can you say "when you..." and describe the situation.

One of the good things about *I-messages* is that it allows your feelings to be expressed. One of the disadvantages is that the person you are sharing your

feelings with can become defensive and react to what you are saying. This can be uncomfortable. but it can provide an opportunity to vent their feelings as well. When this happens, I advise clients to try to forget about your own issue for a while and begin to listen to the other person.

Just reflect or paraphrase what is being said to you. Start each statement with “You feel...” and listen to the emotions behind the statement from the other person. This is called “Active Listening”. Give them your full attention, look at them carefully, stop what you are doing and actively listen to what the other person is saying and feeling.

Listen to the dialogue below between a mother (M) and her 15-year-old daughter, Danielle (D). In this very typical example, the mother started with an “I message”, but the daughter reacted in a negative way and got angry:

M: “Danielle, I feel worried when you don’t tell me where you are”.

D: “Well isn’t that too bad!”

In **Scenario #1**, the mother decides to do active listening. In **Scenario #2**, she reacts with anger at her daughter’s insolent comment. See what kind of difference this can make.

Scenario #1 – Mother decides to do “Active Listening”.

She listens to the feelings of her daughter until they seem to be completely vented or expressed or the matter is resolved. Notice the number of times the mother just listens, when she might be tempted to correct her daughter’s misunderstanding or answer her questions directly.

M: You feel angry when I tell you how I am feeling angry.

D: You’re right! You don’t care how I’m feeling, so why should I care about how YOU are feeling?

M: You feel unsure about whether or not I care about your feelings.

D: You don’t care about anybody.

M: You feel disappointed that I don’t seem to care about anybody.

D: You don’t care about anybody.

M: You feel certain that I don’t care about anybody.

D: Actually, I know that you care about me. I just hate being watched all the time.

M: You feel resentful that I am paying attention to what you are doing.

D: Yes, I think that you don’t trust me.

M: You are afraid that I don't trust you.

D: Yes, that is how it seems when you are always asking me where I am going.

M: You feel insulted when I ask about your plans, because that suggests that I don't trust you to make the right decision.

D: That's right and I hate it.

This is quite a long dialogue, but you can see that a lot of frustration and misunderstandings are being expressed. You can see how listening to her daughter resulted in a calming of emotions. The daughter was even able to see that some of the things she said were not reasonable, so she corrected herself (e.g., “*Actually, I know that you care about me.*”). Watch how listening well eventually leads to a solution to the problem, and the daughter even comes up with it herself!

M: You feel pretty angry that I don't trust you to make the right decision.

D: Oh, I know that you trust me, I just hate being watched.

M: You feel cramped by my watchful eyes.

D: Yes I do. It's none of your business what I do.

M: You feel bothered by my trying to know your business.

D: Yes, I am grown up now and I want to live my own life.

M: You feel sure that you are capable of making all of your own decisions.

D: Yes I do. If I want your opinion, I will ask.

At this point, the mother will have to decide whether to continue “Active Listening” or to give her own reactions. Let's say she decides that her daughter seems to be more calm now and settled and that it would be appropriate to explore options for a solution.

M: Actually, that seems like a good idea for you to ask my advice if you want my opinion. I apologize for giving you advice that you weren't requesting. I do trust you to make responsible decisions, Danielle and I am sorry if it doesn't seem that way to you.

My problem is that I feel convinced that in a family, it is respectful of one another to make sure we know where the other people are. That's the rule in our family. I'm sorry if you find it difficult or insulting; but can you think of any way that we can be respectful towards each other without making it seem like we are snooping around or not trusting each other?

D: I have an idea. Why don't we have a white board like they do at your office? I will write down where I am and when I'll be back and you can do it too.

M: I think that sounds like a great idea. Let's try it for a few weeks and see how it works.

D: O.K. I love you, Mom. Thanks for listening to my ideas.

If the mother had NOT chosen to active listen, the discussion might have ended much more abruptly and without any solution to the problem, as we will see in the next scenario. This is certainly a familiar pattern to many of us. Sometimes we just "lose it". We are human, after all!

Scenario #2: Mother decides NOT to do active listening and gets angry instead. This is how it all began...

M: "Danielle, I feel worried when you don't tell me where you are".

D: "Well isn't that too bad!"

M: That is no way to talk to your Mother, young lady. Get to your room!

D: Make me! I dare you to!

M: That's enough of that - you are grounded for a month.

D: Oh sure, just try it. I'm tired of living here anyway! I'm going to move in with Aaron. Good-bye!

How many teens do you know who have ended up on the streets or at their friend's homes as a result of an interaction very similar to this? It was certainly shorter, didn't take as much time or thought, but the results were disastrous. The ***I-message*** and ***Active Listening***, or "I-feel... You feel...", way of communicating can defuse a potentially hostile situation and lead to much greater understanding. Once you have talked out the situation fully by listening to each other's feelings, you may choose to problem solve -but not before you have listened. Sometimes just venting our anger or listening to the feelings of the other person takes care of the problem. In other situations, you may need to work more actively on solving the problem by exploring possible options and their consequences.

The ***I-message*** and ***Active Listening*** approach may seem awkward at first, but it is amazingly powerful if you can persist with listening to the feelings of the person who is upset. If you want to learn more about how to communicate in this way, please refer to a book by Adele Faber, ***How to Talk so Kids will Listen***.