Understanding I & What Statements

A Practical Guide to Healthier Communication

FREE Educational Guide

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Educational Disclaimer

This educational guide is intended for self-reflection and informational purposes only. It is not a diagnostic tool and should not be used to diagnose any mental health condition. Completing this guide does not establish a therapist-client relationship.

If communication difficulties, conflict, or relationship patterns are significantly affecting your emotional well-being or daily functioning, consider seeking support from a qualified mental health professional.

What Are I & What Statements?

Communication can quickly become difficult when we feel hurt, angry, frustrated, ignored, or misunderstood.

In those moments, many of us naturally focus on what the other person did wrong.

We may say:

"You never listen to me."

"You don't care."

"You always make everything about yourself."

"You don't respect me."

"You knew that would upset me."

The problem is that statements beginning with **"you"** can easily sound like accusations.

Once another person feels accused, they may stop listening to what we are actually trying to communicate and begin defending themselves instead.

I & What Statements offer another way to communicate.

Instead of beginning with what the other person did wrong, you begin by explaining **your experience** and then clearly identify **what happened, what affected you, or what you need.**

For example:

Instead of:

"You never listen to me."

Try:

"I feel frustrated when I'm talking and the conversation changes before I feel heard. What I need is a chance to finish what I'm trying to say."

The issue hasn't disappeared.

You're still addressing it.

But you're communicating the problem without immediately attacking the other person.

Why Communication Changes During Conflict

Most people communicate differently when they're emotionally activated.

When we're calm, we may be able to explain ourselves clearly.

When we're angry or hurt, communication can become:

- Defensive
- Accusatory
- Sarcastic
- Critical
- Dismissive
- Reactive
- Blaming
- Overgeneralized

Words like:

“Always.”

“Never.”

“Every time.”

“You don't care.”

“You only think about yourself.”

can quickly shift a conversation away from the original issue.

Now instead of discussing what happened, the conversation becomes an argument about whether the accusation is true.

What Is an I Statement?

An I Statement focuses on your own emotional experience rather than immediately defining the other person's behavior, character, or intentions.

A simple I Statement might sound like:

"I feel hurt when plans change and I don't know what's happening."

Instead of:

"You obviously don't respect my time."

Or:

"I feel overwhelmed when I'm handling several things at once."

Instead of:

"You never help me."

An I Statement allows you to communicate your experience without assuming that you know what the other person intended.

Be Careful With "I Feel Like You…"

Simply beginning a sentence with the word **"I"** doesn't automatically make it an I Statement.

For example:

"I feel like you don't care about me."

"I feel like you're selfish."

"I feel like you purposely ignore me."

"I feel like you don't respect me."

These sound like I Statements because they begin with "I feel."

But what follows is still an interpretation or accusation about the other person.

Compare:

"I feel like you don't care about me."

with:

“I feel hurt and disconnected when we go several days without really talking.”

The second statement describes your actual emotional experience and identifies what is happening.

That's much easier for another person to hear and respond to.

What Is a What Statement?

A What Statement helps you identify **what is actually happening** or **what you need** without attacking the other person's character.

For example:

Instead of:

“You're so inconsiderate.”

Try:

“What is difficult for me is when plans change and I don't find out until the last minute.”

Instead of:

“You don't care about anything I say.”

Try:

“What I need is to know that we can talk about something important without the conversation immediately becoming an argument.”

Instead of:

“You're controlling.”

Try:

“What I'm uncomfortable with is feeling like I have to explain every decision I make.”

The purpose is not to make your communication sound perfect.

It is to become more specific.

Why I & What Statements Work Together

An I Statement explains **your experience.**

A What Statement identifies **the issue or need.**

Together, they can sound like:

"I feel overwhelmed when several responsibilities are left for me to handle. What I need is for us to talk about how we're dividing things."

Or:

"I feel hurt when I'm interrupted during difficult conversations. What I need is a chance to finish what I'm saying before you respond."

Or:

"I feel anxious when plans change and I don't hear from you. What would help me is a quick message letting me know what's happening."

You're not avoiding the problem.

You're actually becoming more direct about it.

The Difference Between Blame and Communication

Consider this example:

Blame

"You never help around the house. You're lazy and I have to do everything."

The other person may immediately respond:

"That's not true. I did the dishes yesterday."

Now you're arguing about whether the person is lazy.

The original problem—how responsibilities are being divided—has disappeared.

Now try:

I & What Statement

"I feel overwhelmed when I'm handling most of the household responsibilities. What I need is for us to look at what needs to be done and divide it more evenly."

Now the actual issue is much clearer.

I & What Statements Are Not About Avoiding Accountability

Healthy communication does not mean you have to soften everything another person does.

It also doesn't mean that disrespectful or harmful behavior should be ignored.

You can still be direct.

For example:

"I am not comfortable being spoken to that way. What I'm going to do is end this conversation if the yelling continues."

That's clear.

It's not passive.

It doesn't excuse the behavior.

I & What Statements are not about avoiding difficult conversations.

They're about communicating difficult things more clearly.

Common Communication Traps

Certain communication patterns can make conflict worse very quickly.

Mind Reading

“You did that because you wanted to hurt me.”

You may believe you understand someone's intention, but unless they have told you, you're still interpreting.

Character Attacks

“You're selfish.”

“You're lazy.”

“You're impossible.”

Now the conversation is about who the person is rather than what happened.

Always and Never

“You always do this.”

“You never listen.”

Absolute statements often make people immediately search for the exception.

Bringing in Everything

A disagreement about today suddenly includes five years of unresolved problems.

Speaking for the Other Person

“You don't care.”

“You don't want this relationship.”

“You think I'm stupid.”

Instead, communicate what you're experiencing and allow the other person to speak for themselves.

Turning You Statements Into I & What Statements

Instead of:

“You never listen to me.”

Try:

“I feel dismissed when I'm interrupted. What I need is a chance to finish what I'm saying.”

Instead of:

“You don't care about me.”

Try:

“I feel disconnected when we don't spend much time together. What I'd like is for us to make more intentional time for each other.”

Instead of:

“You're always criticizing me.”

Try:

“I feel discouraged when our conversations focus mostly on what I'm doing wrong. What I need is to be able to talk about concerns without feeling attacked.”

Instead of:

“You never help.”

Try:

“I feel overwhelmed with everything I'm managing. What I need is more help with some of these responsibilities.”

Instead of:

“You don't respect my boundaries.”

Try:

“I feel frustrated when I've said no and I'm asked repeatedly to change my answer. What I need is for my decision to be respected.”

I & What Statement Communication Self-Assessment

Instructions

Rate each statement based on how accurately it describes the way you typically communicate, particularly when you are upset, hurt, frustrated, or in conflict.

0 = Never

1 = Rarely

2 = Sometimes

3 = Often

4 = Always

1. When I'm upset, I can explain what I'm feeling without immediately blaming the other person. _____
2. I can describe what happened without attacking someone's character. _____
3. I can tell someone what I need instead of expecting them to figure it out. _____
4. During conflict, I avoid using words such as "always" and "never." _____
5. I can identify my actual emotion instead of saying, "I feel like you..." _____
6. I try to separate what happened from what I believe the other person intended. _____
7. I can communicate disappointment without insulting, criticizing, or labeling the other person. _____
8. I can clearly explain what behavior or situation is bothering me. _____
9. I can ask for a change without demanding that another person agree with everything I say. _____
10. When I'm emotionally upset, I can slow down enough to think about how I want to communicate. _____
11. I can express a boundary without attacking the other person. _____
12. I can stay focused on the current issue instead of bringing several past conflicts into the conversation. _____

Understanding Your Score

Total Score: _____ /48

Unlike some of the other assessments, **a higher score on this assessment reflects stronger use of healthy, direct communication skills.**

This score is not a judgment of whether you are a "good" or "bad" communicator.

Communication often changes depending on the relationship, situation, and level of emotion involved.

Your individual answers may be more useful than the total number.

Look closely at the statements where you scored lower.

Those may identify the communication skills that would be most helpful for you to practice.

0–12

Your responses suggest that communicating feelings and needs during conflict may be difficult for you.

You may be more likely to blame, become reactive, expect others to understand what you need, or struggle to communicate clearly when emotions are strong.

Start small.

You don't need to change everything at once.

Practice identifying:

What am I feeling?

What actually happened?

What do I need?

13–24

Your responses suggest that you use some healthy communication skills, but they may become harder to access when you're emotionally activated.

You may communicate clearly in calmer situations but become more reactive during conflict, disappointment, or hurt.

Look at your lowest-scoring questions.

Those are good places to begin practicing.

25–36

Your responses suggest that you generally have a good foundation for direct and respectful communication.

You may already use I Statements, communicate needs, or avoid some common blaming patterns.

There may still be certain people or situations where old communication habits return.

Pay attention to where that happens.

37–48

Your responses suggest that you frequently use direct, emotionally aware communication.

You may be relatively comfortable identifying feelings, communicating needs, staying focused on the issue, and separating another person's behavior from assumptions about their intentions.

Continue practicing these skills, particularly during emotionally intense conversations.

Even strong communicators can become reactive when something feels especially personal.

Look Beyond the Number

Your total score gives you a general picture of your communication skills.

But look more closely at your individual responses.

If your lower scores involve:

Identifying emotions, you may benefit from slowing down and asking yourself what you're actually feeling before beginning the conversation.

If your lower scores involve:

Asking for what you need, you may be expecting others to understand something you haven't communicated clearly.

If your lower scores involve:

Blame, labels, "always," or "never," emotional frustration may be taking over the conversation.

If your lower scores involve:

Assuming intentions, you may benefit from asking questions before deciding why someone behaved a certain way.

If your lower scores involve:

Staying with the current issue, unresolved past conflicts may be entering present conversations.

The goal isn't perfect communication.

The goal is recognizing where your communication tends to change when emotions become stronger.

Practice: Build Your Own I & What Statement

Think about a recent situation where you felt upset or frustrated.

What happened?

Stick to the actual situation.

What did I feel?

Try to identify the emotion.

What was I tempted to say?

Did that statement include blame, assumptions, "always," "never," or a character attack?

What do I actually need the other person to understand?

Now try:

"I feel _____ when _____."

"What I need / What would help me is _____."

Reflection

Take a few moments to think about what you noticed.

What happens to the way I communicate when I become angry or hurt?

Do I explain my feelings, or do I usually begin by explaining what the other person did wrong?

How often do I expect people close to me to know what I need without telling them?

Do I sometimes use "I feel like you..." when I'm actually making an accusation or assumption?

Which words tend to appear when I'm frustrated—"always," "never," "you should," or "you don't care"?

What is one You Statement I frequently use that I could practice turning into an I & What Statement?

Final Thoughts

Using I & What Statements doesn't mean every conversation will suddenly become easy.

The other person may still disagree.

They may become defensive.

They may not understand your perspective.

And sometimes you may communicate clearly and respectfully and still not get the response you hoped for.

Healthy communication does not give us control over another person's response.

It gives us greater control over **how we communicate our own experience.**

Instead of:

"You never listen."

You can identify what is actually happening.

Instead of:

"You don't care."

You can communicate what is making you feel disconnected.

Instead of:

"You should know."

You can say what you need.

And instead of trying to prove who is right or wrong, you can begin asking:

"What am I actually trying to communicate?"

"What am I feeling?"

"What happened?"

"What do I need?"

The goal isn't to sound perfect.

It isn't to memorize a script.

And it isn't to avoid conflict.

The goal is to communicate in a way that gives the other person a better chance of hearing what you're actually trying to say.

Sometimes changing the first few words of a difficult conversation can change where the entire conversation goes.

Continue Your Learning

Continue exploring the free educational guides and self-assessments available through the **Albanian Mental Wellness Hub**.

These resources are designed to help you better understand communication, relationship patterns, boundaries, attachment, empathy, expectations, assumptions, emotional responses, and other areas of personal growth.

Thank you for downloading this educational guide. I hope it helped you better understand how you communicate during difficult moments and how I & What Statements can help you express your feelings, needs, and boundaries more clearly.

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