How to get your message across respectfully.

We have all done it. Lost our cool in the heat of the moment and said something that we later regretted. The tool to overcome this is I-messages. It gets the message across about how you feel and what behaviour made you feel that way. All this without blaming and rarely does it makes things worse. I-messages is a simple way to communicate in any situation. But do not confuse simple with easy. It takes skill and practice.

I-messages

I-messages provide a way feedback can be safely offered, as it avoids putdowns, judgement or assigning blame. There are three types of information when providing effective feedback to someone about their behaviour. These are:

1   describing the behaviour,
2   the feeling the behaviour creates and
3   the effect that the behaviour has.

A description of the behaviour is necessary to inform the person what the problem behaviour is. This should always be included in the message otherwise they will not know what behaviour to change. Including either of the other two types (how it makes you feel and what the effect is) will normally be sufficient to communicate the problem effectively.

An I-message states the behaviour and describes the speaker's feelings (numbers 1 and 2 above). The speaker owns their feelings without coming across as judging the person. It promotes a willingness to exchange information, find a solution and to seek a constructive change in the situation. Rarely does this make matters worse.

I-messages are delivered by saying: **'I feel …** (name the feeling) **when …** (describe the behaviour)'. For example, you might say, '**I feel** angry **when** I am expecting a ride home and am forgotten.'

Some other examples of I-messages are:

•   I feel angry when people call me names.
•   I feel hurt when no one asks what I want to do.
•   I feel suspicious when someone tells me one thing, then I find out they are doing another.

Download this information about I-messages. (This document is released under a creative commons licence. See document for details.)

You-messages

In You-messages, the message contains either **you** or **you're** in it. For example, '**You** make me so angry because **you** forgot to give me a ride home.' Using You-messages blames the person for the situation and judges them. It can also hold others responsible for the feelings of the speaker as well as include putdowns. It causes feelings in the

receiver that can make them defensive or start making excuses. All of this can make the situation worse.

The examples of the I-messages above have been turned into You-message to show this:

- I feel angry when you call me names.
- I feel hurt when you don't ask what I want to do.
- I get suspicious when you're telling me one thing then I find out you're doing another.

I-messages and You-messages

An effective I-message does not contain a 'you' reference in it. It is common for those new to I-messages to use the form, **I feel** …(feeling) **when you** … (behaviour) such as 'I feel upset when you ignore me.' It could be classed as both an I-message and a You-message. However, the 'you' in the statement still blames the other person, making them less likely to cooperate. Therefore, the I feel … when you … message needs to be treated as a You-message and avoided. Everything said before the 'you' is generally ignored by the person receiving the message.

As soon as they hear the 'you', most people immediately concentrate on the personal attack that follows. It is similar to using 'but' in an argument. This is generally interpreted to mean that you may now disregard everything I have said prior to the 'but'. For example, 'I agree with you, but …' is normally followed by listing all the reasons why you do not agree with them.

Always avoid using the 'you' word when giving constructive feedback as it will be heard as a personal attack. Instead replace it with a generic term, like 'people', 'someone' or 'anybody'. By using a generic term with an I-message, others are more likely to listen to your entire message and willingly change their behaviour.

You will normally feel the same no matter who is using that specific behaviour. So you do not have to single them out. When you don't accuse directly, it enables them to save face and their reaction to you is more open-minded and receptive. It provides an opportunity to start a conversation and work towards a solution.

It is worth noting that I-messages can be used negatively in order to try and manipulate someone. For example, 'I feel worthless when we are not together', or 'I feel angry when people go off and talk to somebody else without me.' This use is calculated to manipulate the other person into behaving in the manner the user wants. Like any tool it can be used for good and bad.

Alternative ways of delivering an I-message

The simplified version, **I feel … when …** is the best starting point when teaching or learning to use I-messages. It is less complex and gets the most important information out first - the behaviour and the feeling about the behaviour.

A danger in using a template such as this is that it can become predictable or sound false and manufactured. This comes down to what the actual content is and how the message is delivered. o offset this there are a number of additional options.

Below are 20 additional variations to consider. They use the three types of information feelings, behaviour and effect in various combinations.

The basic I-message includes the feeling and the behaviour.

I feel… (feeling) **when…** (behaviour)

- I feel worried when it's well after home time and there is no phone call or message.
- I feel angry when I get told off for things when others don't.

Possible other words to replace feel are: **get** and **become**

- I get concerned when I hear stories about the dangerous pranks that are played on people.
- I become frustrated and annoyed when people say they will do something for me and then they don't.

Or you can reverse the order:

When… (behaviour) **I feel…** (feeling)

- When people talk about me as if I am not even there, I feel powerless and useless.
- When I am picked on by others, I feel this rage in my gut and just want to rip something to pieces.

Possible other words to replace when are: **because, as, whenever, after,** and **due to**.

- I feel hurt because no one asked me what I thought.
- I feel frightened because of all the yelling and pushing.
- I feel disappointed because this mess has not been cleaned up.
- I feel humiliated as shouting at me in front of others shows a lack of respect.
- I feel offended whenever someone uses racist language.
- I feel suspicious after finding out that people have not told me everything.
- I feel anxious due to the risks involved in riding a motorbike in the city.

The basic behaviour and effect messages

I want… (behaviour) **because…** (effect)

- I want everyone to stay away from the edge because they could fall and get seriously hurt.
- I want everybody to be on time because we need to have this finished tomorrow.

I need… (behaviour) **because…** (effect)

- I need everyone to turn up on time because we cannot serve our customers well without all our staff.

I expect… (behaviour) **because…** (effect)

- I expect everyone to treat each other with basic respect because that will make it enjoyable for everyone.

It was my understanding that… (behaviour) **because…** (effect)

- It was my understanding that everyone agreed not to use putdowns because it can make people feel angry or hurt.

The complex behaviour and effect message

I think… (behaviour + judgement) **because…** (effect)

- I think telling stories that are not true about someone is unfair because others will believe the stories and not like the person for the wrong reasons.

The complex feeling, behaviour and effect messages

I would… (feeling) **it if …** (behaviour) **because…**(effect)

- I would appreciate it if everyone would ring when they are late because then I can plan to have enough staff stay back and cover till they arrive.

I would… (feeling) **it very much** (or variation) **if…** (behaviour) **because…** (effect)

- I would like it much better if only one person at a time spoke because then we can all get to hear what each other has to say.

(behaviour and effect)**… and then I feel …** (feeling)

- Leaving the sports gear outside all the time means it gets ruined and then I feel angry about having to spend money to replace it.

The final option is to use a feeling and effect message.

Just be aware that, when using this type of message, the actual behaviour that is causing the problem is not included in the message. Only its effect is, so you might need a follow-up message to outline the behaviour to change.

I feel… (feeling) **because…** (effect)

- I feel hurt because I didn't get to make a choice.
- I feel frightened because the situation is dangerous.

Possible other words to replace because are: **as** and **due to**

- I feel sad as it hurt my feelings.
- I feel horrified due to the animals being left to go hungry.