



USING “I” STATEMENTS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

We all want relationship harmony, but all too often we experience conflict instead. Common causes of conflict are assumption and accusation. Communicating through assumption and accusation is a sure recipe for communication breakdown and we don't stop there.

After creating a whole fantasy with stories that arise from our own imagination, we then become judge and jury and condemn other people for their role in the story. We project our own story onto other person, assuming that we “know” their motivations and what they think.” For example:

“You made me so angry and hurt yesterday when you came home from work. Why did you ignore me like that? How could you?! You're just so selfish!”

Much destructiveness is unleashed by this unhealthy and unskilful type of communication.

We are holding the other person responsible for our own thoughts and imaginings. Of course, there may be issues that do

need to be addressed in any situation, but ultimately we cannot know what is going on in the mind of another person.

We also perpetuate confusion when we assume we have an infallible memory. We hold the other person for ransom over an incident that happened ten weeks ago, ten months ago, or even ten years ago. Our recollection of the incident is “totally accurate”, of course. And of course, our recollection focuses on how we were victimised. This is an effective way of turning a discussion into an argument. Deep down we all know what we are doing, but our pride, a fear-based self-protection mechanism, keeps us locked in denial for the sake of winning/protecting our vulnerabilities. When we allow our fear-based ego to conduct our relationships, recurring conflict is inevitable. Again, often issues in the past do need to be addressed, this needs to be done with awareness and skill.

An essential aspect of speaking our truth is speaking only from what we actually *know*. Everything else must be in the form of an *open question*, or at least a statement that is truthful about the *speculative nature* of what we are saying. An open question gives the other person more space to speak their truth. Here is an example of a closed question and an open question:

Closed question: You’re annoyed at me aren’t you?

Such a question only leaves room for just yes or no, which doesn’t really add any valuable information to the communication process. It also backs people into a defensive position. It does not allow or encourage them explore their own experience and to speak for themselves.

Open question: I feel we are a little disconnected. What are *you* feeling?

Here the person has space to speak for themselves. They also began with an “I” statement of their experience to bring the energy of that moment into awareness.

When it all boils down, *all we can know is what we directly experience ourselves and how we felt about it*. Even then, our perceptions of the experience are still going to be flawed.

Psychological studies overwhelmingly prove this. In one common study, a number of people are shown an incident on video, for example, a car accident, and are asked to write down what they see. When the witness reports are compared, they tend to vary, often greatly, even though all the participants are sitting in the one room watching the same video. Our minds colour and distort everything that we experience, depending on our character, our culture, our socialization, our fears and insecurities, and so on. Where the human mind is concerned, there is no such thing as total truth. There is only the truth as each individual perceives it.

Therefore, it is essential to take ownership of all that we say. Using “I” statements and open questions is a more skilful way to communicate that reduces the risk of conflict and makes room for genuine sharing and intimacy.

I will take the example I used at the beginning of this passage to demonstrate again how to use “I” statements and open questions constructively. Imagine I am talking to you:

“I need to share something with you. Is now okay?... Please just listen at first as I share it with you. I felt angry and hurt yesterday after you came home from work. I felt like I was being ignored. I started imagining I was being punished for

something. Now I'm wondering if you were upset about something. What was happening for you yesterday?"

First note how the I opened the conversation. It gave you an opportunity to prepare for the communication and a bit of guidance on how I needed to receive it. Everyone is in a different head space. We may want to talk about something straight away, but forget we are the ones who have been already mulling this issue over. The other person needs a moment to shift from their headspace and be open to yours, otherwise they can be thrown into confusion and not hear you very well and not react well.

Also note how there are no accusations. The space is left open for the you to freely speak your own truth. I have taken ownership of my own experience of the situation and how I felt about it. I only know about my experience. I don't yet know what is going on for you, which could be something totally unrelated to me. I take ownership of my experience by using "I" statements.

If I start using "you" statements, then I am likely to fall into assumption and accusation again. Instead of backing you into a corner with an accusation, I concluded my statement by asking you an open question that invites you to share your feelings, thoughts and experiences with me. Communication is bound to lead to understanding and a heartfelt connection if consistently approached in this way.

My fear and insecurity, that wants to blame and accuse you and see myself as a victim, belongs to me. It is for me to take care of. It is not your responsibility. You are not the cause of my fears and insecurities. My fears and insecurities were set up in my mind long before my, role-play partner arrived on the

scene. This is the case for most adult relationships.

Furthermore, trying to control you is not going to help me overcome my fears and insecurities. In fact, it will only compound them and harm the relationship as well. I would be allowing my fears and insecurities, my wounded inner-child / emotional vulnerabilities, to control our lives. That will only add up to one thing, and that is more conflict. I am an adult. It is my responsibility to take care of myself and my own mind, like a parent taking appropriate care for his own child. Part of that responsibility is checking with you about what is really going on for you.

Learning how to take care of our own mind is an essential part of the process of learning to take care of our relationships.