



USING “I” STATEMENTS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

We all want relationship harmony, but all too often we experience conflict instead. Two common causes of conflict are **assumption** and **accusation**. Communicating through assumption and accusation is a sure recipe for communication breakdown.

When we make assumptions and accusations based on assumptions about another person, we are “imagining” that we know what is going within the mind of that other person, which is simply not possible. We can only guess, and that guess will most often be inaccurate. This form of interaction tends to shut a conversation down and triggers that others person’s defences, making it even harder to address the actual dynamics of the relationship.

In the rough and tumble of our growing years, we are often immersed in environments where communication skills are lacking and we unconsciously take on habits of communication that are problematic. Because we grew up in those environments, our child and adolescent minds grew to regard

communicating in that way as normal and it became a deeply ingrained, unthinking habit. In other words, we did not gain the ability to stop and look squarely at the ways that we communicate. We don't think to ask ourselves, "does the way I am communicating make sense?" We are not aware of how our old habits of communication are contributing to the conflict we are having with those we are trying to have a relationship with.

In reality, all we know in that moment is what is going on in our *own* mind in relation to that other person, which has little to do with the other person. We project our own story onto the other person, assuming that we "know" their motivations and what they think. We mistake our own mind for theirs'. 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!"

We are holding the other person responsible for our own thoughts and imaginings that are often triggered by our own fears and insecurities. 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, which can be quite deep and complex and may not have anything to do with us.

An essential aspect of speaking our truth is speaking only from what we actually *know*. Everything else must be communicated 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 to explore their own experience and to speak for themselves.

Open question: I feel like we are disconnected. What are *you* feeling? Are you okay?

Here the person has space to speak for themselves. I also began with an "I" statement of about my own experience to bring my feelings of that moment into awareness, without projecting them onto you.

In reality, *all we can truly know is what we directly experience ourselves and how we feel about it*. Our perceptions or conclusions of the experience are going to be very much coloured and clouded by what is going on in our own minds, such as our past trauma's and present vulnerabilities.

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 in that moment. There are

fundamental truths or principles such as personal responsibility and Acceptance, but these are principles that we try to live by in order to manage our minds. What is going on in our own mind is always coloured by all the factors I mentioned above, and therefore our perceptions, our interpretations of the moment are most often going to be biased by our past experiences. It takes learned awareness to be able to manage and rise above the confusions of our minds.

Therefore, it is essential to take ownership of your mind, to accept responsibility for all that you say, which is often driven by your unconscious conditioning, which in turn controls your thinking and feeling. It is important not to judge yourself for your confusions and lack of skill in communication. To have a healthy relationship with yourself, it is essential to accept that you are human. However, as an adult with the ability to develop awareness, your mind is your responsibility. You are now the parent of your own mind. Your partner is not your parent.

Instead of thinking that you can read minds by making assumptions, communicating using “I” statements and open questions is a more skilful way to interact. This skilful form of communication reduces the risk of conflict and makes room for genuine sharing and intimacy. Using I statements and open questions facilitates empathy and understanding. I am making space for you to get in touch with and tell me what is going on for you.

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 that we are in a relationship and I am talking to you:

“I need to share something with you. Is now okay?... Let’s say that it is okay with you and so I start the conversation. “Please just listen as I talk it through a bit first. I found myself getting a bit triggered when you came home yesterday from work. I felt angry and hurt because I felt like I was being ignored. I started imagining I was being punished for something, but I realised that was just my own story. Now I’m wondering if *you* were upset about something. So what was happening for you yesterday?”

First note how I opened the conversation. I gave you an opportunity to prepare for the communication and a bit of guidance on what I needed to receive at the beginning. 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 may need 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 you to freely explore and 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, and I emphasize *consistently*.

Even if I manage to be aware enough to use those communication skills, you may still be used expecting the old ways we used to communicate, and therefore not know how to receive the new approach. Therefore, it is very important that I let go of expectations of how you are meant to react to my new approach, which may still be a bit clumsy. If I persist, however, in time you will likely feel and come to appreciate the more gentle and empathic approach that I am taking to our interactions, and start to feel more accepted, relaxed and open. Note that you don't have to be perfect at this. At first, you may feel clumsy and awkward. It's not about getting it right. It is about having a go and knowing that the more you persist, the more likely your partner will notice and appreciate your efforts and be positively influenced by those efforts.

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, even though you may be triggering them. My fears and insecurities were set up in my mind long before you, as my partner, arrived on the scene. This is the case for most intimate adult relationships. Of course, when we project our fears and insecurities onto one another, our relationship can begin to develop its own baggage, but this is only because we did not know how to take care of our own minds. Also, the closer we get to each other, the more we open our hearts become to one another, which means the more open and vulnerable we are going to be with one another, which is why we are going to end up triggering each other. Rather than seeing this as a problem, we can actually recognise it as a wonderful opportunity for awareness and healing. We began

our relationship because we truly loved one another. It is very important to remember that, and focus on learning better communication skills that will help us untangle our baggage from each other, and learn to appreciate the mirror into our own minds that we are for one another. Because we don't truly mean to hurt one another, an intimate relationship is a great opportunity to become aware of our own fears and insecurities and learn how to heal them and manage them, and in the process, learn loving and compassionate communication skills, such as using "I" statements and open questions.

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. It is me trying to avoid my fears and insecurities. By controlling you, I would be allowing my fears and insecurities, my wounded inner-child / my emotional vulnerabilities in other words, to control my life and run my relationship with you. 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*, instead of assuming that I know. Instead of putting barriers between us, misunderstandings can instead bring us closer together.

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