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A Case Against Using "I" Statements

"You cancelled on me 4 times. I mean, I felt frustrated when our plans kept changing."



Keri Savoca Jan 7, 2019 · 7 min read ★



"I feel sad when I have to sleep alone at night." "Oh — I'm sorry you feel sad." by [rawpixel](#) on [Unsplash](#)

"I" statements. Not "you" statements.

That's the advice, nowadays: Don't be too confrontational by saying "You didn't do [x]." Don't accuse the other person of doing something wrong by saying "You did [x] again." Make the conversation about how you feel, not about what your partner did.

Honestly, I don't buy it. And here's why.

It's not about how you feel — it's about why you feel that way. And you feel that way because of something the other person did. Period.

Otherwise, you wouldn't be having this conversation with your partner; you would be writing it in your diary.

"I" statements imply that the "problem" is that you feel sad, not that your partner actually did something.

"I" statements are fine for initiating a conversation with someone who is likely to be defensive (though there are better strategies for this type of situation; more later). I understand saying "I feel really hurt about something and I'd like to find time to talk," but then it's time to discuss the actual issue. About what the other person did.

And guess what? You can still do it in a civil manner.

The issue is not how you feel. The issue is why you feel that way.

Having an entire discussion full of "I" statements means avoiding the issue at hand (i.e. you believe the other person messed up) and **avoiding a potentially uncomfortable conversation** so that you can seek comfort and reassurance. But most of the time, the person on the receiving end doesn't understand the severity of your feelings, nor that they are either partially or entirely responsible for your state of discontent.

Basically, using "I" statements is a great way to avoid the discomfort of giving and receiving feedback.

Imagine if your boss called you in for a check-in and said, “I feel worried because the deadline is approaching quickly and there is still work to be done!” instead of “There were a few major errors on the spreadsheet, so you need to make some revisions. Could we look at it together?” The first one protects your feelings, but the second one tells you what the problem is.

I’m pushing back against “I” statements because you CAN use the word “you” without having a small issue escalate into a full-blown argument.



The look on your face when you said how you feel and nothing changed. ([Niklas Hamann](#) on [Unsplash](#))

Let’s take a look at a few “I” statements and examine why they are not entirely effective.

1. “I feel hurt when we don’t spend time together.”

The response you wanted: “I’m so sorry I hurt you. I didn’t realize that I had become so distant. You’re right; now that I think about it, I cancelled our plans and I haven’t called you in days. Let me make it up to you immediately. I will never make this mistake again.”

The response you probably received: "I'm sorry you feel hurt. I'll fix it. We will spend time together."

And then the conversation is over, unless you push and nag, hoping the person on the receiving end will magically figure out what exactly prompted your hurt feelings.

What you could have said instead: *I'm feeling really hurt lately. You haven't called me in 3 days and you cancelled our last 2 dates. Is something on your mind?*

This is civil. It still explains how you feel, but it is explicit in stating that the other person did something to cause you to feel this way. It ends with a question that demonstrates your willingness to listen.

2. "I feel frustrated when all of the household chores fall on me."

The response you wanted: "I understand. I have been leaving the dishes in the sink and playing video games all night, and this is inconsiderate. Let's make a chore chart so we can evenly split the household chores."

The response you probably received: "Okay. What do you want me to do?" Or, "I'm really tired after work."

What you could have said instead: *I'm exhausted lately because I've been doing a lot of chores after dinner, while you've been getting a head start on watching Netflix. I've also been waking up early to do laundry while you sleep in. Could we try to tag team this stuff so that we can finish in half the time and have more time to relax together?*

This is also civil. It explains how you feel, it makes it clear that the other person is somewhat to blame for your frustration, and it ends with question so that you can make an actual plan.

3. "I felt worried when I didn't know your whereabouts. Around 1:00 AM, I really started to get nervous."

The response you wanted: "I'm so sorry I made you worry! Rest assured, I was not out being unfaithful to you; I was at a restaurant with my friends and it was too noisy to call you. You can go through my phone if you're still feeling insecure and you will see time-stamped pictures of me at the restaurant. I promise I will keep you updated in the future if I will be late."

The response you probably received: “You don’t need to worry about me. I told you not to stay up and wait. You don’t trust me?”

What you could have said: *Last night, when you didn’t come home and didn’t pick up the phone, I was worried that something had happened to you. I always worry, and this is something about me that is never going to change. Next time, could you send a quick text if you’re going to be late and let me know when you’re on your way home?*

Again: this is civil. It explains how you feel, it explains why, and it also explains that this is a non-negotiable by stating that worrying is a personality trait of yours that will never change. It ends with a reasonable question.

Instead of an “I” statement:

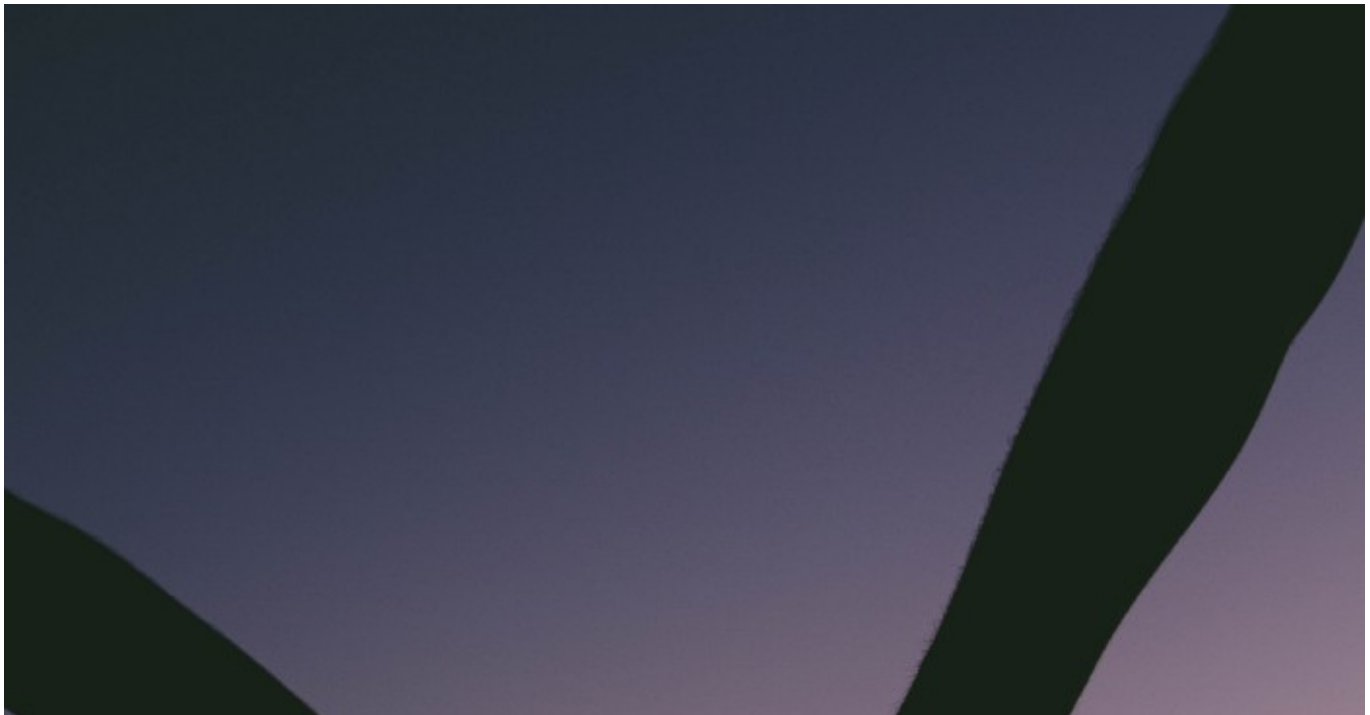
- state how you feel
- state why you believe the other person is responsible for you feeling this way
- state exactly what you need in the form of a question, or ask an open-ended question if you’re not sure what you need

If you find yourself getting nowhere — because of an issue with face to face communication, or because your partner is extremely defensive — try one of these methods instead.

1. **Creating a shared note on an iPhone or a shared Google document.** Say that you want to try something new and share a document with your partner. Write exactly what you need to say and leave space for the other person to respond. This gives you both some necessary wait time. You can think before you write it, and the other person can let it sit before responding.
2. **Recording voice messages.** If your written words come across differently than you intend, and if face-to-face communications often end in arguments, try this one. Instead of a phone conversation, really take the time to think about what you need to say and exchange short voice messages. You still get to hear the other

person's voice, but you get the wait time for both of you to process each other's responses.

- 3. Scheduling a time to talk.** Tell the other person that you want to have a conversation about [x] and pick a mutually convenient time so that they are not caught off guard by your dissatisfaction. For example: "I really want to talk to you about what happened yesterday and why it made me so angry, but we have a really busy day today and I don't want it to be a stressful conversation. Can we talk about it tomorrow night? I'll bring ice cream." Give your partner a heads up about the topic of conversation, and then don't bring it up again until the scheduled time. Offering to talk over food or to go out afterwards communicates to a defensive partner that this will not be a relationship-ending conversation.
- 4. Agreeing to talk for no longer than 5 minutes at a time.** If you need to talk about a deep-rooted problem that you're certain will end in a huge fight, agree to break the problem into small pieces and address a small part of it each day. Agree that you will be talking about something uncomfortable, but the discomfort will be over in a few minutes. This also signifies to a defensive or apprehensive partner that this is will not be a relationship-ending conversation. If the only reaction you get is "I understand", consider it a win for now. Take baby steps and acknowledge that you have made progress in tackling a difficult issue together. Pick up where you left off the next day.





Pinky swear that you will not bring this up until the designated time. ([Valentin Antonucci](#) on [Unsplash](#))

All of these approaches work well for people who tend to bring up their concerns at really bad times, or for people whose partners become emotional upon being confronted.

Regardless of the method you choose, don't forget:

- state how you feel
- state why you believe the other person is responsible for you feeling this way

- state exactly what you need in the form of a question, or ask an open-ended question if you're not sure what you need

Giving and receiving feedback is an integral part of ALL interpersonal relationships.

While “I” statements themselves aren't terrible, the lack of follow-up discussion and the avoidance of accountability absolutely is. It's difficult to call someone out, and it's even more difficult to be the one who is called out, but navigating through that discomfort is the only way to make sure both of you are heard.

After all, there is a big difference between “my partner is hurt” and “I hurt my partner”.

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