

# Communication in Relationships, Part Three

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I hope our mini-series on communication has been helpful. This time we will look at simple communication tool and examine the five levels of communication.

The simple tool is called an "I" message. "I" messages are a healthy method for sharing your feelings, thoughts and perceptions, because it avoids using blame or shame. A well designed "I" message takes the focus (blame) off of the receiver and puts the focus (responsibility) on the sender (you) of the message. "I am beginning to take responsibility for myself when I can let you know what I am feeling in a particular situation."

The opposite of an "I" message is a "you" message." The "you" message is a message of blame. It communicates hostility and puts the focus on the other person. The natural reaction of the receiver to a "you" message is defensiveness. Healthy communication will be the casualty of such an interaction. Phrasing your message as an "I" message rather than a "you" message does not contribute to the escalation of a quarrel. An "I" message can be chosen whether the other person chooses to use such healthy communication or not. Below are some tips for creating "I" messages.

- Describe the behavior that is affecting you (without blame).
- State the feeling you have in response to this behavior.
- Describe the consequence this behavior might have for you (without blame).
- Stress the word *because*, in your message; it can help to connect the feeling and consequence elements of the message. This minimizes blame and keeps the focus on you.

Here are some examples of "I" messages:

"When you talk to me that way I feel hurt and discounted because I begin to think I do not matter to you."

"When you did not kiss me good-bye this morning, I felt hurt because I wanted us to part on a more positive note."

"When you called me from the office today, I really felt loved and important to you, because you thought about me."

"When you forget to record the checks in the checkbook, I feel really irritated and concerned; because I have no way of knowing how much is left. We could overdraw."

## ***Levels of communication***

In *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am*, John Powell suggests that you and I communicate on at least five different levels, from extremely superficial to deeply personal and honest. Emotional woundedness tends to keep us at the shallow

end of communication. However, with personal growth and practice, we can move to deeper, more transformational levels of communicating. This is so important because real intimacy occurs only at the deeper levels and intimacy is what holds relationships together. Our core emotional needs can only be met when we communicate at levels one or two mentioned below.

- **Level five: Cliché.** This is the safest level of communication. There is no personal sharing. Everyone is comfortably behind his or her mask. At this level, communication is never intentional and core personal or relational needs are never addressed. Examples of level five sharing include, “How’s the weather?” “How’s it going?” “I’m fine.”
- **Level four: Reporting the facts.** The level involves minimal sharing. Facts about other people are reported with no personal commentary; much like the news on TV. Examples of level four sharing include, “The Cats are in town.” “Looks like it may rain this weekend.” “The neighbors are going on vacation next week.”
- **Level three: Sharing my ideas and opinions.** This is where any real communication begins. Unfortunately, this is also where communication ends for the vast majority of couples. At this level a person is willing to give a little more of him or herself. Probing and risk-taking increase slightly. This is where couples begin to find out if it is safe to be vulnerable with one another. Examples of level three sharing include, “I really don’t like the new carpeting at church.” “I don’t think we talk often enough.”
- **Level two: Sharing my feelings, values and emotions.** Sharing of the personal self begins; “the real me is now peeking out to see if it is safe.” If a person senses a safe response—shared feelings in return—then communication will progress and personal sharing will occur. Masks begin to come off. People become vulnerable. Examples of level two sharing include, “It really hurts my feelings when you forget our anniversary.” “We don’t have fun like we used to.”
- **Level one: Complete emotional and personal truthful communication.** This is the level of confessional or transformational sharing that is only spoken in safe relationships. Here are the hopes and fears I may speak only with God. This is the place of deep speaking to deep, of truth-telling and vulnerability. The authentic self, with no mask, is finally present at this level. “I will share this only with someone I trust, someone with whom I have a “grace” relationship.” Examples of level one sharing include, “I am struggling with my faith.” “I have a need for more intimacy.” “I don’t have any real friends.” “I am struggling with an addiction.”

Next time we will take a look at some key communication processes and explore some tips for becoming better listeners. For now, let me leave you with some questions.

- Are you consistently saying, "Tell me more" or are you avoidant or defensive?
- Do you encourage others to share by being attentive, accepting and trustworthy?
- Can you recognize superficial avoidance patterns (levels four and five) in your own interactions?
- Are you using more "I" messages or "you" messages?
- Are you having level one transformational conversations?