

Assertive communication: 'I' statements

'I' statements are a special way of communicating assertively how you feel. They are particularly useful to use when you are feeling angry, upset, or just not getting what you want.

An 'I' statement tells the other person how you feel without blaming them. If you blame them, what usually happens is that they will become defensive and will stop listening to you, because they will be busy thinking what to say back to defend themselves. They may come back at you with a counter accusation, and in no time you will be going round in circles again.

There are four elements to an 'I' statement.

1. **When ...** The first step is to describe the situation objectively. Imagine you are describing what a camera might see if it was looking down on the situation. Examples might be:

'When I come home with my shopping and I can't park near my house ...' (rather than 'When I come home with my shopping and find you've **pinched** my car parking place **yet again...**')

'When you have parties and people stay late ...' (rather than 'When you have **rowdy** parties with **people shouting and screaming and banging car doors ...**')

'When you trimmed the hedge last weekend ...' (rather than 'When you trimmed the hedge **without even bothering to tell me first...**')

Describing other people's behaviour objectively can be difficult, as it is easy to stray into an *interpretation* of the event, or an *assumption about it*. For example, '**without even bothering to tell me first...**' the *assumption* is that the person doesn't care. Take out the blame words (highlighted above in red) and describe the specific behaviour or action as simply and objectively as possible. An *interpretation* might be something like this: 'When you went **behind my back** to talk to the housing officer...' Again, take out *your* interpretation of the event and describe what happened from the point of view of the camera, or objective third eye.

2. **I feel ...** Your response comes next. It might be an *emotion*. For example, 'When I come home with my shopping and I can't park near my house ...', **I feel annoyed.** Sometimes it is quite hard to find exactly the right word for what it is you ARE feeling. Most of us have a fairly limited vocabulary to find the right word for the exact feeling, so it is worth spending a few moments reflecting on what it is you are actually feeling. Then it is worth thinking about what you are actually going to say to your neighbour. You could soften the word you use with a phrase like 'a bit', or – if the feeling you have come up with is 'angry', choosing a lesser word like 'annoyed' or 'irritated', or 'frustrated'. So the statement becomes 'When I come home with my shopping and can't park near my house, **I feel a bit annoyed / irritated / frustrated.**'
3. **Your needs.** If you build this step in to your statement, it avoids you then telling the other person what they should do. The snag with telling people what they should do, in order to make things right for you, is that they may very well throw the whole thing back in your face by saying things like, 'Well, that's your problem!' or 'It's not my fault if you(*blame statement*).' So instead you might say something like this:

'When I come home with my shopping and can't park near my house, *I feel a bit annoyed / irritated / frustrated.* I need to unload near my house so I can manage to carry it in.'

Add reasons, if you like. You may want to add an element of explanation. This helps the other person to understand you better, and makes your request sound more reasonable. For example: 'I have trouble with my back / arm / shoulder etc and I can't carry heavy weights far.'

4. **Your preferred outcome.** Discuss what you would like to be able to do or have. This gives the other person an element of choice, and doesn't come across sounding like an ultimatum. They are much less likely to resist you than if you tell them what you expect. So: "When I come home with my shopping and can't park near my house, I feel a bit annoyed / irritated / frustrated. I need to unload near my house so I can manage to carry it in. I have trouble with my back / arm / shoulder and I can't carry heavy weights far. What I would really like is if you could park / ask your visitors to park on your drive / round the corner."
5. **How to begin.** Now you have worked out what you are going to say, try it out a few times, and remember when you go round to see your neighbour, you need to check it is a good time for them first: So: (*ring doorbell*) – 'Oh, hi Dave, I just wondered if I could have a quick word. Is this a good time?' If Dave indicates it is, you could introduce the subject briefly: 'It's about the car parking. It's just that / the thing is that ...' and carry on with your prepared statement.
6. **Build on the relationship.** If you have previously had a good relationship, you can add reassurance that you are looking for a peaceful solution. Giving them the benefit of the doubt is a good way to do this. 'You probably didn't realise / I'm sure we can work something out.' *Allow them time to respond.*
7. **If you have something to apologise for, do so.** 'Look, I just wanted to say I'm sorry if I came across a bit rough the other day. I'd like to talk things over with you and sort it out. The thing is ...'
8. **Thank them.** If the conversation has gone well, thank them and show them you appreciate their understanding. If it has not gone well, remain calm and polite, and say you need to think about what they have said. Remember you can talk to the assessor about how things went, and you have other options open to you.

A lot of people think they are being assertive, but actually can come across as aggressive or confrontational. That isn't good in terms of getting the outcome you want. So – here's how things might have gone if you had stayed with the first statement:

How not to do it!

'I came home with my shopping last night and find you've pinched my car parking place yet again. I'm fed up with telling you. Just stop stealing my parking space or you'll be sorry.' (*Ends with unspecified threat*). This might invite the following: 'What makes you think it's your space anyway? You don't own it! I'm sick of you and your complaints – and don't you dare threaten me or I'll call the police and have you for harassment!' (*The dispute has just escalated!*)

How to do it better

'When I come home with my shopping and can't park near my house, I feel a bit frustrated. I need to unload near my house so I can manage to carry it in. I have trouble with my shoulder and I can't carry heavy weights far. What I would really like is if you could ask your visitors to park on your drive or round the corner.'

This might invite the following: 'I'm sorry to hear that, Joe / Jean – I didn't know you had a problem with your shoulder. Is that a result of that accident you had when you fell off the roof / your horse? I didn't realise it was a problem for you if you couldn't park nearby. I tell you what, I'll mention it to Carole when she comes over again and make sure she parks in the drive in future. Is that OK for you?' (*You have got the outcome you wanted, and everyone remains on good terms.*)