

## SPEAKING WITHOUT OFFENDING

Have you ever hesitated to speak up due to fear of offending the other person or of being rejected or humiliated? I certainly have. Most of us have probably done this. Sometimes it is the wise and prudent path but mostly it isn't.

I chuckled the other day when my canoe partner of many years, cautiously shared that I made rather loud, slurping, smacking sounds when I eat apples or other fruit. I then remembered my sweet granddaughter telling me similar news. This also sparked memories of my dear paternal grandfather's eating noises. Aging has some inevitable drawbacks, if not indignities! Thankfully, some people give us feedback.

On the other hand, as human beings, we occasionally may explode or we may witness someone exploding. Emotional explosions generally have devastating impact upon the recipient person, whether a child or an adult.

### PURPOSE

So the question for many of us is how can I avoid the two extremes of being passive (not expressing ourselves) and being aggressive (exploding)? When we are passive we are generally fearful and insufficiently self-valuing. For many people, the inability to speak up originates in childhood trauma causing a state of paralysis or frozenness. So there are varying degrees of being unable to speak up.

On the aggressive side of the ledger, we may have a short fuse because we have collected so much emotional wounding that we finally erupt or explode. When we unload on someone, the recipient either gets flattened or retaliates in kind. Either way, it's not a pretty picture.

If we are afflicted with a short fuse, we are probably carrying around a heavy load of hurt or trauma, which we haven't addressed and resolved so we quickly explode. Think of road rage.

A third possibility is for us to be covertly aggressive. This is where we communicate our anger, alienation, hurt, resentment, etc. indirectly where we can reasonably deny our negative motivation. Examples would be being late, forgetting, sabotaging. This is labeled Passive-Aggressive. It is manifestly unhealthy. It is generally discernible as a reprehensible pattern of behavior.

In summary, when we are passive we don't value ourselves sufficiently. When we are aggressive we don't value the other person sufficiently. Both stances are unhealthy. The purpose of this article is to address the healthy stance of asserting ourselves where we balance valuing ourselves and valuing the other person.

### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Many people hesitate to speak up because they are afraid that they will emotionally hurt the other person if they do. People afflicted with this dilemma are

generally what we call “people persons”. They care about people. They love people but they are uncomfortable with conflict and they may suffer from the imbalance of valuing the other person much more than they value themselves. They are sometimes labeled as “people pleasers” or “doormats”.

Perhaps you will be uncomfortable with how we achieve the healthy stance of being assertive. We use sentences beginning with the pronoun “I” to assume an assertive stance. Unfortunately, many of us were taught to avoid “I” messages because they were deemed to be egotistical, self-centered, narcissistic, etc. So many of us have been well trained to avoid “I” messages.

Before explaining “I” messages, let’s explore the phrasing we typically use. We frequently begin sentences with the pronoun “you”. These sentences may be experienced as negative, positive or neutral. For example, “You were very caring” (positive), “You were never kind to me” (negative), “You were here before” (neutral).

The problem with sentences beginning with “you” is that they are judgments of the other person. We human beings instinctively dislike being judged. The guideline to follow is to only use a “you” message when doing active listening/mirroring. An example is “You felt anxious when your friend was driving so fast and recklessly.”

## BEING ASSERTIVE

Being assertive entails balancing self-valuing or self-respect with valuing and respecting the other person. It’s like saying “I’m important and you’re important too!”

The twin prerequisites are self-awareness and self-valuing/self-confidence. The essence is the ability to say “I feel” or “I am” followed by a one word labeling of the feeling state. The nexus is that how I feel equals who I am at that point in time. If you don’t tune into and respect my feelings, I don’t feel valued.

In our society, many of us routinely fail to differentiate between thoughts and feelings, which is necessary for optimum communication and mental health. We say “I feel that this sofa is too soft” equals “I think this sofa is too soft”. Or “I feel like we need to stop” equals “I think we need to stop.” The important issues are not to confuse thoughts and feelings but to balance thoughts and feelings. For example, “I feel uncomfortable on this sofa. I think the cushions are too soft.” Or “I feel hesitant to continue. I think we’ve exhausted this issue.”

As a small digression, saying “I feel” or “I am” followed by one word is also the essence of emotional intimacy. When I tell my friend or my spouse how I feel, I’m telling them who I am. Are they accepting and supportive or unaccepting and indifferent? The bottom line is that in a healthy relationship we can share our deepest heart/feelings in safety. We feel safe in sharing ourselves. We feel confident about the other person’s ability to hear me and support me. (See [The Transparent Self](#) by Sidney Jourard)

## ABC MESSAGE

A full and effective “I” message is an ABC message. It looks like this:

**A**ffect: I feel or I am followed by one word. I feel lonely equals I am lonely.

**B**ehavior: A non-blameful description of the other’s objectionable behavior, e.g.

When you spend so much time on the Internet.

**C**hange Request: I’d like you to work out an amount of time on the Internet that is genuinely acceptable to each of us.

The ABC message is also the most powerful way to affirm another person. For example, “I feel close to you when you look at me when I talk to you. I really like it when I feel connected with you.” Having an open heart with a soothing, pleasant tone of voice is essential.

Initially, using “I” messages or ABC messages may seem awkward, artificial or mechanical. But with time and persistence, they will feel authentic, powerful, and intimate. Keep in mind that in being passive, we hurt ourselves; in being aggressive we hurt the other person. When we are assertive we treasure ourselves and the other person.

*Dr. Jim David is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist practicing in Silver Spring, MD. Visit his website at [www.askdrdavidnow.com](http://www.askdrdavidnow.com) or email at [james519@comcast.net](mailto:james519@comcast.net).*