

From:

Relationship Enhancement Client Manual

Bernard Guerney, Jr. Ph.D.

Fourth Edition

Relationship Press

Silver Spring, Md

2005

pp-24 thru 35 ; & pp. A-37 thru A-43

1. Show understanding of the other person's probable position and viewpoint before you express your point of view. The Discussion/Negotiation skill covered in the next chapter can take care of this automatically in an ongoing conversation. However, sometimes you will be the one to bring up a topic. It is still possible to show your understanding of the other person. For example, suppose you would like your partner to give you advance notice before he brings people home for dinner. You might say, "I know it's probably a pain to have to think ahead when you want somebody to come home for dinner. I also know that it's not always easy to call me beforehand, however..."

Be sure that what you say is something that will make him feel understood; you do not want to cause him to feel defensive. For example, "I know you don't like to think about the effects of what you do on other people, including me" would probably cause him to feel defensive. This statement ignores the guideline and would not accomplish your goal.

2. Be the world's leading authority on everything you say. A scholar or scientist can be the world's leading authority on a special topic, but *you* are always the world's leading authority on *yourself*. You are the world's leading authority on what *you* believe, what *you* think, and how *you* feel. When you work to solve a problem with someone who has different views from yours, speak *only* on the subject of yourself.

3. **State your past, present, or expected feelings if they are important to the issue.** Feelings are often a very important, sometimes the most important, aspect of an interpersonal problem or conflict. By “feelings,” we mean *emotionally important* states—such as feeling neglected, loved, cared for, burdened, overwhelmed, angry, satisfied, or irritated.

A statement of feeling might be, “It upsets me when I see things lying around instead of being in particular places.” When you include your feelings, you add an important element that the other person needs to consider in thinking about the issue. Also, being aware of how you feel about something may change the other person's view of a situation. Sometimes it will evoke concern, sympathy, and cooperation.

4. **Be specific if you want others to change in some way.** That is, concentrate your remarks as much as possible on their behavior and not on their motivation or character. Talk about specific instances. You may generalize when you are unhappy about a person's behavior and wish to see it change. You may think and speak of her *character* or *motives*. In fact, you may often *overgeneralize* and express your views in extremes. For example, you might say, “You're just lazy,” or “You never think about me.” Statements such as these make it difficult for your partner to listen with an open mind. Such statements are likely to make her defensive. She also may see these statements as unfair and inaccurate—or even as an attack. She might feel threatened and angry and may want to retaliate. Your partner will probably argue about the accuracy of your statements and make a counterattack of some kind. Her reaction to what you said will cause the two of you to get sidetracked from the real issue, and then it will be harder to solve the problem. You can reduce these reactions by being specific and concentrating on the actual behavior you'd like to see changed. Your statements will seem more believable and less unfair. So, try to pinpoint times, places, and circumstances that have led to your desire to see change.

You can be pretty sure that your partner will see your statement as an unfair or inaccurate overgeneralization if you use words like “always,” “never,” “everyone,” or “nobody.” Examples are:

- ◆ “You’re always after me.”
- ◆ “You’re never on time.”
- ◆ “You constantly interrupt me.”
- ◆ “I’m the only one who cares about...”
- ◆ “Everybody knows that...”
- ◆ “All my other friends...”
- ◆ “People just don’t...”

You may regard these as harmless figures of speech and mere statements of emphasis. Nevertheless, these words will sting your partner. They also will give her an opportunity to argue about what other people do or don’t do, or to bring up exceptions to prove you wrong. They start arguments about your statements instead of focusing attention on the real issue: the specific behaviors that *you* do not like and how and why they disturb *you*.

Irritation, frustration, and anger are usually the cause of overgeneralizations. Avoid using exaggerations (such as, “You always...” or “You never...”) to express your feelings indirectly. She will listen to your statements more closely and argue less often if you express these feelings directly. For example, rather than “You’re never on time,” say “I’m really mad. It’s nine o’clock and I’ve been waiting an hour because as I remember we agreed to meet at eight. It seems to me this has happened two or three other times this month too.”

Also avoid stating as fact any ideas you’ve drawn about your partner’s attitudes, motives, or character. For example, avoid statements like:

- ◆ “You’re insensitive.”

- ◆ “You don't care about me.”
- ◆ “You are a procrastinator.”
- ◆ “You're not ambitious enough.”
- ◆ “You underestimate yourself.”

Instead of such generalizations, describe the behaviors that led you to the conclusions. You can discuss your *ideas* about your partner's attitudes, motives, and character if those ideas disturb you more than the behavior itself. Even then, state your ideas as *your* ideas or fears—not as facts or convictions.

Being specific and concentrating on your partner's behaviors and specific events help you avoid unnecessary and unproductive arguments. In addition, specific details and behaviors are more clear and create a solid common ground for your search for solutions.

5. State your positive assumptions, attitudes, feelings, and expectations about the other person as they relate to the issue. Make this statement as soon as you are emotionally able. This is probably the most important aspect of Expressive skill. It is also the most difficult to learn and apply. First, you may have difficulty stating your underlying positive feelings about your partner when you want to change his views or behaviors. Your attention is focused in the opposite direction. You are concentrating on the negative aspects of the situation and your partner. These aspects naturally drive out positive views that you also have about him and your relationship. In addition, you are probably experiencing strong emotions at the time of your discussion. These emotions make it very difficult for you to think and talk about positive features. You may experience fear and anger immediately before and during such a meeting.

You may feel fear because you have tried to change someone's behavior in the past and received an annoyed or angry response. This may have happened because you

lacked the skills to encourage change. In turn, you felt upset or anxious. Creating such a “scene” probably did not result in the payoff you wanted. Now, you may feel anxiety and the fear of disappointment when you *think about* asking someone to change. As a result, you may delay bringing up a request for change. You hope the undesired behavior will go away on its own. You hope that your partner or the situation will change if you hint that you are displeased or upset. The longer you delay, the longer the behavior will continue. Then, you become more irritated or angry.

In addition, you now have a second cause for anger: your partner seems insensitive to your disappointment. Your hints should have been sufficient, you believe, to cause the change. Therefore, you become even more frustrated and angry. Then, you find more fault with your partner because you’re angry. More faults provide more reasons to be angry. In this manner, you create a vicious cycle.

You may have had several unsuccessful experiences requesting people to change. As a result, you probably feel that most people will not change only to please you. Also, you may think that your desires are not a sufficient reason to ask someone to change. You may feel that you must *justify* the request for change to yourself and to your partner on “objective” grounds. Often, this means you must find your partner's behavior wrong, atypical, maladjusted, unproductive, silly, childish, or immature. Convincing yourself that such a real flaw exists justifies your anger. The anger is now free to grow stronger. At this point, you are very angry and believe you have “objective” grounds to request change. When you finally bring up the issue, your partner will feel as though the request is an attack on his motives, personality, character, adequacy, or normalcy.

Because you may not think it's okay to ask for favors, you may delay talking about what's bothering you. You might also delay because you're afraid of how the conversation might go. When you finally bring up the issue, it is often “on the spur of the moment.” Something happens that you see as “the last straw.” You then act

impulsively and do not feel responsible for what you say. You “lose control,” and, therefore, feel free to “get hot under the collar” (although the guilt may surface later).

Of course, all of this makes it unlikely that you will be able to solve the problem. Your partner, feeling attacked, will not listen well nor is he likely to feel like cooperating. He will be more concerned with protecting his self-image. Often to protect his self-image he will counterattack. In the first few minutes of a discussion like this, a genuine solution becomes a lost cause. Little chance exists for a real solution, one that depends on respectful listening and honest self-examination. The discussion can become like a “battle” or a contest which you are each trying to win. It is no longer two people working together to solve a problem that is bothering one of them. In a contest there is a winner and a loser, and the loser is unlikely to be satisfied with any agreement, so the agreement probably won't last. In a battle, there are usually casualties, and in this case it's the good feelings about your relationship. Only when two people work together as teammates to solve a hard problem will they find satisfying and lasting solutions. Only working as teammates will build the best relationship.

How, then, can you avoid these emotional “booby traps?” How can you overcome the difficulties? How can you make the process of requesting change less anxiety-producing and accusatory, and more productive? The first step is to tackle the issue early, before frustration and anger build. This will become easier as you become increasingly familiar with Empathic, Expressive, and the other Relationship Enhancement* (RE) skills. Using these specific skills will lead to discussions that will go better and gradually build your confidence in your ability to get what you want. In return, you will be able to help others get what they want, without undue self-sacrifice. That is, gaining, practicing, and perfecting these skills will help you resolve interpersonal conflicts and problems with greater confidence *as they arise*. If you resolve conflicts and problems early, the potential fear and anger will not build to such

high levels. You will then find that the conflicts and problems are easier to solve. You will be less hesitant to bring them up when they first enter your mind as problems. Your success will then make it easier to be prompt the next time. A positive cycle can replace the vicious cycle.

But, what can you do before using these skills becomes second nature? How do you deal with the anger you feel? How can you bring the positive underlying aspects of the relationship into focus so your partner will listen to your request? For now, when you find yourself “losing control” out of frustration or anger, try using that feeling as a cue. Express your feelings subjectively and directly. Tell your partner that you feel frustrated or angry and mention the specific behavior that has caused the feelings. This may release your feelings enough so you are ready to think and act skillfully.

However, if your control is not enough to act skillfully, simply say that you are not sufficiently in control to discuss the issue now but want to talk about it soon. Suggest a specific time for that discussion.

Also, you may have to tell your partner your negative feelings about a longstanding issue before you feel ready to be constructive. If you use these guidelines, you should be able to overcome most or all of the damage to your partner and to the problem-solving process. Before deciding if you need to tell her your negative feelings, you might try to release your anger outside her presence. You could carry on imaginary conversations in which you vent your anger. (No harm is done as long as your partner doesn't hear it!) You could fantasize expressing your anger as vividly and directly as you wish. Some people write angry notes and letters and then throw them away. When it's time to discuss the issue, you still may feel the need to express your anger or frustration. Before you move toward solving the problem, express these feelings. Express yourself as strongly as you wish, but don't resort to physical violence. Use the Expressive skills you've learned to reduce the potential damage to the relationship.

After you express your anger, try to bring positive elements to the surface. Discuss your positive views and feelings about your partner and her character and potential. This will help her listen and wish to reach a solution that satisfies both of you.

If you are trying to work out a conflict with someone, rather than just end the relationship, it must mean that you see significant, positive features about the person. Bring these positive features to the surface as they relate to the conflict or problem. Your attempt to change the situation implies that the partner shows at least one of the following positive attributes:

- a. You believe your partner is willing to give your views some consideration.
- b. You think your partner cares, at least a little, about your views or feelings.
- c. You think your partner has the necessary flexibility, intelligence, and resources to change his views or actions.

If you don't believe these positive things, why are you involved with this person at all? If you don't believe any of these things, why waste your time trying to bring about change? If possible, get out of the situation; leave the person behind you.

If you do believe these things, talk about them. The three positive attributes listed above are the bare minimum. Your partner may have other positive qualities that relate to the issue under discussion.

It is important to only state positive things you truly believe and feel. "Soft soaping" or "buttering up" the person, that is, saying positive things you don't really mean, will only cause problems in the long run. Be honest, while making your statements in the most caring way possible. Being honest and caring are the two most

important things you can do to improve your relationships and resolve conflicts with other people.

6. When you want another person to make changes, state an Interpersonal Message at an appropriate time. An Interpersonal Message is your specific request that the other person change his perceptions, attitudes, or behavior. Your Interpersonal Message should follow the Expressive skill guidelines. First, show your partner that you understand his feelings and point of view. Tell him what thoughts and feelings you have had that led to your request for change. Emphasize your positive attitudes and feelings about the person as they relate to the request. After you have done these things, present your Interpersonal Message.

State the request subjectively, avoiding any suggestion that you are asking him to behave in a “better,” “more normal,” “more mature,” or “more sensible” manner. Base the request on *your* desire and *your* values, perceptions, and feelings. Be very specific and behavioral. Describe the *behavior* you want to see in terms of what you can *see* or *hear*. If you must talk about generalities, be sure to give specific behavioral examples.

For example, you might want to ask someone to be more considerate. Specific behavioral examples might include:

- ◆ Looking at you rather than doing something else when you are speaking;
- ◆ Not playing the radio when you are talking on the telephone; or
- ◆ Putting things back where they belong after using them.

You might take a general approach at times. However, consider tackling each of these issues at different times and handling them as specific, isolated issues. Conclude your

Interpersonal Message with the positive perceptions you have of the other person. Discuss the positive effects his cooperation would have on your feelings and behaviors.

Look at the following Interpersonal Message. It includes many of the other guidelines as well. Be aware, however, that the other guidelines could have been included in an earlier part of the conversation. As a result, they would not need to be in the Interpersonal Message itself.

I find talking to my sister on the telephone relaxing. It really helps me unwind. It is also important to me to keep in touch with my family. I know you enjoy listening to the stereo in the evenings. It would probably be a sacrifice not to listen to the stereo or to tie yourself down with the headphones. You've been helpful to me in other ways. You have helped out with cooking and laundry when I've felt overwhelmed. I hope you will be willing to help me now, too. I would really appreciate it. I wonder whether I could make a special request. When I make my weekly call to my sister, I'm wondering if you would be willing to help me out either by not listening to the stereo or by using the headphones. It would really help me to unwind, and then I could join you for a relaxing evening.

This message is *essential* when asking others to change. The Interpersonal Message adds to the other skills:

- a. a clear, specific statement of your wishes; and
- b. the benefits you both would derive if he would help you meet your needs.

Sometimes, you just have to get negative feelings off your chest. But it's not always necessary to state negative feelings. If you can go directly and positively to what

you want, and how it will help you and the other person too, you will probably reach your goal more quickly.

We recommend that you study the Expressive Skill Guidelines in the Appendix (page A-37) for this topic to reinforce what you have learned in this chapter.

We also recommend that you study the RE Phrase Finder. The RE Phrase Finder is on page A-39. It gives many examples of statements people often make which are unskillful. Then it gives a skilled Expressive statement you could say instead.



Expressive Skill Guidelines

Your Goals as a Skillful Expresser Are

1. To promote a spirit of cooperation in order to facilitate open communication and foster cooperative problem solving.
2. To communicate all your experiences, feelings, concerns and desires to your partner openly, honestly and clearly.
3. To express yourself in a manner that minimizes defensiveness in your partner and maximizes receptivity to hearing your point of view.

Guidelines for Being a Skillful Expresser

1. Be respectful. Let your partner know you have an issue before you begin to discuss it, and request that he or she agree to join you in a skilled dialogue.
2. To help build a spirit of cooperation, begin your expressive statement with an Underlying Positive. Let your partner know how important he or she is to you or express something positive about your partner related to the issue you wish to discuss.
3. When possible, use “preemptive” empathy to acknowledge your partner’s feelings, concerns or difficulties relating to the issue.
4. Express all your relevant feelings, concerns and desires relating to the issue.
5. Be subjective and speak from your own point of view.

Avoid all claims about what “really” happened, or what supposedly is or is not true, accurate, normal, right or good.

Also avoid implying that your way of thinking, memory, insight, values, or morals is superior to those of your partner.

Instead, frame everything your partner might see differently in terms of your own perception, memory, personal commitments, values, etc.

6. Avoid implying that there is something “wrong” with your partner as a person because you are unhappy with your partner’s behavior. Instead, keep the focus on your own experience and describe the impact that your partner’s behavior has on you.
7. Be specific when referring to your partner’s behavior. Avoid generalizations about your partner’s character (“I think you’re lazy”), behavior (“You always...” or “You never...”), motives (“You did that to hurt me”), or commitment to the relationship (“You don’t care about our relationship”). *“you really should be in school.”*
8. When relevant, make a specific request for a change in behavior. Explain the benefits of your requested change to you, your partner and/or the relationship.

Relationship Enhancement™ Phrase Finder
--

Staying Subjective

Incite...**Insight...**

You make me...

When you act that way, I get...
 When you talk that way, I feel...

You should...

I would like you to...
 I think it would be best if you...

Most men think...

I would like you to...

Most women feel...

I wish you would...

Most men do...

I would like it if you...

The right thing to do...

I would like you to...
 I wish you would...
 I would like it if you...
 [if talking about self] I would respect
 myself more if I...

The correct thing to do...

I would like you to...
 I wish you would...
 I would like it if you...
 [if talking about self] I would respect
 myself more if I...

A mature (nice, considerate, healthy,
 sociable, normal, moral, etc.) person
 would...

I would like you to...
 I wish you would...
 I would like it if you...
 [if talking about self] I would respect
 myself more if I...

A good father would...

I would like you to...

A good wife would...

I wish you would...

A good provider would...

I would like it if you...

You said you would...

As I remember it, you said you would...

Incite...

We (you) (they) agreed that...

You're driving too fast!

Insight...

As I remember it, we (you) (they) agreed...

I'm very nervous about this speed. It would be a big help to me if you slowed down some. I'd really appreciate that.

The following “incite” statement is subjective (“I think”) but it requires a change. The revised statement gets rid of the generalization about character. It also includes a meaningful feeling statement.

I don't think (believe) you are a very caring (considerate, warm, thoughtful, energetic, sensitive) person.

When you act (talk) the way I've described, I don't feel cared for (loved, thought-about, understood, as though I can count on you to do things that need to be done around here, etc.).

Predictive statements are usually threatening and stimulate arguments. Putting “I think” in front is not much help. Try to make them more subjective and provide a “feeling” base.

When the time comes, you will...

Based on the way I thought you acted in the past [example may help], I'm *afraid* that when the time comes, you *may*...

The way you react to those situations is...

Based on my memory of our past reactions [examples?], I find myself being *nervous* because I think that you *might*...

When I “X,” then you “Y.”

I'm very uncomfortable when I think about doing “X” because, in my mind, there's a pattern. When I “X,” I *expect* that you will “Y.”

Feelings

Incite...

I feel that (it) (they) (he) (she)...

Insight...

I *think* that...

“Feel” should not be followed by “that” but by an emotion (sad, upset, etc.). If you use the term “that” or “that you,” you are not talking about a feeling. You are talking about a thought.

If the reason you are using “feel” instead of “think” is to show tentativeness, say:

I think perhaps...

Perhaps...

Maybe...

Specifying Rather Than Generalizing

Incite...

As I see it, you *always*...

As I see it, you *never*...

I think you are an inconsiderate person...

Insight...

As I see it, you frequently...

It seems to me you often...

I think that many times you...

As I see it, you seldom...

I don't think it's very often that you...

I don't think it's very frequent that you...

I don't feel cared-about when you...

I don't think our daughter feels cared for enough because...

I doubt that your associates feel looked after when you don't...

As I see you, you're not one for hard work. You're lazy...

I'm distressed to see that you have failed several times this month...
[followed by specific incidents]
I am upset that you don't do more around the house...
My understanding was that we agreed that you would...

My perception is that you're a slob...

To me, it still looks like a mess...
I would like to talk to you about the way you keep your desk. The way it looks bothers me...
I prefer this room to look more orderly than it does right now...

I feel you drive too fast...

I feel nervous and scared when we go at some of the speeds you often drive. Today was an example...

Note: In examples above, making a statement subjective (“I feel,” “I think,” “As I see it,” “My perception is”) does not remove the problem of overgeneralization (“too fast,” “inconsiderate person,” “lazy,” “a slob”). This overgeneralization must be corrected.

Underlying Positives

Incite...

I get angry when you play golf on Saturdays...

or

Most men stay with their families on weekends...

or

If you really cared about me and the kids, you'd spend more time at home.

Insight...

I miss you when you're gone. I get frustrated and then angry at you when you play golf on Saturday. Saturday seems like one of the few times we can spend time together...

or

I enjoy your company when you're here. I really look forward to our having time together on the weekends. *It lifts my spirits to be with you.* I think the *kids also like to be with you.* So, it's very disappointing to me—and I think to them—when we don't have the opportunity to be with you. I know how much golf means to you, but, I would really appreciate...

I would like you to take more responsibility for doing things around the house...

I appreciate the things that you do around the house, such as (give examples). I also know that your other responsibilities don't give you much time for relaxation. However, I'm really feeling burdened, and I do think you care about that. I could really use some help and would like you to take more responsibility around the house...

(Father to teenager): I think it's very important for your future that you get into college. To assure that, I believe you need to get your grades up. So, I'd really feel less anxious if I saw you working harder to accomplish that...

I regard you as being very bright. I have also seen that you are able to do very well in your schoolwork when you set your mind to it. I really believe you are capable of doing very well in school. I think it's very important for your future that you get into college. To do that, I believe you need to get your grades up. I'd really feel less anxious if I saw you doing more to accomplish that...