

# EFFECTIVE EXPRESSION

Often, it seems that the harder you try to have your needs met, the less successful you are. Instead of inviting others to listen and cooperate, you may drive them away with complaints, attacks, lectures, or orders. To get what you want, you need to take your attention off others and focus on yourself—your feelings, wants, and limits:

- State your feelings by using the word “I” and naming an emotion: “I feel hopeless when you constantly criticize me.” This is a constructive way to express feelings and furnishes others with information about the effects of their behavior. Saying “I think you should . . .” is an opinion that can make others stop listening or strike back. “I feel that you . . .” disguises opinions as feelings. “You make me feel . . .” is blaming.
- Make requests by asking questions: “Would you tell me something I’ve done well before you criticize me?” Even when people understand how you feel, they still may not know what to do. It is up to you to identify what you would like from them. It helps to list three things others can do to resolve issues. Saying “I would like you to . . .” is a statement and does not require a commitment. “Could you . . . ?” asks if others are able and implies that if they can do something, they should. “Would you . . . ?” gives others the freedom to say “No” while encouraging cooperation.
- Set limits by knowing what you are willing and not willing to do: “I will act hard of hearing when you don’t say something kind before you complain.” If others do not respond to your requests or offer acceptable solutions of their own, it is time to stop talking and act. Actions can be playful, like the one above, or adamant: “If you continue to yell, I will leave for an hour.” Often, it is unnecessary to state your limits out loud. When others can sense that you will take action, they are more responsive.

Complaints, criticisms, and orders focus on others and start with the word “You.” Instead, turn useless “you messages” into words that work:

<b>You Message</b> <i>You should . . .</i>	<b>State Feelings</b> <i>I feel . . . when you . . .</i>	<b>Make Requests</b> <i>Would you . . .</i>	<b>Set Limits</b> <i>I will (not) . . .</i>
1. I feel that you have no right to accuse me!	I am sorry you have so much trouble trusting me.	Before making accusations, would you ask me why I’m late?	I will rephrase any accusations for you: “Did you just ask me . . .?”
2. Why don’t you just shut up and listen for once!	I feel annoyed when you give me unwanted advice.	Would you ask for my ideas before giving me advice?	I will cut our conversations short when you give me unwanted advice.
3. You make me feel useless.	I feel powerless when you don’t consult me about family decisions.	Would you get my input before you make family decisions?	I will not cooperate with decisions when I’ve had no input.
4. You’re not even trying to find a job.	I feel used when you don’t tell me what you’re doing to find work.	Would you tell me what you’ve done to find a job?	I’m not willing for you to stay longer than next week.
5. You have no consideration for others.	I feel frustrated when you don’t do what I ask you to do.	Would you put away your clothes during the next commercial?	I will turn off the TV until you have done what I’ve asked.

## INTROSPECT TO IDENTIFY YOUR FEELINGS, WANTS, AND LIMITS

The more shades and intensities with which you express your emotions, the better you will be understood. Often, it is important to dig for more painful feelings of fear and hurt that lie beneath surface anger:

**Anger:** Irritated → frustrated → resentful → guilty → envious → jealous → furious → loathing

**Fear:** Concerned → embarrassed → suspicious → worried → tense → anxious → terrified

**Sadness:** Hurt → lonely → helpless → discouraged → defeated → depressed → despairing

Making requests is especially hard for people who have never given themselves permission to have wants and desires. They may be concerned that their requests will be refused or that others will comply out of obligation instead of desire. If your requests are refused, you are no worse off than if you had not asked at all. It can actually help people further their development when they reluctantly cooperate. It is unfair to require people to *want* to do things they are *willing* to do.

## PREPARE PEOPLE TO LISTEN

Before you can even begin to make your point, you may first have to prepare others to listen. This is especially true when others are angry, talkative, or controlling. Often, it is necessary to listen first! Show you understand by rephrasing others' thoughts, recognizing their feelings, and validating factors that contribute to those feelings. Withhold your own ideas until others become curious about where you stand. Then you can help them focus their attention on you:

- Ask suggestive questions before making your point: "Do you want to know my concerns, what I want, if I agree? Are you sure?" This helps others switch gears and put on their listening hats.
- Keep your points brief and frequently ask for a rephrase: "Am I making any sense? What does it sound like I'm saying? You've almost got it. Do you want to know the part that's missing?"
- Help others understand your feelings by asking: "I'm not sure what I'm feeling. Do you know?" "Can you help me understand why I might feel that way?"

Not only will the above questions encourage others to focus on you, they will help you look at yourself. Intently listening to others can clarify any differences between you and make communication more efficient and effective.