

Communications Styles

Summary

- Humans have communication styles when it comes to conflict. There are four chief types: passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, and assertive.
- In aggressive communication, the focus is on winning, often at the expense of healthy dialogue. Such behaviour can lead to feelings of resentment, fear, and defensiveness in the other party, hindering effective communication and escalating conflicts.
- A passive communication style tends to avoid confrontation and prioritize or accommodate the needs of others.
- A passive-aggressive communication style mixes elements of the passive and aggressive styles. It will typically employ sarcasm, indirect communication and avoiding conversation.
- Assertive communication strikes a balance between aggression and passivity, emphasizing clarity, respect, and empathy in interactions.
- Most of us don't use a single communication style in every interaction; they're simply tools that you can use to communicate.
- "I statements" are a practical tool rooted in assertive communication principles, enabling individuals to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs in a non-confrontational manner. This communication technique shifts the focus from blaming or accusing the other party to expressing one's own experiences and emotions.

Communication is the cornerstone of human interaction, shaping relationships, resolving conflicts, and fostering understanding. Humans communicate their thoughts and feelings to each other in several different styles. From aggressive to passive to assertive, each style carries its own set of inferences and consequences.

In this section, we examine these four communication styles, exploring their characteristics, effects, and applications.

Additionally, we explore the function of "I statements", a powerful tool in the appropriate context for constructive dialogue, particularly in familial conflicts between parents and carers and offspring.

Aggressive Communication

Aggressive communication is characterised by a forceful and often confrontational approach. Individuals employing this style tend to prioritize their own needs and desires while disregarding the feelings and needs of others. They will ignore others' rights in order to support their own. They often alienate and hurts others yet are defensive or hostile when confronted. They may use intimidation, hostility, or manipulation to assert dominance and control in conversations.

In aggressive communication, the focus is on winning at any cost, often at the expense of healthy dialogue and mutual respect. Such behaviour can lead to feelings of resentment, fear, and defensiveness in the other party or parties, hindering effective communication and escalating conflicts.

Examples of aggressive communication include statements like "this is what we're doing" or "get over it"; body language includes crossing arms, eye rolling, or finger pointing.

Passive Communication

On the opposite end of the spectrum lies passive communication, where individuals tend to avoid confrontation and prioritize or accommodate the needs of others over their own. This communication style is characterized by a lack of assertiveness, with individuals failing to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and boundaries adequately.

Passive communicators may resort to silence, avoidance, or compliance to avoid conflict, often at the expense of their own needs and wellbeing.

While this approach may seem non-confrontational on the surface, it can foster resentment, misunderstanding, and a lack of authentic connection in relationships and may exacerbate the conflict situation.

That said, there will be times when adopting a passive communications style can be a safer communication option when a conflict may escalate to violence.

Examples include statements like "I'm okay with whatever you want to do"; body language includes failing to make eye contact or looking down.

Passive Aggressive Communication

A passive-aggressive communication style mixes elements of the passive and aggressive styles. It derives from mixed feelings, wanting on the one hand to control while being too cautious to come out and say it. A person

who is passive-aggressive will have surrendered a point but not their anger over having done so, which they can't or won't express directly. Instead, they will pursue a course of indirect aggression and even sabotage to achieve their goal or to revenge themselves on those they believe have frustrated them.

A passive-aggressive communication style will typically employ sarcasm, indirect communication and avoiding conversation.

Examples include passive statements and body language followed by giving the "silent treatment", spreading rumours, and undermining another person's efforts.

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication strikes a balance between aggression and passivity, emphasizing clarity, respect, and empathy in interactions. Assertive communicators express their thoughts, feelings, and boundaries confidently and respectfully while also listening attentively to others' perspectives.

Unlike aggressive communication, assertiveness should seek to prioritise mutual understanding and clarity rather than dominance or control. It fosters open dialogue, problem-solving, and the cultivation of healthy relationships built on trust and respect. Assertive communication like all communication is a 'skill' and skills need to be practiced to become more effective and productive.

Examples include "I" statements like "I feel...when you...and I need for you to do..."; body language includes eye contact, straight posture, and relaxed gestures.

Keep in Mind

Most of us don't use a single communication style in every interaction; they're simply tools that you can use to communicate.

In general, assertive communication is most likely to lead to respectful and longer-term relationships, so that's the style to strive for in most situations.

However, passive and aggressive communication might work better on some occasions. For example, if you are feeling fearful that you are about to be harmed, passive communication may help to defuse the situation and aggressive communication might prevent the problem from getting worse.

While the passive communication style can be helpful, when people pair it with subtle aggression, the passive-aggressive style is likely to interfere with or undermine healthy relationships.

The following table charts the different characteristics of the different communication styles (it is taken from Luca Buffalmano's [The Four Communication Styles: Description & Examples](#), based on work by Randy Patterson):

	Passive	Aggressive	Passive-Aggressive	Assertive
Actions	Keeps quiet Puts himself down Apologizes for self-expression Hides his disagreement Inconvenience himself	Express himself over others Belittle or dismiss others Ignore, insults, or attacks other opinions	Denies personal responsibility Covert aggression Sarcastic Agrees to avoid discussion, then looks for ways to defect on the agreement	Directly express needs, wants & feelings Expects others to be equally open & honest Accepts different opinions without dismissing them
Looks	Makes himself small Looks down & hunch over Avoids eye contact Speaks softly	Makes himself large Looks threatening Penetrating eye contact Loud	Similar to passive	Relaxed Comfortable body language Frequent eye contact (but not glaring)
Beliefs	My needs are less important than others I don't have as many rights as others My contributions are not as valuable as others	My needs are more important and justified than others I have more rights than others My contributions are more valuable than others	My needs come first, but I can't express that openly I am not responsible for my actions I am entitled to get it my own way, even if I made different commitments	My needs are equally important as others I have equal rights We both can make valuable contributions I am responsible for my behavior
Emotions	Fear of rejection Helplessness & low self-esteem Frustration Resentment towards others who "use me"	Anger Powerful (or still angry) when winning over others Later, potentially remorseful for mistreating others	Fear of rejection if being direct or assertive Resentful of people's demands & power Fear of being controlled	Positive feelings about self Positive feelings about socializing with others Good self-esteem
Goals	Avoid conflict Please others (no matter at what cost to me) Let others take control (including of my actions)	Win at any costs Control others Always make sure others know who's in charge	Get it my way, without taking responsibility Get it my way, but without having to assert myself	Express himself Find an agreement Keep fair boundaries of mutual respect

I Statements

"I statements" are a practical tool rooted in assertive communication principles, enabling individuals to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs in a non-confrontational manner. This communication technique shifts the focus from blaming or accusing the other party to expressing one's own experiences and emotions.

For instance, instead of saying, "You always ignore my feelings," a person might use an "I statement" such as, "I feel overlooked when my concerns aren't acknowledged."

An 'I statement' isn't about being polite, it's about being clear – clear about where you're coming from. Nevertheless, by framing the message in terms of personal experiences and emotions, "I statements" reduce defensiveness and promote empathy and understanding.

In the context of familial conflicts between parents and offspring, "I statements" can be particularly effective in fostering constructive dialogue and resolving disputes without escalating tensions.

When navigating sensitive topics such as curfews, academic performance, or lifestyle choices, both parties can benefit from adopting an assertive communication approach supplemented by "I statements."

For instance, a parent might say, "I feel worried about your safety when you stay out late without informing me," instead of resorting to accusations or ultimatums. Similarly, an offspring might express, "I feel overwhelmed and or stressed because of my studies and would appreciate your support," rather than withdrawing or acting out rebelliously.

By using "I statements," parents and offspring can communicate their perspectives, needs, and concerns in a manner that encourages empathy, validation, and collaborative problem-solving. This approach fosters mutual respect, strengthens familial bonds, and cultivates a supportive environment conducive to growth and understanding.

We put together "I Statements" according to this pattern:

- Begin with how you feel:
'I don't like it...'
- Continue with what has caused this feeling:
'...when you talk to me in that tone...'
- Explain why you feel that way:
'...because it makes me feel like you don't respect me.'
- Say what you'd prefer:
'I would prefer that we spoke to each other in a civil tone.'

In conclusion, effective communication is essential connection and for managing the complexities of human relationships and resolving conflicts constructively. By understanding the nuances of communication styles – from aggressive to passive to assertive – and applying techniques such as "I statements," appropriately and not over use it, individuals can foster meaningful connections, bridge differences, and cultivate harmonious relationships grounded in respect, empathy, and mutual understanding.

References and Further Reading

["I" Messages or "I" Statements. Binghamton University Ombuds Office.](#)

[The 4 Communication Styles: Description & Examples by Lucio Buffalmano. The Powermoves, 2023.](#)

[The Assertiveness Workbook: Notes & Review by Lucio Buffalmano. The Powermoves, 2023.](#)

[Types of Communication Styles And How to Identify Them by Meg Palmer. Southern New Hampshire University, 2023.](#)

[Understanding Your Communication Style. U Matter, Princeton University.](#)