

elevate your RELATIONSHIP

Owning the Message

Every living thing needs nurturing and attention. If you plant a tree and want it to thrive, you wouldn't simply set the tree in the yard and hope for the best. Instead, you would water it, carefully monitor its growth, and protect it from possible weather, insect, or disease damage. A relationship, just like a newly planted tree, needs similar care.

Are you nurturing your most important relationship? David and Amy Olson, authors of *Empowering Couples: Building on Your Strengths* (Life Innovations Inc., 2000), recommend five tips for nurturing a relationship:

- Focus on the good in each other.
- Praise each other often.
- Take time to listen. Listen to understand, not to judge.
- Be assertive. Let your partner know what you want—don't let your needs become a guessing game.
- Give your relationship top priority.

These suggestions sound easy, but more often than not, we find ourselves ignoring our partner's feelings and needs. When partners don't feel understood and appreciated, this could lead to feelings of resentment and disinterest. Eventually, these feelings can result in a lack of desire to nurture the relationship.

One of the best ways to avoid this negative situation and make Olson's suggestions a part of our everyday routine, is to use "I" statements. Use "I" statements to discuss your feelings and communicate facts without placing blame. Since "I" messages do not communicate blame, they are less likely to be misunderstood or promote defensiveness in the receiver.

In contrast, negative "you" messages (e.g., "you always" or "you never") create defensiveness because they sound accusatory and put down the other person. When we feel blamed, accused, or attacked, we will usually defend ourselves and then counterattack. In other words, put-downs invite other put-downs, and over time this pattern of communication can be harmful to a relationship.

Here are a few examples of "I" versus "You" statements. How would you respond to the following?

- "I feel hurt when you say negative things about me in front of your friends." vs. "You always put me down in front of your friends"
- "I feel lonely when I am home alone so much. I would like to spend more time with you." vs. "Why don't you ever stay home?"
- "I feel overwhelmed with housework and could really use your help. Could you please put your dishes away?" vs. "You are so lazy! Why can't you put your dishes in the dishwasher?!"

Instead of making comments to put your spouse down, make compliments to boost them up! For example, "I like it when you say nice things about me," "I enjoy spending time with you," and "I appreciate it when you share the housework with me." Think of your partner as a team member. Supporting your partner personally will inevitably benefit both of you. Daily compliments will prevent your relationship from becoming routine and make it more mutually satisfying. Receiving a compliment not only makes you feel good but also makes you feel good about the person giving the compliment.

Activity

We all like positive feedback and to have someone say something nice about us. Yet we generally do not say nice things as often as we should—or hear them as often as we would like. Take a few moments at the end of each day to share with each other five things you liked about your relationship and your partner that day or in general. Practice using "I" messages as you take turns sharing these feelings.

For more resources, visit healthyrelationships.uga.edu and ElevateCouplesGeorgia.com.

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