



Military Caregiving Communication Series [“I” Messages: Strategies for Caregiver Conversations]

In our conversations the words “I” and “You” are powerful because they send messages regarding our thoughts and feelings. Let’s look at some examples of how “I” messages can help avoid misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

Caregiver Scenario

Maggie is 30 years old. She has been a military caregiver to her husband, John, since he was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury due to combat injuries while deployed. The severity of John’s traumatic brain injury has left him with short-term memory loss and a speech impediment. In addition to monitoring John’s daily activities and medication intake, Maggie is responsible for seeing that John attends weekly speech therapy sessions.

Carol, John’s mother, has dropped by for a visit, but Maggie doesn’t have much to say to her.

Carol: “What’s wrong Maggie? Why are you so quiet?”

Maggie: “Nothing’s wrong. Everything is just fine.”

Carol: “From your tone of voice, I have a feeling you’re upset about something? Is it something I did?”

Maggie: “No, it’s something you didn’t do.”

Carol: “What didn’t I do?”

Maggie: “If you really cared you would know, Carol. You didn’t bother to see if I needed help taking John to his speech therapy appointments or see what you could do to lend a hand around our house, since you are retired. I am running out of vacation days and sick leave from work to take John to his weekly therapy sessions. Apparently, you can’t even help me out with a few things around the house, like laundry.”

Carol: “Not that it matters to you, Maggie, but I have health issues of my own. I barely have time to do things around my own house.”

Upset and tired, Maggie indirectly accused Carol of not caring. She also expected Carol to read her mind. Her words put her mother-in-law on the defensive because they contained “you” messages.

“You” vs. “I”



“You” messages can make others feel attacked and can create frustration. With “I” statements, you take ownership for any thoughts, feelings and concerns that you may have. As a caregiver, start by saying: “I feel...,” “I need...,” “I am frustrated...,” or “I am worried about...” When you make statements in this way you are conveying your own needs and feelings. Using the case study of Maggie and Carol, how would you respond or feel to the following “you” messages versus the “I” messages?

“You” message: “Apparently, you can’t even help me out with a few things around the house, like laundry.”

“I” message: “I have a few items of laundry that we need washed. I wonder if you could help me with our washing the next time you come over.”

“You” message: “Instead of coming to the house to visit John you could have visited with him while taking him to his speech therapy appointment.”

“I” message: “I’m so overwhelmed with the number of speech therapy appointments John has to attend. I was hoping you could take him once or twice a week to his appointments. This would give you some individual time with John which I think you both might enjoy.”

Hidden “You” Messages

Be aware of hidden “you” statements. In some cases, “I” messages carry a blaming tone because they contain hidden “you” messages. These messages can come across as accusatory. Hidden “I” statements are usually followed by the words “when you” in a sentence. See the differences in how Maggie could share her concern of Carol treating John like a child because of his memory loss.

Hidden “you” message: “I feel badly when you treat John like a child.”

“You” message: “You treat John like a child.”

“I” message: “I feel badly when John is treated like a child as it makes him feel so useless.”

Raise. Return. State. Express. (RRSE)

“I” statements can also be used to raise concerns, return problems to the person who raised them, state your intentions, and express appreciation and positive feelings. Look at the following examples and consider how you can relate RRSE to your military caregiving situation.

Raise a concern: “I am overwhelmed with trying to take care of John and manage everything else that has to be done around the house.”

Return a problem to the person who raised it: “I need to know if I can depend on you to help me with caring for John and some household tasks.”

State your intentions: “I want us to figure out a schedule that works for you and tells me what tasks will be done and when.”

Express praise and appreciation: “I really appreciate your willingness to help care for John because it helps to reduce my stress.”

“I” messages are the building blocks of communication and enable you to express your needs, concerns and feelings in a positive manner. They foster supportive and successful relationships between family, friends, and health care professionals by reducing misunderstandings.

To learn more about family caregiving communication techniques and additional caregiving information go to: http://www.extension.org/family_caregiving

Reference

Schmall, V., Cleland, M., & Sturdevant, M. (2000). *The Caregiver Helpbook: Powerful Tools for Caregiving*. United States of America: Legacy Health System. Adapted with permission.

To access the current edition of the Caregiver Helpbook and to learn more about the self-care education program, Powerful Tools for Caregivers, visit www.powerfultoolsforcaregivers.org