

# LANGUAGE OF AWARENESS

*"A different language is a different vision of life"*

Federico Fellini



The language we use can have a significant impact on our experience of ourselves, our lives and the world. We can choose to use language that frees and empowers us, language that acknowledges that we are responsible for our choices and actions or we can habitually use words that may perpetuate the drama or passivity we may experience in our relationships and interactions.

Language shapes experience. What do you experience when you change how you speak? How might you feel different? How might your life be different?



## Me, Myself and I

When I am talking about myself and my experience and I use the words you, we or one, I may be making an assumption that everyone shares a common experience, that everyone else is the same as me or understands what I am saying. Sometimes that is useful and appropriate.

By using we, you, one, instead of I, it may be that I am distancing myself from what I am saying. Using these words is often a socially accepted way of not being too self-centred or arrogant. And it can also be disempowering and self-effacing. Using we, one or you to talk about ourselves can suggest that we have no choice or that we are not responsible for what we do or think.

When I use 'I' to talk about myself, I am owning what I say. I am willing to acknowledge that the beliefs, views and experiences I am talking about are mine. They may or may not be shared by others, who might disagree with me or even judge me. I am willing to take the risk that no one else will identify with what I am saying. I am risking being different. I am talking about myself and as such I am defining who I am and taking responsibility for my beliefs or actions. And when I define myself I am asserting that I matter, my voice counts, I am me, not you, and I speak for myself, I am responsible.

Experiment with replacing you, we or one, with 'I' when you are talking about yourself, your beliefs, your life, your actions and your experience. What differences do you become aware of?

# Musts, Oughts and Shoulds



## **I must, I ought to, I should, I have to...**

Says who?

What authority am we deferring to when we choose those words and when we think that way?

Vague impersonal forces

A condition, diagnosis, personal or psychological history

The actions of others

The dictates of authority

Group pressure

Institutional policies, rules, and regulations

Gender roles, social roles, or age roles

Uncontrollable impulses

Where do our beliefs and ways of thinking come from? And do they work for us?

What is the impact of forcing ourselves, making ourselves, coercing, pushing? What is it like to behave as if we have no choice? How does it impact us to talk as if we are not responsible and have no agency?

What emotions do we experience when we use these words? Guilt? Shame? Frustration? Hopelessness?

Experiment with replacing I must..., I ought to..., I should... I have to... I've got to... with:

I would like to

I want to

I could

I might

I choose to... because

How is your experience different?



# Needs and Wants

What is the difference between a need and a want? What do we truly need? As human beings, in order to live a joyful and satisfying lives, we need air, safety, sustenance, companionship, love and touch. We also need some compassion and understanding, belonging, autonomy, respect, meaning, purpose...

It is not 'needy' to express these needs. It is not a weakness or a burden on others. Expressing our needs creates connection with ourselves and with others.

Sometimes we use the word need because we don't feel entitled to want something. We don't feel entitled to ask for things that will enhance our experience of life. We imagine people will not do what we ask if we just *want* something but don't need it. We don't have the right to want. Maybe we believe that wanting is selfish, spoilt, demanding. Do you ever remember being told "I want doesn't get"?

On the other hand, if we need it, surely we can't be denied it? If we need it, the other person has to say yes... Or at least has to listen, don't they? If we need it, we tell ourselves that it's ok to ask for it, we don't have to feel bad. Using the word need can be a way of trying to make others do what we want. Sometimes we use the word need when telling people what we need *them* to do or not do. This is a way of trying to control the other rather than identifying a deeper need in ourselves.

And we coerce ourselves sometimes, with our needs; "I need to tidy my room", "I really need to do some exercise". And yet, when we acknowledge the importance of what we need without committing to it, we often perpetuate feelings of guilt and we can stay stuck in self blame.

What might it be like to experiment with using "I need" to express our deepest most fundamental needs and experiment with using the expressions below for everything else?

I would like (to)

I want (to)

I could

I don't know how to manage without... (yet)

I would love to

I would feel so happy if...

What if we allowed ourselves to ask for the things that would bring us joy, pleasure, fun, connection?



Using I can't sometimes means that we are not taking responsibility for ourselves and our actions. In doing so we render ourselves powerless.

Is it really not in our power or is it that we would rather not, don't know how to or maybe we don't in fact want to but we don't allow ourselves to say that because it sounds too rude, too selfish or too rejecting? Or maybe we are choosing not to do or think or say something because we don't want to deal with the consequences.

When we are not clear with someone, when we don't let ourselves say *no* and we rely on "I can't..." to get us out of doing something, we are disempowered. We are not being honest, with ourselves or with the other.

Sometimes we don't know how to do something, yet. "I can't ride a bicycle, I can't knit, I can't swim, cook, snorkel. More information, training, experience, support or practice might mean that we can, that we will be able to, when we're ready and if we want to.

Sometimes we say I can't when we can, but we're choosing not to because we know that the consequences won't be good and we don't want to deal with them. If I have coeliac disease I can eat wheat, and most likely choose not to because the impact is painful and dangerous to my health.

Experiment with replacing I can't... with

I don't want to...

I'm not going to...

I won't...

I don't...

I'm choosing not to...

I'm not willing to...

I don't feel like...

I'm not interested in...

I don't know how to.... (yet)

I'm not ready to...

What is it like to limit the use of I can't to when you really can't, even if you'd like to.



# Metaphors & Images

Metaphors and images can be valuable and interesting for describing our experience. When they help others understand us and add to the aliveness of our experience, they can be positive and helpful. Metaphors and images can add colour and can also help people see the world through our eyes.

"I feel as though I'm carrying a mountain on my shoulders"

"I am so happy my whole body is fizzing, it's as if fireworks are bursting in my head"

It can be interesting to become more conscious of the types of metaphors we use and how and when we use them, playing with different ways of talking about our lives.

How do the words we use to describe our experience impact us and others? Sometimes our language adds colour, the words and images we use are creative and imaginative and they help us give voice to our experience. And sometimes the metaphors and images we use reinforce the drama or helplessness we feel.

What's the difference when I say:

"My business is haemorrhaging money" and "Profits are down this year"

"Tomorrow is my last day at work and I'm limping to the finish line" and "I'm really tired, I've been working really hard and looking forward to my break"

Describing situations in extremes and with dramatic language can perpetuate fear and powerlessness. Creating dramatic images can contribute to keeping us on edge, anxious, fearful. Describing our situation or experience accurately and simply, avoiding the colourful, dramatic metaphors, can help us feel calmer, rooted in reality.

# Being Descriptive



What do I mean when I say:

I was freaked out

She was acting weird

I'm depressed

I'm stressed

I'm starving

I'm terrified

Sometimes we use extreme or provocative language for effect. It's not always unhelpful. That kind of language can bring colour and drama when needed; when we want to convey the depth or strength of our feelings, when we are telling stories, entertaining, having fun etc. Some of the terms above are used as shorthand. They are signposts, ways of communicating sometimes complex experiences in a way we hope the other will understand.

And sometimes, when we use commonly used terms (like some of the above), we miss the opportunity to really acknowledge, take responsibility for or describe our experience.

When we say "I freaked out" what do we mean? How did we really feel? What is our experience?

When we tell someone that we're depressed, can we then assume that they know what we are experiencing? Is depression the same for every one of us? When we use terms like 'I have depression', the language suggests that we are the passive subject of a universal experience. That is sometimes true, but not always.

Being curious enough about ourselves and describing our experience specifically, carefully, validates our experience. We are saying (either to ourselves or to another) 'My personal experience, my responses, matter', "I matter". And that is one definition of good self esteem.



How often do you apologise?

When someone bumps into you on the street, do you sometimes find yourself apologising?

Why do we apologise for our thoughts, our actions, our feelings?

What if we were to stop apologising for being different, for taking up space, for having a voice?

What if we kept the word 'sorry' for times when we are truly contrite? What if we reserved our apologies for times when we know we have done or said something we regret or we know has caused pain or hurt?

What if we used "I'm sorry" to let someone know that we felt compassion or empathy?

And what if, once we've said sorry, we make 'sorry' into a verb and we make amends, in some way (where appropriate and possible) for the actions or behaviours that we regret?

Sorry is a powerful word, diluted and devalued by overuse. Used deliberately, mindfully and meaningfully it has the power to mend relationships and heal.

# Always and Never



We sometimes use sweeping statements and generalisations to replace uncertainty with certainty to lower our anxiety or fear of not being right or justified.

In describing people, behaviours or experiences in terms of always and never, we may be ignoring or denying facts that don't sync up with our perceptions. We may be using these words to make ourselves right or others wrong.

Before using always or never, check in with yourself, is this true? Is this factually accurate? Are you trying to express a need by blaming or judging the other because you feel angry or upset? Are you trying to justify or excuse your own behaviour, fearful of taking responsibility, fearful of being punished or criticised?

"You never listen to me"

"I'm never late"

"We always do what you want"

"I always follow the rules"

What are the fears or needs behind these always or never statements?

Instead of using always and never, experiment with being more specific. If not always or never then when? Was it today, right now, yesterday, sometimes, on the day we met to go to the park, on the last training day...?