

"I" Statements podcast – Episode 17 – Support
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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about support. My name is Rachel, I use she/her pronouns and a word that comes to mind when I think about support is "expected."

Julia: Hi, my name is Julia, I use she/her pronouns and a word that comes to mind for me when I think about support is "empathy."

Anna: My name is Anna, I use she/her pronouns, and a word that comes to mind when I think about support is "boundaries." I think about boundaries because in my own personal experience I've had a hard time removing myself from other people's problems when offering support, and being a little too unconditional when I give support so having to take a step back and establish boundaries has, has been something that I've had to learn the hard way. And sort of just to ground that in an example, I had a friend in high school who was experiencing a loss, a death in the family, and I, I tried to support so much that I became overcome by their pain and I really, almost experience that loss myself because I had given such endless support. And so I learned, really, the hard way that boundaries is super important for me. So I think there's a lot of times where when I'm giving someone else support, I say, "What can I do for you? What do you need from me?" just to get that clear understanding and if I don't have the capability to offer that support then that's where I learn- I've had to learn to take a step back.

Julia: I think it's really interesting, Anna, that you chose to talk about providing support for others because when I heard about this prompt I immediately thought about how others have provided support for me. I think a lot about empathy when I think about support because a lot of the times the people who have supported me have really used empathy in order to know what I want. So for instance for me, in my sophomore year of college I lost a friend who I was really close to and my now roommate - who I'm super close with but actually wasn't that close with at the time - she provided support to me in so many different ways based on the day and I honestly, I'm still in awe of how she did that: sometimes it was that I needed to go for a run and vent about what I was going through, sometimes it was just coming in my bed and sitting there with me while I cried, sometimes it was driving around in the car blasting music, and every day it was kind of something different and her ability to empathize with me and meet me where I was at on a given day was really important to me and gave me a space and a person that I could feel safe with. So I, I don't know, I think you need to know someone really well; I think the reason why my friend in that example was able to support me in a productive way was because we spent a lot of time together, and she probably got it wrong a couple times but the times that she got it right really stuck out to me and really made me feel like I had a space.

Rachel: I'm curious how you've noticed your social identities sort of showing up in the way that you experience support? And whether that's giving support or receiving support.

Julia: I definitely have noticed myself falling into this role of providing emotional support for other people and I think it's tied to my gender identity. I know that a lot of friends come to me as someone to talk to about what's been going on in their lives and I think I don't challenge that stereotype at all because I think, like, I love hearing about what's going on even if it's something challenging. I love working through things and trying to help get people to a place where they feel confident with their choices, but I feel like by doing that I do play into this gender role. I also have been thinking a lot about how differences in identities can impact the support that I'm able to provide for other people. So, for instance, in the last couple of weeks there's been a huge uptick in AAPI violence and I've been thinking about how I approach supporting my Asian American friends as a white woman and how that racial difference between the two of us makes me incapable of knowing exactly what they're going through, and I've had to think about what type of support is best for them. I think that oftentimes I hear people, like, talking about how they're afraid to engage with people who are different from them because they're afraid to, like, screw up and I also definitely have that fear. I think when I'm approaching really hard topics with friends who hold different social identities I worry about, like, tiptoeing around them and not saying things that could be perceived as offensive, but I think I have to be honest about where I am at and if I'm not, like, up front about what I want to say and how I want to support them then nothing productive can happen. But I think the way that I try to support people who hold different identities than me is I think, like, universally there are similar emotions and that's what empathizing is for me: is tapping into those similar emotions that you may have experienced even if the situation was very different and using that emotion that you've had before as a jumping off point to understand or maybe anticipate what the other person needs or what type of support they need. So even though I haven't experienced what it's like to be in America as an Asian American during this time, I do have other marginalized social identities: my gender, my sexuality, my mental health status, things like that, and tapping into this emotion of fear and concern for family and frustration, like, that's kind of what I see there, and so I try to bring those emotions from other aspects of my life into how I support them.

Anna: Julia, I really appreciate how you brought up the idea of different social identities changing the way that you communicate with them and offer support because I've seen that show up in my own life but I'd say in, in a different, in a different way than what you described, so that's why your point was really interesting to me. I think gender is where I really see support showing up in an interesting way in my life, and I think that as a woman I'm often more supportive of men because I, I generalize that all women are as emotionally capable and complex as I am given, like, that stereotype of women being emotional, and so I think that I have, like, a natural empathetic tendency that only is, like, gracious towards men. Which I see all the time especially because in high school a lot of my friends were men and I think every emotion that they showed or every accomplishment or anything like that I just showed so much more support, and it's almost like a motherly tendency which is very odd, I feel, to show up in a

19-year-old college girl. But I have felt that in a lot of ways where, where I would drop anything if one of my male friends needed something, but I don't lend that same support to my female friends because I just, I've made a lot of assumptions that they can handle it if I can because of our gender and the types of, like, stereotypes that go along with that. Which is scary because, exactly what you said, Julia, that we're all human, we all have emotions. My female friends, you know, could use just as much support as my male friends could and I could, I deserve just as much support as my male friends do. So that's sort of, like, something interesting that I've seen show up in terms of social identity.

Rachel: Anna I'm wondering if you have a sense of how, how that came to be? You know, you've talked about stereotypes that exist or sort of different expectation you have about gender and caregiving or gender and providing support: how much do you feel like you know where that came from?

Anna: Yeah that's a great question, and I think my mom plays a big role in it. As I was growing up my mom was, like, and has still been the most supportive person ever in my world. And she in my, like, early childhood demonstrated to me the idea of almost giving your everything to support someone else. She, she gave up everything to, to be mine and my sister's mom and she, you know, she stopped working and my dad continued to be the one that that worked and she would do literally anything to support us. And so I did see that show up a lot and I've seen that in every relationship that exists within, like, my extended family: the father is the one that's really doing the work and the mom is the one who shows that emotional complexity, I would say - but not to say that my dad has not been super emotionally supportive of me. But my mom, then, as I started developing like these types of tendencies to be overly supportive, demonstrated to me a lot of ways in which she has taken, like, authority over her own life, I guess you could say, in the way that now she prioritizes her needs as much as my own and my sister's and my father's. Which has been the most amazing lesson to learn because she is, like, the strongest woman and she is capable of being as supportive as possible but also takes steps back and refers us to other people if there are other ways to be helped to, you know, get support. And she, she has demonstrated to me how my boundaries need to be set and really empathize with the fact that it's, it is natural to want to do everything for someone but we're not capable of that physically, mentally. At least in my family my mother and I have seen it show up, so yeah I don't know, I think I talked in circles around that answer a little bit.

Rachel: What's interesting about that, to me, is that in that example your mom is caring for you and your sister and still you got this message that your care or your support was more needed by men in your life than women. So I think that's, I think that's a little interesting, right, 'cause, 'cause your example wasn't that you mom was more supportive of men, so.

Anna: Yeah. I don't you know, now that I'm thinking about it I'm not really sure where it comes from.

Rachel: Yeah. I was thinking while you were speaking, support shows up in all kinds of relationships in my life and I think about so many of my friends are women and, and some of these are friendships that I've had for decades and I've consistently experienced those as being really supportive - and mutually supportive - relationships where I feel like I am both offering support and receiving support from those friends. And then I think about romantic relationships I've had, and I am a straight woman so I've only dated men, and I have such different standards for what counts as support there! And I feel myself doing a lot more support than I'm receiving and so it's interesting to me 'cause this is a thing I've been trying to have higher standards for, is like what is the support I deserve in all of my relationships and how do I make that happen. And a lot of it is, Anna you mentioned boundaries earlier, a lot of it is having boundaries, having clarity about what I need and what I want and walking away from situations where those things are not being met. So yeah, I just, that's what came to mind for me when I when I heard you sharing that.

Anna: It's really interesting that you brought that up because it made me realize that in my response to the idea of support the first things that come to my mind are the times that I offer support when it's taxing to me, but hearing about, you know, your friendships I do realize that I have so many supportive friendships and so many amazing women in my life that are always supporting me, and men as well, and I think, I just, only, really what only comes to mind is the relationships and the support that that causes me stress.

Julia: I think I'm also thinking about that and I think that, like, our conversation has really focused on support - emotional support for people who are going through hard times. But I'm also thinking of all of the other types of support that maybe aren't as like, like, I don't know what the word for it is, but maybe they're not as intense? For instance like, Anna, you were talking about your mom and I think about my mom, when I was growing up and I, I lived an hour and a half from my school by train, and I remember several times I forgot my sneakers for gym class and my mom drove my sneakers to school. And that is like such a small thing, I mean it wasn't a small thing for her 'cause she took two hours out of her day to bring me tennis shoes, but those things that are not emotional or, like, emotionally taxing but require some sort of service or going out of your way to do something for someone: that is also to me a big sign of support. Showing up to plays that people put on, showing up to sports games, listening to your friend's podcast once it's released (that's a shout out to all my friends), things like that, and I just I don't think it has to be so, such a gruesome thing. I think that support, like, is kind of natural, I think it comes naturally to me at least, and I want to support my friends in ways that go beyond just sitting down and being like, 'hey I think you needed like a second to talk it out.'

Anna: I really like the idea that support could just mean showing up and that really makes me feel very grateful for the way that I grew up because someone always did show up for me: every game that I had, any performance, any time I needed a ride, like, someone always showed up for me. And that really opens my eyes to the other ways that I have had support in my life that haven't been, like, so deeply emotional. I think that's also my tendency to dramatize things so it is really nice to put it in that lens that support is just showing up.

Julia: It really aligns with some of the things that I've been thinking about recently regarding allyship and what it means to show up for someone or for a group of people. And I'm thinking about how during a lot of the big Black Lives Matter protests that were going on this past summer, I felt like it was almost a responsibility to be there as a white person, and I thought a lot about my power diffusing violence during those situations. I unfortunately wasn't in the country, I was pretty out of the loop, but I think about how I can strategically implement the social identities where I hold privilege in order to help other voices be heard and stay safe. But I'm also thinking about how I feel like this conversation would not be complete if we didn't talk about the self-serving nature of support, and, I don't know maybe I'm just selfish, but, you know, it gives me a little bit of an ego boost when I'm like, hey, I helped out this friend! I remember one time I had a friend of mine who was struggling with, like, relationship issues and I wasn't even responding to her really, I was just, like, asking her follow-up questions about what was going on and how she felt about it. And by the end of it she got up and she was like, 'wow, like, I think we're going to stay together!' and I was like, OK, like, I didn't even say anything! But it was, like, so comforting to me to know that I had that with my power to affect the people in my life to believe in themselves and to make decisions that were, like really true to who they are. There is something self-serving about support and it has always made me feel really good, I don't know where to go with that, but maybe I'm just selfish.

Anna: Julia, I love that you brought that up because I genuinely could not agree more. You're actually making me question if I'm even a good person or if I just love the feeling that I get from supporting other people. I really love how it feels to know that someone was more successful or felt better or had a better day because of my involvement in whatever that scenario may be, and ego boost is the perfect way to describe how I feel. I am definitely the type of person to look at someone and be like, 'I can fix all your problems. I have the tools and I'm going to take, take that on.' And I've seen that, I've seen that show up in my life and I think that I feel, like, this big pride if someone asked me for support because it's like, I have something, I have a knowledge that they don't have and they need it from me, and it makes me feel very good. I had a friend, very similar story to what you just said, Julia, who called me one day and having relationship problems and I, I rambled about all of my relationship problems that I've ever had and somehow that, that made sense to her and she came to me the next day and told me about how her conversation with boyfriend went and I was like, 'I just changed that girl's life and I'm an awesome friend' and I felt so good. So yeah, I think my consensus now is that I don't support anyone to make them feel better, I do it for myself.

[laughter]

Rachel: So, so it sounds like it feels great to give support. I'm wondering how it feels to receive support?

Julia: When I think about this question of how it feels to receive support I feel like it makes me really uncomfortable. I think it relates a lot to power, almost, and power dynamics. I don't know

why, I think it probably has something to do with my gender, but I really don't like needing others. I will give support easily, happy to do it, but when it comes to needing support from other people I'm really reluctant to ask for it. And I don't ask for it because I don't want to burden someone else, I don't want to make them feel like they're responsible for me. It's something that I've been thinking a lot about recently because I'm in a relationship with my girlfriend - who endlessly has supported me, super sweet, super reliable - but I always feel like I am taking up too much space and that I'm requiring too much attention. I mentioned before that I do struggle with mental health issues and so she has really been great at dealing with me, but at the same time I'm like, she shouldn't have to deal with me. And she's been really trying to get me to see that it's OK for me to take up space and it's OK for me to accept support, but I can't help but feeling like every time I do need support that I am somehow less competent or capable and that I'm just kind of like defaulting to whatever, whatever she decides, and that she has power in this relationship because I am weak for needing support. That is how it has made me feel and I don't know why it's so hard to talk about, I feel like I should be able to admit that sometimes I need someone to listen to me and to give me hugs. I don't know, it just makes me feel really sensitive and embarrassed, almost, that I need that.

Rachel: That really resonates with me, Julia; I feel powerful when I am giving support to other people and I feel vulnerable and exposed and powerless when I need support from other people. It's a, it's a challenge, it's a thing I'm trying to, trying to show up differently in relationships and recognize that I don't have to hold it all myself. And it makes a difference if I put myself out there and it's, it's OK, and it doesn't make someone express that I'm a burden, right? They don't confirm my worst fears, instead they just show up for me and it's, it's, it's nice to let people show up for me and support me.

Anna: Yeah I definitely agree with that very ending of it feels really nice to have people show up and support me. I think it's interesting the people I look to for support, the people that I look to for support that I don't feel bad expressing vulnerability to, and that is never a romantic relationship. And I think that's why for quite awhile I haven't even been seeking romantic relationships, because I know I'm not capable of that mutually supportive partnership. But it is interesting to hear both of your sort of sentiments of feeling maybe a little bad to be too vulnerable or take up too much space because I think I'm almost the opposite: I really have no shame when it comes to picking up the phone and calling my mom or dad or calling my sister, calling my best friend. And I think that's probably because in some taxing relationships, you know, I hold those things heavy and so I gotta release everything that, that is in my mind. And my mom has even said it to me before, she's like, 'when you go away at college it's almost like you're home because of how much you call me and fill me in on everything that's happening in your life.' And I could not be more grateful to have that person that can support me, but I think that I can also see how I could be a hard person to support because I'm so willing to be supported.

Rachel: Did you tell your mom about this podcast? Should we say hi to your mom right now?

Anna: Yes I did! And she said, when I told her I was talking about support and boundaries, she was like, 'Wow, girl that is a perfect topic for you!'

Rachel: Hi Anna's mom! We are getting sort of towards the end of our conversation, so we've covered a lot of ground and I'm wondering what's sticking with you? Whether it's questions or feelings, things that are on your mind right now?

Anna: I think for me gratitude is really on my mind after this conversation because when we first talked about the topic being support I came up with a list of times where support didn't feel good for me, and this conversation really put into perspective how many positive experiences of support I have on a daily basis and all the really really supportive people in my life. And so I think that's something that I want to work on even going forward is putting into perspective how many good things outweigh the bad and how many people I always have that are there for me and how many people I can healthily support in my life. So yeah, I would say that my big takeaway is being a little more positive and recognizing the support that I have and being grateful for it all the time.

Julia: I think I'm definitely thinking about, like Anna said, those positive relationships that have really impacted me. I'm also thinking about how to receive support better and I guess that's a question that I'm leaving with is: how do I better let people support me? I think I've been trying to answer this question for quite some time and I don't even really know where to start.

Rachel: What makes it important to let people support you?

Julia: I think it definitely helps me. I know when I'm receiving good, effective support that I feel more like myself, I am able to recover from bad days more easily, I'm more mentally healthy. And I think for others it helps build strong relationships with me, it helps them learn more about what I'm feeling and try to connect with me instead of me shutting them out. I think it's so important to have a support system because it's so easy to get burnt out - I know that's a broad generalization, it's very easy for me to get burnt out - and I think I really rely on the people around me to bring me out of some of the funks that I get into when things are getting really hard.

Anna: Yeah I would agree. I think having a support system, like you said, Julia, pulls me out of funks but also gives me so much confidence. Because I know that I should go into everything with confidence and if I mess up or something doesn't go the way that it should, I have a support system and I have people that I can lean on to bring my confidence back up. So I think I go into things with more trust and confidence because I can fall back on my support system.

Rachel: Thank you both for being part of this conversation on support, I want to thank everyone who's supported us and gotten us to this moment where we're recording "I" Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. Our cover art is by Bryan Garner, our music is written and performed by Evan Wilhelms, a good friend of mine who has

provided support of various kinds throughout the years. We would love to hear your, your thoughts, listeners: if you have ideas for a future episode topic, if you want to share a big or small way that someone's supported you, you can find information about our program and also our email address at our website: www.idp.cornell.edu, thanks and bye.