

INTENTIONAL DIALOGUE

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INTENTIONAL DIALOGUE:

The Dialogue was developed by Harville and Helen to help couples and others create more conscious, intentional relationships, and to thus create a better world.

This basic Dialogue process combines three essential elements. Many other communication skills programs have at least one of the skills, but the combination is what provides the safety so that you can truly understand and be understood your partner. Usually, one partner hates the formal structure of this form of Dialogue, but the structure is vital in making the process safe for both partners. Although it may sound strange and feel awkward at first, the structure creates the opportunity for open, honest, and non-defended communication.

Preparing Before the Dialogue:

The person who wants the dialogue, the Sender, must ask for an appointment. The Receiver agrees to give the appointment as soon as possible -- within a 24 hour period.

How can the SENDER prepare?

Think about how you can initially state your frustration or concern in a 1-2 sentence 'bottom-line' statement. 'Bottom-lining' will help you stay focused on your issue during the dialogue and will help your partner understand what is important to you about that issue. After you give the bottom line, the focus shifts to you and how you experience that inside.

Remember that you will also need to describe a picture of what it is like for you inside when he or she does the frustrating behavior. What do you think when s/he does it, how do you end up feeling? What is the story your brain makes up about your partner's behavior or words.

Also remember that your frustration or concern is an opportunity for you and your partner to heal, to create safety and intimacy, and to take another step toward wholeness.

How can the RECEIVER prepare?

Take at least a few moments to prepare yourself to create a safe and welcoming space for your partner and his or her frustration/concern:

Remind yourself that although you may have said or done something (or did not say or do something!) that triggered your partner's frustration, it is partially about you -- and a lot about pain in your partner's history.

Remind yourself that no matter what you may think or feel about the topic, your 'movie', -- what you think, feel, believe about the situation -- belongs on the shelf when you are the Receiver. Choose to put your movie aside for now. Focus on truly

understanding your partner's experience. (You may need to consciously do this several times in a dialogue!)

Step 1 - Mirror

MIRRORING means repeating back your partner's words so you both know you have actually heard the Sender's words. Both the Sender and the Receiver have responsibilities during Mirroring.

The SENDER'S Responsibility in Mirroring:

Your job as Sender is to help your partner understand your experience of an event. Tell him or her what it is/was like for you. What thoughts and feelings does it bring up for you? What hurt or angered you the most about it?

The Sender is also responsible for staying focused on the one issue that you express in your opening 'bottom-line' statement. Other issues may come to mind during the dialogue; save them for another time.

Make sure you connect your frustration or concern to your partner's behavior in stating your bottom-line frustration. Instead of saying: "My frustration is that you are so selfish," you might say something like: *"I felt frustrated when you. . ."* and state the behavior.

The Sender has the responsibility to make sure they are being mirrored accurately. Let your partner know that they got what you said, or at least part of what you said. (This also means that you have to pay attention to what you are saying!) Giving that feedback let's help the Receiver mirror it accurately.

When the Receiver has missed something, simply say: *"That was most of it (part of it) -- and the part you missed was . . ."* It does not help you or your partner to criticize their efforts to mirror you! This is not a contest. You get better at it as you practice.

Say it in small pieces to help the person mirroring, especially when your partner is difficulty mirroring it accurately. The more volatile the issue, the more need there is to go slowly and in bite-size pieces.

The RECEIVER'S Responsibility in Mirroring:

When you MIRROR, begin each time by saying *"What I'm hearing you say is . . ."* Use your partner's words even though it feels awkward at first. Do not add or subtract. Mirror all that you can, even if it you know you did not get it all. Your partner will give you what you missed. No matter what your partner says, keep mirroring! If s/he asks a question, simply mirror it. You can answer when you switch if you still want to.

Each time you mirror, ask, *"Is there more about that?"* You are inviting your partner to share his or her experience with you -- even if it feels uncomfortable. You are giving yourself and your partner an extraordinary gift!

Continue mirroring until your partner says that there is no more at this time. Then move to STEP 2 -- EXPRESS UNDERSTANDING.

About Paraphrasing. . .

Changing even a few words can dramatically change the meaning for you or for your partner. Paraphrasing keeps you in your own language and thereby makes it much easier to bring in your own 'movie.' Paraphrasing corrodes the quality of mirroring and the safety of the dialogue over time. You are going for creating the ultimate in SAFETY. Using your partner's words is a stretch for you but will help the process.

What Do I Do When I Start Getting Upset?

Know that your movie is creeping in. Acknowledge it internally. Then visualize putting your 'movie' in a box and putting it on a shelf or the floor for the time being. Use whatever image works for you to 'put away' your movie. You consciously choose again and again to be intentional, to notice and set aside your own movie and reactivity for right now.

Step 2 - Summarize and Express Understanding:

SUMMARIZE:

Before communicating understanding, it is helpful for the Receiver to first summarize the gist of what the Sender has said up to that point (or what has been said since the last understanding and empathy in this dialogue). While it is not necessary to repeat every detail in the summary, the Receiver should include the essence of what the Sender said, continuing to use the Sender's 'language.'

The summary is not an interpretation or judgement about what the Sender has said! For example, a Sender may have said, "I'm afraid you're going to criticize me any time I make a decision because no matter what I say, it's wrong." A judgement or interpretation would be something like, "So the essence of what you are saying is that your insecurity gets in the way of you making a decision." That is NOT what the person said -- it is an interpretation, not a summary.

At the end of the summary, before you express understanding, ask,
"Do I have it all?"

EXPRESS UNDERSTANDING:

This means telling the Sender that their experience makes sense -- and why it makes sense to you--why your partner, or anyone could possibly think and feel the way they do after your action or words. Remember:
You do not have to agree in order to express understanding well!

You, the Receiver need to step into the Sender's shoes to understand it from the Sender's experience, not from your experience. If a stranger on an airplane told you the same story that the Sender has just told, it would most likely make complete sense to you -- because you have no history in it. You have little or no movie about it. And

that is the position from which you can validate.

The Receiver expresses understanding by saying after the summary,
"And what you are saying makes sense to me because. . ."
and you explain why it makes sense to you from the Sender's perspective.

Example:

The Sender has said she is upset with you "because you were an hour late getting home and when you arrived you walked over and turned on the TV and completely ignored me. . . which is what you always do. . . you are insensitive and selfish etc.."

Your side of the story may be that the boss 'called you in 10 minutes before you were supposed to leave, you were angry and tired when you left and all you wanted was some peace and quiet. And you only arrived 40 minutes late! You just spent the weekend doing everything she wanted to do instead of watching football or playing golf! She's never satisfied!'

At this point in the process, you put your whole story, and all those feelings associated with it, on the shelf. You put yourself in the Sender's shoes. Your story can be told when you are the Sender. Right now, your job is to continue to be a safe and empty Container. So, no matter what your movie is, you put it on the shelf.

An understanding in this example may sound something like this: "What you're saying makes sense to me because I'm usually home by 6:00 and that's when you expected me. I didn't call you to let you know what had happened. My being late left you hanging about whether to have dinner without me or wait. You decided to go ahead and eat with the kids but probably couldn't even really enjoy your dinner because you were worried and frustrated that I was late and you didn't know what was going on. I also know that any time I or one of the kids is late, you worry that we may have had an accident. And then, when I arrived, I just sat in front of the TV without any explanation and without acknowledging you or what you were feeling. So I came across to you as being insensitive. It seemed like I wasn't interested in how you felt and so it makes sense that you would see me as selfish."

In working with couples, an Imago therapist would help the person discover wounding in their past that is triggered by their partner's behavior. As both gain a clearer picture of each other's underlying issues, they can begin to take specific steps toward healing, growth, and wholeness for each person.

But, what if it DOESN'T make sense?

First, check inside to see if your 'movie' is running -- if you are reacting, wanting to justify, etc.. If so, put your movie away and try to understand it from your partner's position.

However, sometimes you don't have enough information for it to make sense. If it does not make sense, don't try to fake the validation. Simply say, "It doesn't yet make sense to me -- help me understand. Then mirror until you do understand and can express why.

Step 3 - Empathize:

EMPATHY means trying to put yourself in your partner's shoes in that experience and imagining what that must have felt like for him/her.

Communicating understanding is an intellectual empathy. It comes from your head. It makes sense. The empathy now comes from the place of feeling. Given your partner's experience of that event, what is your best guess of how that made your partner feel when it happened? And this is only a guess! Sometimes you will be right and sometimes you will be completely wrong! But give it your best shot.

The Receiver says at the end of the expression of understanding,
"And the way you might have felt is"

In the example above, the Receiver might have guessed "invisible, unimportant, scared."

When the Receiver has made his or her guess, the Sender tells which ones are right and any other feelings that the Receiver may have missed. For example, the Sender may say, "Yes, I felt completely invisible and unimportant to you. I don't know if I really felt scared. But I did feel hurt and really angry."

The Receiver simply mirrors and then asks, ***"Is there more about that?"*** If the Sender says anything more, the whole process of Mirroring, Expressing Understanding, and Empathizing begins again.

Switching:

After you mirror and there is no more, you again understand and empathize, until your partner is finished for this particular time. Only when your partner is finished, do you ask, ***"Can we switch?"***

When you switch, take just a moment so that the Sender can prepare to consciously become a Receiver as described earlier, put his or her movie away, in order to hear and understand their partner's story.

When you switch, do not counter and argue details, or justify your actions. This is not about assigning who is "right" and who is "wrong". Instead you can communicate what it was like for you first to listen to your partner (what feelings came up in you), and then if you want, what the actual event was / is like for you. Sometimes, after you understand what it was like for your partner, you don't even need to say your movie. Sometimes you may switch and say something like, "Wow! I didn't even think about what you might experience with me being late. I was so and caught up in my own frustration, I didn't think about what it was like for you. I think I understand now, . . . "

A good phrase to start with is:

"As I listened to you just now and tried to understand, what I felt inside was. . . (sad, relief, angry, caring -- whatever combination of feelings fit for you.)

A workshop participant put it well when he said, "I would rather be close than right."

Being 'right' belongs to power struggle. Understanding and empathizing helps you co-create a conscious, healing relationship.

In order to experience the power of the basic tool of the Dialogue, you need to practice, practice, practice!

Use the Dialogue process for good things or for something that is important to you that you want to tell your partner in addition to frustrations or hurts. You can use it to explore something you are not sure of. You can use it to express to your partner a frustration with someone at work or with a parent or friend. The more you practice, the more natural it will become when you hit rough waters.

You will not do it perfectly, especially in the beginning. Approach it with the attitude of a student eager to learn a new skill, a traveler eager to discover new things, a healer eager to create safety, and a lover eager to love well. It is a process, it takes time. But it can bring a whole new depth and dimension of intimacy, friendship and real love to your relationship. As Nike says, "**JUST DO IT!**"

Further help in Intentional Dialogue:

Read [Getting the Love You Want : A Guide for Couples](#) by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. Through our partnership with Amazon.com, you can order this and his other books that help in understanding yourself and others: Keeping the Love You Find, and A Couple's Companion.

If you are married or in a committed relationship, attend a [Getting the Love You Want Workshop](#).

Find a Certified Imago Relationship Therapist in your area. [Imago Relationships International](#) listed in the Relationship Resource section can give you information.

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