

## THE COUPLE'S DIALOGUE

Effective communication is essential to a good relationship. Good communication skills may not solve every problem or resolve all issues, but it is a good place to start in making each other feel safe and heard. Communication can be defined as the verbal or non-verbal exchange of information, meaning, and feelings between two persons. One of the most effective forms of communication between people in a committed love relationship is the couple's dialogue. It consists of three processes called: Monitoring, Validation, and Empathy.

**Mirroring:** This is the process of accurately reflecting back the content of a message from one partner. The most common form of mirroring is paraphrasing. A "paraphrase" is a statement in your own words of what the message your partner sent means to you. It indicates that you are willing to transcend your own thoughts and feelings for the moment and attempt to understand your partner from their point of view. Any response made prior to mirroring is often an "interpretation" and may contain a misunderstanding. Mirroring allows your partner to send their message again and permits you to paraphrase until you do understand.

- An example of this might be: "So what I hear you saying is..."

**Validation:** This is communication to the sending partner that the information being received and mirrored "makes sense". It indicates that you can see the information from your partner's point of view and can accept that it has validity and that it is true for the partner. Validation is a temporary suspension or transcendence of your point of view that allows your partner's experience to have its own reality.

- Typical validating phrases are: "I can see that...", "It makes sense to me that you would think that", "I can understand that..."

Such phrases convey to your partner that their subjective experience is not crazy, that it has its own logic, and that it is a valid way of looking at things. To validate your partner's message **does not mean that you agree** with his or her point of view or that it reflects your subjective experience. It merely recognizes the fact that in every situation, there are two points of view. Every report of any experience is an "interpretation" which is the "truth" for each person. The process of mirroring and validation affirms the other person and increases trust and closeness.

**Empathy:** This is the process of reflecting or imagining the feelings the sending partner is experiencing about the vent or the situation being reported. This deep level of communication attempts to recognize, reach into and, on some level, experience emotions for the sending partner. Empathy allows both partners to transcend, perhaps for a moment, their separateness and to experience a genuine "meeting". Such an experience has remarkable healing power.

- Typical phrases for empathic communication include: and "I can imagine that you must feel...", and "when you experience that, I hear... understand you feel...", and "that makes sense".

A complete dialogue transaction may then sound as follows: "So, I understand you to be saying that if I don't look at you when you are talking to me, you think that I am uninterested in what you

are saying. I can understand that. It makes sense to me, and I can imagine that you would feel rejected and angry. That must be a terrible feeling.” The reciprocal exchange of this process is the couple’s dialogue.

**Sender:** Is the one who wants to send a message must take the initiative and say, “I would like to have a Couple’s Dialogue, is now okay?”

There are four reasons why one might want to have a Couple’s Dialogue:

1. You are upset about something and want to discuss it.
2. You want to discuss a topic that you think might be “touchy”.
3. You want to be heard about something important to you.
4. You want to understand our partner’s viewpoint.

**Receiver:** It is the receiver’s job to grant a Couple’s Dialogue as soon as possible. If cannot be right away then set an appointment time so that the sender knows when they will be heard.

1. **Mirror:** “What I hear you saying is...” or “Let me see if I got it.”

When there is a natural pause, the receiver will say two things:

- a) “Am I mirroring you accurately?” or “Is that right?”
- b) “Is there anything more you would like to say about that?”

When the sender has finished sending, the receiver moves on to validation.

2. **Validation:** The first thing to do is to summarize in a few sentences what has been said and check out the accuracy. Then say a few sentences like:
  - a) “I am listening to you carefully.”
  - b) “I follow what you are saying and you make sense to me.” You must end up saying the sentence, “You make sense.”
3. **Empathy:** “I imagine you might be feeling...” or “I imagine you might have felt...”

Then you must make some guesses at what the sender is feeling. Feelings are stated in one word (i.e., angry, confused, sad, frustrated etc.). If your guess entails more than one word it is probably a thought. “You feel that you don’t want to go with me.” This is a thought, not a feeling. Also one never knows for sure what another person is feeling therefore check out your guess by saying “Is that what you are feeling?”

When the sender shares with you other feelings, mirror back what you heard. Then inquire, “Are there any other feelings you are having?” Then mirror what is said.

When the receiver has gone through all three parts (mirror, validation, and empathy) then they say, “I would like to respond now.” Then there is a switch and the receiver now becomes the sender.