

Intentional Dialogue

by Tim Atkinson

Imago Dialogue is an intentional process that can help keep relationships dynamic and get beneath conflict to rediscover a deeper connection. Most emotionally charged conflicts are only 10 percent about the present and 90 percent about some past wound that is causing pain now. Our current partner is the ideal person to help us truly heal old wounds.

Imago Dialogue is a conversation in which people agree to listen to others without judgment and accept their views as equally valid as their own. This can be challenging, especially if we are talking about a difficult subject. To truly hear what concerns our partner means putting aside all spontaneous reactions and listening without judgment. This requires creating a safe space, where both parties have agreed to banish all shame, blame and criticism from the dialogue.

Such intentional dialogue is initiated when one partner asks for an appointment and the other agrees to participate. Before beginning, it's good to set the stage for connection by sitting in chairs facing each other, knees close together, maintaining eye contact and breathing quietly.

Mirroring – Using “I” language, one person conveys his or her thoughts, feelings or experiences (“I feel, I need,” etc.) to the receiver without shaming, blaming or criticizing their partner.

In response, the receiver echoes the sender’s message, using a lead sentence like, “Let me see if I’ve got you. You said...”

Then there’s a beautiful question the receiver can ask: “Is there more?” When I ask that question, I then pause to show that I really want to hear more. My partner might say, “Well, let me see... maybe there is.” Often, they will go deeper and share more, and that sharing can be the most fascinating part of the dialogue.

When my partner says, “No, that’s all,” then I can summarize. “So, in summary, I heard you say that...” Then check that you got it all. My partner might often say, “Well you missed this little bit—and it’s important to me that you hear it.”

Validation – When I mirror my partner successfully, she will probably already feel that I have heard her point of view. This step can be hard to do if my partner has a different perspective, but it’s important to recognize that what my partner says makes sense for her. In dialogue, creating the connection is paramount. Who is right and who is wrong doesn’t matter.

After I have summarized my partner’s messages, I can validate her by simply saying, “That makes sense to me.” I don’t have to agree with her, but need to show that I respect her reality. If I can, I might go on with “That makes sense to me because...”

Empathy – In this final step, I imagine what my partner might be feeling. I would just ask: “I imagine you might be feeling afraid, and a little sad, too. Is that what you are feeling?” Then I check in with my partner, and if he or she shares other feelings, then I mirror them to show I also heard: “Ah, a little excited, too.”

Trying this with our partner helps us understand one another a little more and works to bring us closer. It has made a big difference in the lives of couples that use it.

Tim Atkinson is the executive director of Imago Relationships International. For more information visit GettingTheLoveYouWant.com.

Relationship Repair: How One Couple Retrieved Their Love

by Harville Hendrix

I counseled one couple—let's call them Peter and Mary—who were on the brink of divorce. They run a coffee shop and bakery together; Peter is the primary businessperson and Mary is secondary. Mary works from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m., then goes home and makes dinner, which is supposed to be at 6 p.m.

Mary feels unappreciated by her husband for two reasons: "Peter never thanks me for fixing dinner, and he's seldom ever home for dinner on time. I can't seem to get him to understand that I need appreciation."

Peter responds by saying, "I don't think you should be thanked for doing what you're supposed to do—I don't expect you to thank me for doing my job. Second, there are often customers in the store when it's time to close."

It sounds like an easy thing to fix: He just needs to close up the store on time and say thank you. For them, it's been a 20-year conflict that relates to something deeper. As we worked together, Mary remembered two things about her childhood: being told no man would ever love her and meet her needs, and that her mother never kept her promises. Peter noted that he grew up in a family where nobody said thank you and where boundaries weren't set.

Both individuals had been dealing with wounds and defenses for so long that these mechanisms had become a lifestyle, and as a result they were close to divorce. As we continued the conversation, Peter said, "Well, I know about your mother, but I didn't know I was treating you the same way she did. I really do appreciate your meals and I can see that it frustrates you when I don't come home, because you feel valueless and dinner gets cold. Now I see I was delaying going home because I was dreading having the inevitable fight with you."

The partners got clear on why they did what they did, and then made some simple adjustments. He was to come home at 6:30 p.m., and communicated, "I say I don't need appreciation for the store, but I would like to be thanked for being responsible for the majority of our income." She agreed. In their newfound mutual appreciation, the relationship took off like a new love affair.

When we stretch out of our comfort zones into our partner's world, something magical happens. When we sustain that, we are in the real love phase of the relationship.

