

The Couple's Dialogue

*Effective communication is essential to a good relationship.
Good communication skills may not solve problems or resolve issues,
but no problems can be solved or issues resolved without them.*

Defined as the verbal or non-verbal exchange of information, meaning and feelings between two persons, communication covers every possible way we can interact. We may communicate well or poorly, but we cannot not communicate.

One of the most effective forms of communication between persons in a committed love relationship is the *Couple's Dialogue*. A dialogue begins with:

- 1) **Asking for a dialogue** and stating the topic, and
- 2) **Stating your positive intention** for the dialogue.

This shows respect for your partner and communicates an attitude of valuing the relationship. The goal here is to establish a basis for discussing an issue that will allow for deep listening, mindful speech, mutual understanding, and safety for both partners. A dialogue consists of three central processes: mirroring, validation, and empathy.

Mirroring is the process of accurately reflecting back the “content” of a message from your partner. The most common form of mirroring is paraphrasing. A “paraphrase” is a statement in your own words of the message your partner has just sent 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 his/her point of view. Often responses made prior to or without mirroring are an “interpretation” and may contain and contribute to a misunderstanding. Continual mirroring allows your partner to send his/her message again and permits you to paraphrase until you do understand.

Validation is a communication to the sending partner that the information being received and mirrored “makes sense.” It indicates that you can see your partner’s point of view and can accept its validity – that it is “true” for your 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...*,” “*What makes sense to me is...*,” “*I can understand that...*” Such phrases convey to your partner that their subjective experience has its own logic and is a valid way of looking at things. To validate your partner’s message does not mean that you agree with his/her point of view or that it reflects your subjective experience. It merely recognizes the fact that in any communication between two persons, there are always two points of view, and every report of any experience is an “interpretation” which is the “truth” for each person. It also recognizes that no “objective view” is possible. The process of mirroring and validation affirms the other person and increases trust and closeness.

Empathy recognizes the “self” in the other. It is the process of reflecting, imagining or participating in the *feelings* the sending partner is experiencing about the event or the situation being reported. This deep level of communication attempts to recognize, reach into and, on some level, experience the emotions of the sending partner. This empathy allows both partners to transcend their separateness, even if only for a moment, 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...*,” “*I understand that you feel...*,” and at the deepest level, “*I am experiencing your (feelings etc.)...*”

A complete dialogue transaction may then sound as follows: “I 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. You make sense because when I don’t look at you, I do appear uninterested. 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.