

The Imago Dialogue – 101

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Why Dialogue?

Dialogue can help you to keep relationships fresh and dynamic, and to get beneath conflict to rediscover a deeper connection. If I try to resolve conflict in my relationship without creating a true connection with my partner, I may just be patching things up until the next big fight comes along, or even reinforcing the problem. Imago theory shows that most conflicts that have a painful “charge” are only 10% about the present situation and 90% about some past wound that is causing pain now. Imagine if you could truly heal old wounds. Your partner is the ideal person to help you do just that!

Dialogue vs. Discussion

Often when I am listening to my partner, I might also be planning how to respond. I may be fervently figuring out how to show her that she is wrong, or how to defend myself from things she says that I don’t want to hear. My reply would contain carefully chosen words which show just how much I am “in the right”, and are designed so I don’t have to hear any more.

What I have described is not really a discussion between me and my partner. It’s what the philosopher Martin Buber called an “I-It” relationship. I am not dealing with her reality, and I’m working hard to give her a fake shiny version of me.

When we try to solve conflict in an “I-It” discussion, we may get a solution which works for a while. But it is unlikely to be the best solution for us both long-term, and leaves the true underlying reasons for conflict unresolved.

Dialogue helps people cut through their natural defenses to create a more genuine connection, which Buber called “I-You.” When we are both honestly and openly involved in exploring issues, we can discover the real source of pain. Listening and talking about this in a loving, safe space can open up within ourselves amazing potential for an improved relationship.

When my partner and I fell in love, we had a sense of destiny drawing us together. It felt like there was a path together which was greater than the course of our separate lives. Dialogue enables us to unfold that path, and experience the love we dreamed of.

“Your partner is another person – Get it!” (Harville Hendrix)

There are many ways in which dialogue can enrich our lives:

- We can make better decisions, because we can share together a full understanding of what we both need.
- It’s a lot more fun and passionate. I get to continue discovering the amazing other person who loves me.
- It can be a wonderful path of discovery, not just of my partner, but about me. Often I find that our partner’s thinks better of me, than I do of myself.

Imago Dialogue Starts with Safety

If I am going to meet others in an authentic way, and lower my protective shell, I need to feel safe. The structure of the Imago dialogue provides safety. The first rule is to banish all shame, blame and criticism. That might sound tough if I am really angry at my partner for all the things they did or didn't do. How can I tell them how much they are hurting me, if I can't criticize?

But I also need to make it safe for my partner to listen to me. And that means to always talk about my own feelings, not about their actions. What does this mean to me? Why am I frustrated? What do I feel? The key is to make it easy for my partner to remain open, and to be available to hear.

Stop Talking, Start Connecting

Listening to my partner may be the most difficult part of the Imago dialogue, especially if we are going to talk about a hard subject. Am I going to hear something painful? Will I want to jump out of my chair and run out? Will I want to shout and deny it?

Listening well can sometimes be a very courageous act. To be available to listen and truly hear what concerns your partner means putting aside all my spontaneous reactions to it. As the words come out, my first reaction might be to think "No – she's got it wrong – it's not like that!" The key to creating an "I-You" relationship is to put that aside, and instead listen without judgment. I need to open myself up to hearing my partner's reality and, by hearing that, to truly connect with her. If I deny it, then I break the connection, and start an argument.

Try it. Practice.

Create Space for the Relationship

Before you start to dialogue, it's good to create some space where your relationship can grow. You can do this in the room, by sitting on facing chairs, knees close together, with eye contact. But it's also a good idea to spend a few moments quietly too, and become aware of the two of you. Let your breathing be quiet, and remind yourself to be calm, with no shame, blame or criticism as you speak, no judgment as you listen.

Something beautiful is being created between you. Martin Buber called it the "sacred space" when two people met as "I-You".

Now you can start!

The Steps of Imago Dialogue

Imago Dialogue is a unique three step process for connection, developed by Harville Hendrix PhD and Helen LaKelly Hunt PhD. Although it looks simple, the process was formulated through extensive study of psychological theories of relationship, and clinical work with couples.

The three steps are Mirroring, Validation and Empathy, and they are described in detail below. The essence of dialogue is any conversation in which people agree to listen to others without judgment, and accept their views as equally valid as their own. We have found the Imago dialogue to be a particularly effective way to start off on your journey to connection. You can find directions on how to use the Imago dialogue here. What follows is a description of how to use each step.

The Imago Dialogue is initiated when a partner asks for an appointment and the other partner agrees to participate.

1. Mirroring

Using "I" language, one person sends a "message" to convey his/her thoughts, feelings, or experiences to the Receiver ("I feel," "I love," "I need ..."). They should avoid shaming, blaming or criticizing their partner, and instead talk about themselves.

In response, the Receiver echoes the Sender's message word-for-word or by paraphrasing, using a lead sentence like, "*Let me see if I've got you. You said*"

Mirroring helps me to listen to what the other person is actually saying rather than listening to the reactions and responses going on in my head while my partner is talking.

Then there's a beautiful question the receiver can ask. "*Is There More?*" When I ask that question I leave a little time, to show I really mean it, and want to hear more. Often my partner might pause "*Well no....er..let me see...maybe there is.*" Often as they are given space and time, they will go deeper and share more with me, and that sharing can be the most fascinating part.

Keep on with it. You might be more encouraging - "*Wow. Interesting. Is there more about that?*" The more I reassure my partner that I am open to what she is saying, the more I can voyage on a wonderful journey into her world, and experience connection, even if I do find the subject area challenging or unfamiliar.

When my partner says "*No, that's all*", then I can try a summary. "*So, in summary I heard you say that.....*" Then check you got it all. My partner might often say "*Well you missed this little bit - and it's quite important to me that you hear it.*"

2. Validation

When I mirror my partner well, they will probably already be feeling that I have heard their point of view, and seen that for them it is valid. But it's nice to say that too.

This part of the process can be quite hard too, if my partner has a very different perspective on things from me. But to be connected, it's important for me to recognize that what my partner says makes sense for her. Sometimes her view might be so different from mine that I am tempted to think that she must be wrong. But in dialogue, creating the connection is paramount. Who is right and who is wrong doesn't matter. Harville Hendrix likes to say: "**You can be right, or you can be married!**" With this process, you might even discover that you can find a solution together where it doesn't matter whether either of you are right or wrong over this issue, because the underlying pain is what really needs to be addressed. Precisely because you are in relationship with another person, it is healthy to be able to accept that you hold different viewpoints.

After I have summarized my partner, I can validate them by simply saying "*That makes sense to me.*" I don't have to agree with her, but show that I respect her reality. If I can, I might go on "*That makes sense to me because....*"

Sometimes as I watch my partner when I see this, I can see a physical sign of relief. It's a lovely thing to have your views validated by another.

3. Empathy

The third and final step of the Imago Dialogue is empathy. In the empathy step, I imagine what my partner might be feeling. Feelings are simple words like “Angry, Sad, Lonely, Afraid, Happy, Joyful etc:”

I would just ask my partner *“I imagine you might be feeling afraid, and perhaps a little sad too. Is that what you are feeling?”* Then I check in with my partner, and if she shares other feelings then mirror them to show I heard. *“Ah, a little excited too.”*

Did you try that with your partner? How do you feel? Did it help you understand them a little more, and bring you closer? I hope so. It has made a huge difference in my life.

Directions for a simple Imago dialogue

You can begin to use the Imago Dialogue to share with your partner something that concerns you, and that you would like to share with them. A great way to start using the dialogue is to share something that you appreciate about your partner. Try it, and see how you feel when your partner mirrors back your appreciation of them.

Here are some specific phrases you can use as you practice dialogue

SENDER

I would like to dialogue about . . .

Is now okay?

I feel . . .

I love . . .

I need . . .

What’s bothering me is . . .

RECEIVER

1. Mirroring

Let me see if I’ve got you.

I heard you say . . . or You said . . .

Am I getting you? or Did I get that?

Is there more about that?

Summary mirror

Let me see if I got it all . . .?

Am I getting you? Did I get all of that?

or Is that a good summary?

2. Validation

You make sense to me, and what makes sense is . . .

I can understand that . . . given that . . .

I can see how you would see it that way because sometimes I do . . .

3. Empathy

I imagine you might be feeling . . .

Is that what you’re feeling?

SWITCH ROLES

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