

CONSCIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

By Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.

This is the second of a four article series, "Discover Each Other and Deepen Your Connection" by Dr. Harville Hendrix, author of *Getting the Love You Want*. Do you know that if you fully listen to your partner, I mean listen without judgment or filters, you will discover another person you never knew? And if you are listened to in the same way, you will overcome fear and find a part of yourself you have forgotten. In Imago work, we teach a three-step dialogue process that helps couples discover each other and deepen the connection between them. You see, the way we talk to each other and the way we listen changes everything.

The guiding principle of our dialogue technique is something you learned in kindergarten: Take turns and don't interrupt. That applies during all three steps of the process: mirroring, validating, and empathizing.

Step one - Mirroring

In dialogue, one person talks while the other listens, then you take turns. While this sounds so simple and elementary, it is such a new experience for most of us that it takes a lot of practice to get it right. That's why this first step is so important: it's how we sharpen our listening skills and learn to talk in a way that invites listening.

When you mirror, you simply reflect back what your partner says. Start by saying, "Let me see if I got that." State exactly or paraphrase what your partner said, then ask, "Did I get that?"

When your partner confirms that you got it, then you ask, "Is there more about that?" If your partner has more to say, you respond again with, "Let me see if I got that," and the dialogue continues until the partner has said everything he or she needs to say. When you say, "Is there more about that," you are moving into curiosity. Your partner may say, "Well, yes, there is more." Something that had been present as a feeling is now taking shape in words. When feelings are put into words, they become integrated into consciousness. And this gives you more understanding of your partner and yourself.

So often, we only hear the beginning and end of what the other person is saying. We get the two pieces of bread but not the meat in between. The practice of reflecting and summarizing is a way to get the meat. When you listen deeply, you are stretching into your partner's world.

Step Two - Validating

Once you have practiced mirroring, go onto the next step, which is validating your partner's point of view. You begin by saying, "You make sense." This doesn't mean that you agree with

the point of view, it simply means that you have listened well enough to understand the logic behind your partner's point of view. You get inside your partner's world. Then follow that statement with, "You make sense because," and explain the way you understand your partner's reasons. You are saying that your partner has a valid point of view, regardless of whether you have the same point of view.

Then follow that statement, "you make sense," with, "what makes sense is . . .," and restate what was said, showing the logic in your partner's reasoning. For example: "What makes sense is that since I did not call you about being late, you wondered if you were important to me." You are saying that your partner has a valid point of view, regardless of whether you agree. One of the worst habits many of us have is defending our own point of view as either superior or the only one that counts. When you validate, you are no longer challenging your partner. Instead, you become someone safe to be with. Your partner is now beginning to relax in your presence.

Step Three — Empathizing

The third step is empathy, trying to imagine how your partner is feeling. Empathy also takes the conversation deeper. When you listen carefully to your partner (mirror), and affirm the logic behind the words (validate), the next step is to try to understand the feelings behind those thoughts (empathy). You say, "Given that, I can imagine that you might be feeling. . ." and use the word or just a few words that you think would describe your partner's feelings, for instance, "I imagine you are feeling hurt and angry when I was late." Then ask, "Did I get your feelings right?" Everyone wants to be heard and validated. That process alone is healing. But affirming the other's emotions carries the feeling of being loved. It completes the dialogue experience.

When you and your partner first engage in dialogue, it feels awkward and tedious. This is a new way to talk, so that makes sense, but with practice it becomes natural. You become present to each other. You are stretching into each other's world.

Dr. Hendrix, in partnership with his wife, Helen Lakelly Hunt, created Imago Relationship Therapy and co-founded Imago Relationships International, a non-profit organization that offers training and support to 2000 Imago therapists in 30 countries. Dr. Hendrix has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show 17 times. For more information, go to www.gettingtheloveyouwant.com or www.harvillehendrix.com.