

THE COUPLES 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 *Couples Dialogue*. It consists of three 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 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 his/her point of view. Any response made prior to mirroring is often an "interpretation" and may contain a misunderstanding. 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--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..."; "You make sense to me because..."; "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 "that makes sense to me," and at the deepest level, "I am experiencing your (feelings etc.)...."

The Couples Dialogue (Continued)

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. 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 *Couples Dialogue*.

After a demonstration of the *Couples Dialogue*, your therapist will ask you to practice it in all conflicted transactions with your partner for the remainder of your therapy.

