



kort's korner

About Intentional Dialogue

IMAGO RELATIONSHIP THERAPY has a wonderful communication exercise that I use with most every couple—and I use it in my own relationship. The communication exercise is called the *Intentional Dialogue* and is actually

the foundation to all Imago techniques. This Intentional Dialogue has three parts—mirroring, validation and empathy. It offers couples ways to communicate and be in dialogues, not monologues.

Our partner is trying to convey a message. Most often, we're waiting our turn—not truly listening. We are sitting in our own reactivity, not truly hearing our partners' point of view.

Dialogue involves mirroring. One partner sends information, on one topic, until entirely finished, in short declarative sentences starting with "I." Receiver doesn't interpret, diminish or magnify the message, but simply reflects what was said, until Sender says "There's no more ..."

Deceptively simple! But therapists do it all the time. You'd learn these basic reflective listening skills in an emergency crisis center. Carl Rogers, a well-known psychologist, found people felt more connected and understood when therapists used these reflective listening tech-

niques. It was brilliant for Hendrix to suggest that partners use it with one another.

What did your partner say? "I'm upset that you don't appreciate it when I clean up." You—the Receiver—say, "You don't feel I appreciate your cleaning up the house. And you're upset?" Then you add, "Did I get it? Is there more?" This doesn't stop until the Sender feels heard and understood.

Saying *Did I get it?* sends the message that you're really trying to understand what your partner's saying. *Is there more?* tells him that your ears are open and you do want to hear.

This Couples Intentional Dialogue counteracts intimacy-blocking behaviors like dominating a conversation, interrupting, interpreting what you think he's really saying and finishing his sentences, being overly critical and judgmental, or too close-mouthed and not paying attention. Dialogue stops.

The second part is validation. After your partner finishes what he

says, you validate what you heard, from his point of view.

For most people, this is difficult. You—as Receiver—nod. "What you're saying makes sense. I can see why you'd think this way." This isn't agreement, simply validating his point of view. You're looking through his glasses, not yours, affirming the way he views the world. Yours isn't the only way to view conflicts in your relationship!

We gays and lesbians have been told over and over that what we think and feel is wrong, so validating can be hard. Saying to someone, "That makes sense" can feel like a stretch, especially when you don't agree. In our society, what makes one person right makes another wrong.

IRT suggests simply suspending your point of view, temporarily. Let your partner's reality to surface too. You keep your reality, and validate his.

The last part is empathy. Imagine what your partner might be feeling, given what he's said. You validate not just his words but his feelings. We aren't taught to do this as well as women do so, as a therapist, I spend a lot of time helping men be empathic with one another.

After the Sender is complete and the Receiver has mirrored, validated

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About Intentional Dialogue, continued

and empathized, then the couple switches. Sender becomes Receiver and Receiver becomes Sender. Still on the same topic, so as not to stack up issues, allowing both partners' realities to exist.

Afterward, if the conflict isn't settled, IRT implements many other communication techniques. Pick up Dr. Hendrix's books to learn more! Mike and I first learned this couples dialogue at a weekend workshop that, to become an Imago therapist, I had to attend. I recall thinking, If Mike and I are in such bad shape that we have to talk like this for the rest of our lives, then it's not worth it! It felt tedious and mechanical. And it is! But later, after practicing it for a while, we learned that it helped us hear each other more accurately and deeply. Now, we use it only if we're too reactive. It's saved us from a lot of fights that, before, would have spun out into hurting each other's feelings.

Most couples therapists will tell you that reactivity is not helpful in handling communication between partners.

I didn't know this myself, having come from a family where if something was on your mind, you just said it. Whether another person was willing and wanted to hear you was irrelevant. Needless to say, this doesn't work, but I brought this useless belief into my relationship with Mike.

IRT teaches that if you want to speak to your partner, make an appointment. Sounds trite but it

works. The partner who has a frustration tells the other what it is. "Is this is a good time to discuss it?" If the other says no, then the two negotiate for a better time. We recommend that couples not wait more than 24 hours, allowing for Sender to learn patience and Receiver to be ready to be fully present in the dialogue.

More about this dialogue can be learned by reading Dr. Harville Hendrix's book, *Getting The Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*.