



Listening well is the foundation of good communication....

How often do we as individuals shut down our listening when we are upset or out of rapport with our partners and drop inside of our own heads and listen to the same old internal dialogue instead? How often do we dread that important conversation that we know we must have but are afraid to because of the intense emotion we know it will arouse and we are convinced that either we won't be heard or that our partner has a better gift of the gab than we do and therefore has a greater advantage? Giving voice to our own thoughts allows us to vent our own feelings and move our own agenda forward. And we all know where that leads: the dead end where I am right and you are wrong. It is often that dead end which leads people to therapy or to mediation. We can experience terrible hopelessness and loneliness which we feel when we don't seem to be able to get through to one another and then we take these well rehearsed thoughts and create terrifying beliefs about the possible outcomes.

This is where the Imago Intentional Dialogue is most often used in all of my work: my couple's counselling; my parent/teen counselling and my family mediation practice. It works because it removes the deadening power struggle by eliminating right and wrong. The dialogue's focus on listening and "mirroring" helps create a shared mutual space where real, honest and tender and kind well intending communication can flourish. The work is done, not in either person's face but in the comfort of the in between space. As a potter, I often, like potters before me, use the metaphor of a beautifully finished fine large ceramic bowl, into which, the couple places their important issues or concerns. There is no right or wrong, only the genuine expression of thoughts and feelings in the safety of the in between environment that allows each person to be heard with just the right distance and closeness; in that space in-between. Directing the unfinished business to a space outside of ourselves but in-between, in itself, helps the maximizer (see below) contain and the minimizer (see below) share language more generously. Because they can then each see that there is a peace zone which is as yet unpolluted with blame and defenses. That is where there is validation and empathy, safety, trust and truth reign. Our own filters are more likely to be distorting what we see than anything outside of ourselves. If we can soften the glare and look kindly and with curiosity into our partner's eyes, we will much more likely to find the person we love and respect and appreciate. I encourage my clients to extend the benefits of the intentional dialogue where, appropriately, an appointment is made to address a particular and significant issue and the process is adhered to step by step.

The more we can truly integrate the specific techniques of the Intentional Dialogue - mirroring, validation, empathy - into our daily lives, the more first nature it becomes, the more connected we will feel with one another and talk about what wonder that creates in a marriage. Opening with the question, "Is this a good time to have a dialogue", if it isn't, it may at least be a good time to hear just an overview and that one can end with, it sounds as though we really need to have a dialogue. Because, as they say, even where one chooses to squeeze the toothpaste, can be a significant issue if we make up that it means we aren't feeling respected or loved; so if the toothpaste isn't really toothpaste, you do need an appointment for the intentional dialogue.

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