

Communication Triangle Program

Week 5 Skills for Dialogue (Part 1)

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Welcome to the Communication Triangle Program! Many times people live on automatic pilot and don't realize they are disconnecting at a rapid pace, as a result of poor communication. I'm glad you have decided to do something about your communication.

Remember that **Communication is the lifeblood of intimacy**. To live together with satisfaction, couples need clear, regular communication. We have been talking about the communication triangle, which has three sides: Attitude, Desire, and Skills. The first two week we talked about attitude. On weeks 3 and 4 we explore desire.

Today we are going to talk about Skills. The skills needed for dialogue

Skill refers to your ability to communicate directly and clearly, repair relationship ruptures, manage differences, negotiate solutions, and solve problems together. Several basic skills live at the core of dialogue, and it's important to learn and practice these skills for a dialogue that will nurture connection and intimacy.

Think of the communication skills as reminders rather than rules. They're reminders to pay attention to thoughts, feelings, communication, assumptions, and judgments. Held lightly, the skills we explore will ease you into dialogue. Grip too tightly and they will trap you into a limiting system.

Communication is a living process. It calls for both of you to let go of the known and familiar and discover new perspectives. You can then discover together an exciting new world of possibilities.

I have a longer 9 weeks program that focuses on mastering the 9 basic skills of dialogue. Obviously we can't cover here in the last 2 session all nine skills in detail. What I'm going to do is give you an overview of the 9 skills, but we will focus in 4 of them that tend to be the ones that most frequently couples have difficulty with.

I group the 9 skills into 3 basic categories: **Slow down, Move forward, and Sustain.** Depending on your personality and preferences, some skills will be easier to master than others. Find a systematic way to focus your practice on the skills that don't come naturally to you, and then practice until they develop into positive communication habits.

We live in a busy culture. We're in a rush. Too busy for contemplation, observation, and correct behavior. It can be challenging to slow down and learn from actions, reactions, and decisions. Yet, you will see untold benefits when you do so.

Slow down

The first set of skills has to do with slowing down. It's important to slow down your conversations. In doing so you will learn how pause, suspend, and listen. Pausing and suspending are a pre-requisite to be able to listen. And listening tends to be hard for many people.

Slow down to Pause

Definition of Pause: To stop in order to consider; to reflect; a moment of silence; a delay or suspended reaction. Pauses are important. Stillness deepens awareness, connection and love.

Many times taking a moment to be quiet, to be silent, to think, to find better discernment, to calm our emotions, can make a big difference on how we keep the conversation going. Slowing down to pause creates the space where listening can occur.

Reflection helps us learn from our thoughts and actions, and from our mistakes. There's no learning without reflection.

Slow down to Suspend

The other reason to slow down is to suspend. The words suspend comes from the Latin **suspendere**, which means "to hang below." It has to do with drawing out, or stretching. It has to do with sharing your thinking in a way that lets us and others see and understand.

Suspension is difficult because it requires you to relax your grip on certainty. Many times both of you feel you are “right.” When you suspend, you do not work through all your thoughts in advance. You are willing to be influenced by the conversation. And research tells us that the willingness to be influenced by the other is one of the biggest factor that helps to keep couples together and happy.

You acknowledge and observe thoughts and feelings without acting on them. You learn to reflect in action. You see what is happening as it happens. Suspension requires you to live what you know or think you know suspended, hanging out in front of you and the other. It requires that you not understand too soon, and that you let go of early assumptions and stereotyping thoughts. It demands that you open your mind to change and to the unexpected.

What do you need to suspend? You need to suspend assumptions, biases, and judgments. Today we have time to focus only on suspending assumptions. In my experience with couples, this is one of the most difficult skills for everybody.

Suspending assumptions

Assumptions are difficult to see because you take them for granted or accept them as true even without proof or backup. Assumption is a supposition. It can make people presumptuous and arrogant. It’s the snap evaluation you make when you say, “He’s a good (or bad) person.”

Because each individual has a unique life experience, each person carries a unique set of assumptions. But groups, cultures, and families also have shared assumptions that glue people together.

Different assumptions don’t create problems; the need to be *right* about assumptions is what causes trouble. Effective communication demands that assumptions be tested and clarified. Only then can shared meaning evolve.

Assumptions can limit communication and cause conflicts to erupt. Assumptions are like bullets that can destroy and kill. Here is a sampler of assumptions that can confine dialogue and prevent its flow:

- “If my husband is being so nice to me today, he must want something. I better be careful.”
- “My wife says she is ‘just expressing’ her feelings. It sounds more like she is accusing me. As always, It’s my fault.”

You make assumptions every day. For example, when you drive you assume other drivers will obey traffic signals. Most drivers do, and so you proceed through intersections safely. Your assumption is right most of the time. However, it could be proven wrong and result in severe consequences.

It's easy to see the assumption in this simple example. Assumptions are harder to see and understand in more abstract instances.

The main problem with assumptions is that because you know your partner so well, 1/2 of time you are right in your assumptions. . . but the other 1/2 you are wrong!

A good method for uncovering assumptions in any situation starts with thinking about the origins of assumptions. There are at least four possible origins of assumptions:

1) Cultural. Through birth, family of origin, country, and the place where you live, you are immersed in influences – both subtle and not so subtle – that give privilege to one idea over another. This results in your cultural heritage. Consequently, you might prefer new over old, Western over Eastern, male over female. You could further prefer Mexican over Indian food, classical over rock music, and Christian over Muslim faith. The cultural divide between affluence and less privileged backgrounds is another huge influence.

The cultures you and I inhabit all contribute to our way of thinking and form the basis for many of the assumptions we make about the world. I say cultures because each of us simultaneously inhabits several cultures at any one time: family, country, and workplace, to name a few. Culture is definitely a powerful originator of assumptions.

2) Biological. Your genetic makeup is another source of influences, feelings, and preferences. Biology influences your assumptions by the sensory pathways you prefer to use to receive and process information (think your five senses), and your cognitive preferences. Do you prefer to learn and process better by listening? by visual input? or by doing? Those are biological biases that many times take you to assume (there's that word again!) that your partner also prefers the same. It's important to be aware of those preferences so you are not blindsided.

3) Intellectual. Human beings have the unique ability to reason. Consequently, you might think you prefer fact over opinion, certainty over uncertainty, reason over emotions, and "truth" over "lies." The problem you face is that statistics can

bend to tell half-truths. Neurobiology shows that “rational” decisions are impossible without the often unconscious input of emotions.

For example, If you make the faulty assumption that “pictures don’t lie” without further investigation, you might later discover the picture was doctored in Photoshop. If you don’t suspend and evaluate your assumptions, you might mistakenly make the wrong decision while thinking you are making a solid, rational one.

4) Idiosyncratic. You have a unique and distinctive history. Consequently, you may have past experiences that lead you to assume all politicians are controlling, all religions are dogmatic, or all people from the Midwest are unfriendly. These personal assumptions are predictable since they are usually based on traumatic or repetitive events in your personal stories. These same factors could lead you to make assumptions about sex, race, and age.

To further complicate things, some assumptions have supporting evidence and seem warranted. Many others have no supporting evidence whatsoever, and are therefore unwarranted. Because of the four underlying sources of assumptions, you might believe you have supporting evidence, when it is really an unwarranted assumption.

Assumptions can also become limiting by interfering or blocking your ability to think clearly about a particular issue. For example, you might tell yourself, “I’m good at math, but I’m not good with words, so I’ll better don’t say anything.” Or, “My husband is keeping me totally out of the loop about his job, this must mean he’s about to lose his job.” Or, “I don’t know what my wife is thinking, therefore, I better keep my mouth shut because I don’t want to get into an argument.”

You can lose many opportunities when you behave as if your assumptions are true. Don’t limit yourself. Check your assumptions!

Action time: Each day monitor your assumptions and make it a point to check them out. Example: You suggest something and the other person does not say anything. Instead of assuming they did not like the idea ask: what do you think?

Take time to do the exercise about assumptions.

Your Turn for Action:

Think about an upcoming situation or a conversation that may be potentially difficult. Take time to:

- Think up and write down as many assumptions as you can, including ones you are already forming about the upcoming situation.
- Take a moment to think about your assumptions. What are they based on, and what are their underlying sources? What past experiences color your assumptions? What personality traits or cognitive preferences make you prone to think that way?
- How often do you tend to make similar assumptions?
- How can you make sure you check your assumptions in your upcoming situation instead of acting “as if” they were true?

Slow down to listen

The dictionary defines to listen as: To make an effort to hear something; to hear something with thoughtful attention; to pay close attention.

“It is better to listen in order to understand than to listen in order to reply”.

You should listen with your eyes, ears, and heart. That’s how the Chinese character depicts the word listening. Listening facilitates understanding and appreciation. As you listen, you make a thoughtful effort to pay close attention. Because listening is at the core of interactive dialogue, it’s helpful to learn to listen to your own listening. Become aware of *how* you listen. Listening is interactive, not passive. It prompts the speaker to come alive and sustain enthusiasm.

The quality of your listening conveys a sense of appreciation, acceptance, and understanding. When you listen, the other person becomes responsive, comes alive, and sustains enthusiasm. You must be fully present to be a good listener.

Let go of agendas. Release inner noise. Calm your emotions to listen with intensity.

Listen to Understand

As a rule of thumb, strive to understand first and be understood second. We gain a shot of confidence when we receive confirmation that we understand something correctly. Listening is the first step for gaining understanding.

Try to fully understand even if you don't agree with the other's viewpoint. To help you do this, try empathy (remember from last week?) See things from the other's perspective. Walk in their shoes. Ask questions that will help you reach a deeper understanding. And remember to check your assumptions and your understanding.

Take time and have the discipline to quiet your internal noise long enough to totally focus on what your partner is saying. Put aside the resistances and reactions you might feel for the subject matter.

When both of you listens to understand, you will not only hear your own voice and words, but also the meaning that evolves from the conversation.

Your Turn for Action.

Pause! Reflect on your listening

Assess your listening by answering the following questions:

- What makes it difficult for you to fully tune in to dialogue?
- What makes you willing and able to fully listen? (It may help to recall a time when you were engaged in listening. What helped you listen in that circumstance?)
- What behaviors do you display when you are fully listening?
- Recall a time when you stopped listening. What closed you off to the conversation? How could you have listened differently?

To benefit the most from listening, try to listen for three aspects simultaneously:

Listen to what your partner is saying. To understand meaning, identify important points and ask relevant questions until you and the other are satisfied you understand.

Listen to your listening. Tune into your internal conversation and your feelings about the external conversation. Your inner voice is filled with

judgment. It develops ways to refute what you're hearing. This is why it's important to master suspension, so you can put your biases aside. Listen to your own voice – beyond your words to the message – when it's your turn to speak. If you are genuinely interested, your partner will communicate with you. Are you able to listen without resistance? What does it feel like?

Everyone has a different technique for staying in the moment. Some people contemplate quietly. Others speak a few words. Some people giggle nervously. Some shout. To help you remain in the moment, ask yourself why the other's train of thought differs from yours. Avoid the temptation to think they're disagreeing with you. Instead, ask yourself, "Why is my partner thinking differently than me? What is she seeing that I'm not noticing? What experiences he has had with similar issues that color what he is saying?" It will help you from feeling defensive.

Listen together for emerging themes. It's important to remember that what each of you feel, sees, hears, and perceives is only a corner of the reality. Recognize that diverse personalities and experiences contribute to a spectrum of thoughts. Multiple voices create a beautiful and rich symphony that brings a totally new meaning to the experience.

Action time:

Use these questions to help develop your skills for listening to emergent themes and meaning.

- Is there a common reality emerging from your different viewpoints?
- What are the different lenses creating diverse perspectives?
- What shared meaning is being revealed? What common story is emerging?
- What dilemmas are present? How can you face them so you can open doors instead of closing them?

Common understanding and meaning will develop when you can listen together, taking into account how things look from others' perspectives.

Listen to connect

Hearing is the first sense humans develop and the last to go. A fetus' ears are fully functional at 20 weeks. The fetus can hear sounds inside the womb, as well as exterior music and voices. Studies show that a year after birth, children recognize and gravitate toward music they were exposed to in the womb.

People often admit to being angry or depressed because “no one listens.” The greatest gift you can give to your partner is the gift of listening.

- Listen to your heart and from the heart. The heart forms connections. That’s how you show caring and respect.
- When you listen from the heart, your partner can feel your appreciation, compassion, and empathy. These brings connection.
- Connected couples communicate more effectively

Listen to appreciate

When you suspend, pause, and listen deeply, you gain a new appreciation for others in the dialogue. As you listen to appreciate, you will welcome our partner *and* their points of view. Human beings, regardless of background, experience joy and pain similarly. In this spirit, if you tune into your humanity you will feel your biases, assumptions, and antagonisms dissolve. Sometimes the best way to solve a problem is to dissolve it.

I once worked with a couple who were ready to dissolve their relationship. The core issue: neither was listening to appreciate the other. They couldn’t see beyond their differences. The one partner, who recognized he had been in several previous failed relationships, decided it was time to take a different course. He would make an effort to save this relationship.

That set a new tone, and after working through issues together for several months, the couple regained their strength as a team. They adopted a new appreciation for their individual styles. They learned to listen with appreciation. One of them said, “I’m amazed that once I got over myself it wasn’t so difficult to really listen to my partner. I never dreamed that changing my listening style would make me feel so much happier.”

Your Turn for Action.

In your conversations this week, challenge yourself to listen as long as necessary to sincerely appreciate what others bring to the conversation. The other person will feel valued. You will strengthen your connection, and you will feel happier.