

## **The Imago Dialogue – (Couple’s Dialogue)**

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### **Why Dialogue?**

Dialogue can help you to keep relationships fresh and dynamic, and to get beneath conflict to rediscover a deeper connection. If I try to resolve conflict in my relationship without creating a true connection with my partner, I may just be patching things up until the next big fight comes along, or even reinforcing the problem. Imago theory shows that most conflicts that have a painful “charge” are only 10% about the present situation and 90% about some past wound that is causing pain now. Imagine if you could truly heal old wounds. Your partner is the ideal person to help you do just that!

### **Dialogue vs. Discussion**

Often when I am listening to my partner, I might also be planning how to respond. I may be fervently figuring out how to show her that she is wrong, or how to defend myself from things she says that I don’t want to hear. My reply would contain carefully chosen words which show just how much I am “in the right” and are designed so I don’t have to hear any more. What I have described is not really a discussion between me and my partner. It’s what the philosopher Martin Buber called an “I-It” relationship. I am not dealing with her reality, and I’m working hard to give her a fake shiny version of me. When we try to solve conflict in an “I-It” discussion, we may get a solution which works for a while. But it is unlikely to be the best solution for us both long-term and leaves the true underlying reasons for conflict unresolved. Dialogue helps people cut through their natural defenses to create a more genuine connection, which Buber called “I-You.” When we are both honestly and openly involved in exploring issues, we can discover the real source of pain. Listening and talking about this in a loving, safe space can open up within ourselves amazing potential for an improved relationship. When my partner and I fell in love, we had a sense of destiny drawing us together. It felt like there was a path together which was greater than the course of our separate lives. Dialogue enables us to unfold that path and experience the love we dreamed of.

### **“Your partner is another person – Get it!” (Harville Hendrix)**

There are many ways in which dialogue can enrich our lives:

- We can make better decisions, because we can share together a full understanding of what we both need.

- It's a lot more fun and passionate. I get to continue discovering the amazing other person who loves me.
- It can be a wonderful path of discovery, not just of my partner, but about me. Often I find that our partner's thinks better of me, than I do of myself.

### **Imago Dialogue Starts with Safety**

If I am going to meet others in an authentic way, and lower my protective shell, I need to feel safe. The structure of the Imago dialogue provides safety. The first rule is to banish all shame, blame and criticism. That might sound tough if I am really angry at my partner for all the things they did or didn't do. How can I tell them how much they are hurting me if I can't criticize? But I also need to make it safe for my partner to listen to me. And that means to always talk about my own feelings, not about their actions. What does this mean to me? Why am I frustrated? What do I feel? The key is to make it easy for my partner to remain open, and to be available to hear.

### **Stop Talking, Start Connecting**

Listening to my partner may be the most difficult part of the Imago dialogue, especially if we are going to talk about a hard subject. Am I going to hear something painful? Will I want to jump out of my chair and run out? Will I want to shout and deny it? Listening well can sometimes be a very courageous act. To be available to listen and truly hear what concerns your partner means putting aside all my spontaneous reactions to it. As the words come out, my first reaction might be to think "No – she's got it wrong – it's not like that!" The key to creating an "I-You" relationship is to put that aside, and instead listen without judgment. I need to open myself up to hearing my partner's reality and, by hearing that, to truly connect with her. If I deny it, then I break the connection, and start an argument.

Try it. Practice.

### **Create Space for the Relationship**

Before you start to dialogue, it's good to create some space where your relationship can grow. You can do this in the room, by sitting on facing chairs, knees close together, with eye contact. But it's also a good idea to spend a few moments quietly too and become aware of the two of you. Let your breathing be quiet, and remind yourself to be calm, with no shame, blame or criticism as you speak, no judgment as you listen. Something beautiful is being created between you. Martin Buber called it the "sacred space" when two people met as "I-You." Now you can start!

## The Imago Dialogue (Couple's Dialogue)

Imago Dialogue is a unique three step process for connection, developed by Harville Hendrix PhD and Helen LaKelly Hunt PhD. Although it looks simple, the process was formulated through extensive study of psychological theories of relationship and clinical work with couples.

**Note from Laura Fish:** I have modified this framework based on years of working with couple's in therapy. I have made it four steps, pulling out the summarizing part to make it a separate step. I find this makes summarizing more effective. In addition, I have switched Validation and Empathy so that Validation is last. This is based on my belief that taking an empathic gaze must occur for one to truly validate another's perspective. How can you validate if you haven't empathized?

I find this version of the dialogue to have even greater impact on helping couple's stay grounded and in connection as they dialogue.

What follows is a description of how to use each step. The Imago Dialogue is initiated when a partner asks for an appointment and the other partner agrees to participate. **Remember:** you cannot expect to spring a dialogue on anyone and have success. If the person isn't ready to dialogue, they can respectfully decline your invitation for the moment, yet they are required to set and keep a time in the near future to meet.

Note: There is **no crosstalk** during the dialogue. When one person talks, the other is silent, but can non-verbally engage with head nods, eyebrow lifts, reaching out to touch the other person, etc. The non-verbal signals, however, must be those of welcome not warning. Both people need to be checking in on their expressions to ensure a climate of safety.

### 1. Mirroring

Using "I" language, the **Sender** starts with a "message" to convey his/her thoughts, feelings, or experiences to the Receiver ("I feel," "I love," "I need" "I've noticed..."). They avoid shaming, blaming, or criticizing their partner, and instead talk about their perspective with conscious communication.

In response, the **Receiver** echoes the Sender's message word-for-word, using a lead sentence like, "You said ..." or "What I heard you say..." After you state what you heard, you say, "**Am I with you**" Sender, if the Receiver is struggling to mirror DO NOT HELP THEM. Receiver, just do your best and if you realize you can't remember much just send

over what you remember with “Am I with you?” and the Sender will likely say, “Not quite” and give you what you missed. Sender, do not say a hard “No” when they have missed something; instead, send a signal of welcome with the conscious communication “Not quite.”

Mirroring helps you to listen to what the other person is actually saying rather than listening to the reactions and responses going on in your head while your partner is talking.

***To listen to understand, not reply.***

If the sender says you got everything, then the Receiver asks, “**Is There More?**” For example, the Receiver says, “You are saying you have a tough time when I say I will be home at 7 for dinner and don’t call to tell you I will be late. Am I with you?” Sender says, “yes, you got it.” Receiver says, “Is there more?” or “Okay, great. I’m curious, is there more?”

When you ask that question leave a little time to show you really mean it and want to hear more. This goes for the entire dialogue: check in on your tone of voice (both people) and your body language. Are you conveying signals of welcome, curiosity, interest, or signals of warning, shut down, collapse, disturbance?

When you convey curiosity and openness with your question of is there more, your partner might pause “Well no....let me see...maybe there is more.” Often as they are given space and time, they will go deeper and share more with you, and that depth of sharing can lead to efficient resolution of the issues rather than a lingering. Keep on with it. You might be more encouraging - “Wow. Interesting. Is there more about that?” The more you reassure your partner that you are open to what they are saying, the more you stay in connection, even if you do find the subject area challenging or unfamiliar.

## **2. Summarize**

When your partner says “No, that’s all,” during the “mirroring” phase, then you can try a summary. This is the essence of what was said. You bring it all together, but don’t add in any of your perspective. You just summarize your partner’s thoughts, beliefs, sensations, and emotions. Try to include something about everything you heard in the mirroring step. “**So, the essence of what you said is.....**” Then check you got it all, “**Am I with you.**” My partner might often say “Well you missed this little bit – and it’s

quite important to me that you hear it.” Once they share it again, then the Receiver just mirrors that bit back. No need to do the whole summary over again.

### 3. Empathy

The third step of the Imago Dialogue is empathy. In the empathy step, you imagine what your partner *might* be feeling.

***Pro tip: Feelings are one word, not a sentence.***

If you have the Emotions and Cognitions handout I sent you, please refer to page one if needed for emotions. It sounds like this, “I imagine you ***might be feeling*** afraid, and perhaps a little sad too. Am I with you?” Then you wait for your partner’s response of either “yes, that’s how I feel,” or “not quite...I don’t feel afraid, but I do feel sad and disappointed.” The Receiver mirrors back any emotions the Sender added.

### 4. Validation

When you mirror your partner well, they will probably already be feeling that you have heard their point of view and seen that for them it is valid. But it’s nice to say that too. This part of the process can be quite hard too if your partner has a very different perspective on things from yourself. But to be connected, it’s important for you to recognize that what your partner says makes sense for them. Sometimes their view might be so different from yours that you are tempted to think that they must be wrong.

But in dialogue, **creating the connection is paramount**. Who is right and who is wrong doesn’t matter.

Harville Hendrix likes to say: **“You can be right, or you can be married!”**

With this process, you might even discover that you can find a solution together where it doesn’t matter whether either of you are right or wrong over this issue, because the *underlying pain is what really needs to be addressed*. Precisely because you are in relationship with another person, it is healthy to be able to accept that you hold different viewpoints. After you have summarized your partner’s perspective, you validate them by simply saying “You make sense” or, if you want to really go deep “You make sense because...” and you add in anything else you know about your partner to really shore up the sense that you get them.

Remember, validation does not mean you agree. It sends the signal that you care about the person and their perspective.

After you do a round, pause to notice: how do you feel, what sensations do you notice in your body (tense, calm, softness, rigidity?), is this different than how you normally talk about a conflict, how was this beneficial, what didn't you like about it? In short, reflect on the process not just the content to get the most out of this tool.

### **Directions for a simple Imago dialogue**

You can begin to use the Imago Dialogue to share with your partner something that concerns you, and that you would like to share with them.

A great way to start using the dialogue is to share something that ***you appreciate about your partner***. Try it and see how you feel when your partner mirrors back your appreciation of them.

### Switch Roles

Sender becomes receiver and vice versa. The sender now shares their perspective on this same topic. It can be tempting to go line by line and either agree or disagree about every point your partner made. Try to avoid that; instead, just set the intention of authentically sharing your perspective as if you have not heard the other person's perspective. Of course, there will be some overlap. Just avoid it seeming like you are trying to dismantle their perspective; rather, you are adding in yours.

**See Laura's "Couple's Dialogue tip sheet" to guide you when you practice the dialogue.**