



INTENTIONAL DIALOGUE

By Laura Marshall, LCSW (May, 2013)

"To understand another is one of life's richest blessings, and to be understood by another is perhaps love's sweetest, most satisfying gift."
Hemmingway

Intentional Dialogue is a safe and effective way to communicate about issues and feelings that are important. The purpose of Intentional Dialogue is not necessarily to solve problems or make decisions (although this can be a nice side effect). Instead, Intentional Dialogue gives us an opportunity to truly understand our partner's perspective without rushing to judgment, and gives our partner the chance to understand the way the world looks through our eyes. Experiment using Intentional Dialogue with the simple format below. Choose something to discuss that does not have heavy emotional content (such as "the best vacation I ever had" or "one thing I would love to do this week"). After you have practiced several times with easy topics you can begin using Intentional Dialogue to tackle more serious issues.

INTENTIONAL DIALOGUE

1. Request an appointment to dialogue. Make sure you have enough time for both partners to have a turn. If possible find a private, comfortable, quiet space to talk in.
2. Decide who will be the first "sender" (the one doing the talking) and who will be the first "receiver" (the one doing the listening). You will switch roles later.
3. Start by holding hands and making some statement of affection and commitment to the other (i.e. "you are incredibly special to me.")
4. The sender begins to talk about what they want to share. Be careful to do it in small bits (you'll get a chance to say everything you need to - short segments increase the chance that your partner will "get" it all). Make sure that you talk about yourself - avoid criticizing or commenting on your partner's behavior.

5. The receiver repeats back what the sender has said and asks "Did I get that right?" ("What I think I heard you say is that you are really looking forward to.... Did I get that right?")
6. If there are no corrections the receiver then asks "Is there more?"
7. Continue sending and mirroring (repeating) until the sender feels that he/she has said everything he or she wishes to.
8. The receiver then "validates" what the sender has shared. For example he or she might say "It makes sense to me that you are looking forward to lunch with your sisters this week. They have been really important sources of support for you, and I know that you've been having a rough time recently." Validation is simply telling the other person that their world makes sense to you – that you *get* them - even if it is different from the way the world looks to you! It is important to remember that validation does not mean agreement – just that their world makes sense to you.
9. The receiver then "empathizes" with the sender. Empathy is letting yourself imagine how the other might be feeling. For example, you might say "I imagine when you don't see your sisters for a while you start to feel lonely and a little cut off from your family."
10. After completing the three steps of Mirror - Validate - Empathize, switch roles.
11. End by again holding hands and sharing an appreciation of the other.

For more information about Intentional Dialogue and its application to marriage therapy [contact The Wissahickon Center for Relationship Therapy](#) or read *"Getting the Love You Want"* by Harville Hendrix in our [bookstore](#) .