

FOR LOVERS: Keeping Valentine's Day Year-round

By Cindy Bink, LMHC

I love being a lover's counselor. There is such great power in a room of lovers. But like the Star Wars movies, this power can be used for many purposes. Great love or great hate can generate great energy that can be used for good or bad.

I also love observing lovers begin the counseling process. They wonder if the power of their love has completely fizzled out, or if some spark can be re-ignited. Usually they look to me as their counselor to tell them if their relationship is worth salvaging. Perhaps I'm too optimistic but I don't believe we ever lose love completely, it just gets clouded, we can't see it, or we decide to give up, because it takes too much work to bring it back in focus. Most lovers new to counseling are angry and disappointed at each other because they miss the time when they felt happy just to be in each other's presence. They long to be back in that blissful state of their romance, and think, if they only could improve their communication skills, they would find it again. They are not that far off, according to Harville Hendrix, the author of *Getting the Love That You Want*. The key to re-creating that newness or romance is to experience your partner from a new perspective through communication. Here is my short interpretation of the communication steps Dr. Hendrix calls "Intentional Dialoguing." Try it first with a simple problem you're having with your lover, and then move on to other issues and see what happens.

- **Step 1:** Don't talk when both of you want to kill each other. In order for communication to be productive at least one of you needs to be clearly committed to making the relationship better. If you're feeling the need to let your partner know how f***d up they are, you are not in the right place to improve your relationship. Give yourself some time to calm down. Usually in every relationship there is one person who has a hard time with this. They're the ones that will talk long into the night, even when it is clear it isn't helping. So give yourself some time to get ready, and then ask yourself,

"Am I committed to hearing what my partner has to say?" When you are, move onto Step 2.

- **Step 2:** Stop talking. If only one of you stops talking, the other will have the opportunity to be heard and seen. Being seen or heard by your lover is one of the greatest experiences of our lives. Sometimes I think that simply listening (witnessing) a person's experience in therapy does more for them than all the counseling skills I learned in graduate school. It's easy and simple. Be quiet, zip-lock your lips, and then move to step three.

- **Step 3:** Empty your brain while you partner unloads. The only way anyone can deeply listen is to empty one's mind of what they want to say and what they already know about the person they're talking to. This works in any relationship. Imagine swimming under water for a great distance, coming up for air and taking a long deep breath in. You are breathing in your partner's words. Or see yourself as an empty glass being filled by your partner's words. Pretend you don't already know everything about them and can no longer read their mind. Just kidding, we all know you can't read his or her mind, right? I promise you, if you do just this, you will have a completely different experience of your partner.

- **Step 4:** Let them speak and then repeat what you hear. After your partner has plenty of time (as much as they need), repeat what you heard. If they are talking too long and you don't think you'll remember it all, ask them to stop for a while so you can repeat what they have said. Go with your gut on this one. If your partner is in the middle of some heart-wrenching story, exploding with emotion, don't stop them. Sometimes people just need to vent and allowing them the opportunity to talk can release a lot of relationship tension and make it better for you in the long run. So when you are clear they have finished, begin telling them what you heard. Ask them to let you say it all without interruption. Let them know that they will have a chance to correct you once you finish. **IMPORTANT:** This is not the time to bring in your impressions or personal opinions about how wrong they are. Remember you're only a vessel at this point, receiving you partner's words.

- **Step 5:** Make sure you get it right. After you have repeated what your partner just told you, make sure you got it right. If not, try it again. You may be surprised at the nuances you missed that were really important to him or her. So stay calm and keep at it. Eventually you will get it right and remember, just because you think you know your partner, doesn't mean you do.
- **Step 6:** Do it again! Is there more? If they have something to add, let them say it. Sometimes when they hear you repeat what they just said, it reminds them of other things they wanted to say. Believe me, this won't go on forever. You may think it will, but it won't. In the beginning your partner may be so amazed you're letting them talk, they may not come up for air for several minutes. Give them time and then give them more time. I can't tell you enough how great it is for someone to be heard after sometimes years of arguments that left him or her feeling misunderstood.
- **Step 7:** Pull it all together in a summary. This can be the hard part. You have to make sure you get the full picture of what your partner is going through. Summarize the whole thing, pulling it all together. Then, check in with them to make sure you got it. You are almost there. Keep going.
- **Step 8:** It doesn't help to tell someone that they shouldn't think ...what they think. Let them know what makes sense to you. Hopefully you really did empty your brain and heard something that you never did before. You've stepped into the shoes of your partner and left your own self behind. There should be plenty that makes sense to you now about why your partner feels the way they do. Let them know what does. For example, if you never realized that your partner thinks that every time you tell a joke at a party you're insulting them, it might make sense to you that they would hate going to parties with you. Get it? After you tell them what make sense to you, ask them if they felt you understood some of what they were trying to say to you. This is called validation.
- **Step 9:** Can you feel me? Now pretend that you are not you. You are your partner, with all their personality traits and worries. Look through their eyes and let them know what you would be feeling if you were them. Here is an

example. My partner was poor their whole life. If I was poor my whole life I might be anxious around money since I would know what it is like not to have any. The main task here is to get a sense of what your partner may be feeling in their experience and then let them know.

- **Step 10:** You're finished! Congratulations! You have completely understood your partner. Now it is your turn. andI'm sorry our time is up. Just kidding.

- **Step 11:** Your turn! Now you get to tell your partner about your experience, and they should follow these same eleven steps. But remember - Hendrix calls this "Intentional Dialoguing." That means you are not just 'letting loose' on your partner. You are sharing your experience, so that you can understand each other and hopefully have your needs met. Your communication needs to be responsible and helpful while at the same time open, honest and as deep as you can get. Go for it!

Cindy Bink LMHC is an Imago Couples Counselor in Manhattan and can be reached through her web site at <http://newyorkcitytherapist.net/> or by calling 347-541-0923.