

How to Have a Structured Dialogue Following the Relationship Enhancement® Model

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When a couple or family members are faced with an emotionally charged issue that has begun to devolve into an argument or fight (or is running the risk of doing that), then continuing to try to talk about the issue in our common day-to-day ways of talking with one another is unlikely to work and only increases the risk of things devolving even further, with increased emotional distress and hurt feelings, as well as potential harm to the relationship.

In such situations, it is wiser and more effective for the couple or family members to agree to enter into a formal, structured dialogue process that is designed to keep things calmer emotionally. This is accomplished by allowing each person in turn to share their experience, feelings, concerns and desires without being interrupted, to feel heard and understood by the other person and, conversely, for each person to listen empathically and non-judgmentally to the other person's perspective and then to verbally acknowledge the other person's perspective (without any commentary) so that the person doing the sharing *feels* understood.

The key to having a successful structured dialogue is to follow a few simple guidelines:

- Only one person talks at a time, and the other person does not interrupt.
- The person who is talking shares his or her experience, feelings, concerns and desires regarding the issue at hand. This is to be done subjectively and respectfully, i.e., speaking from your own point of view and without attacking the other person.
- The other person tunes in empathically by temporarily setting aside their own perspective; listens intently to understand the other person on their terms; and then verbally acknowledges the other person's perspective. This is to be done without adding any commentary from your own point of view, but do try to "read between the lines" to identify what is implied in what your partner has shared.
- Repeat, perhaps several times, with each person remaining in the same role.
- At an appropriate time, change roles so that the second person has a chance to share his or her experience, feelings, concerns, and desires about the issue at hand. It is helpful for the new person doing the sharing to begin by saying what makes sense to you about what your partner had previously shared, and then share your perspective.
- The partner's job is to tune in empathically, listen intently to understand the other person on their terms, and verbally acknowledge the other person's perspective.
- Repeat, and go back and forth as long as necessary until both of you feel well understood.
- When appropriate, aim to come up with a solution that leaves both of you feeling that your concerns and desires have been taken into account, creating a win-win solution. The "secret" here is to commit yourselves to meeting your partner's needs as much your own.