

PROBLEM SOLVING DIALOGUE

INTRODUCTION

Many problems that occur in relationships are the result of a breakdown in clear communication. Many of us did not grow up in families that modeled the best ways to address, process, and resolve problems. One way to explore it personally would be to think of the word **confrontation**. What memories, images, and feelings do you notice? If you notice something that seems negative, you're not alone. Often people have negative associations with confrontation from their childhood or unsuccessful attempts at confronting others in their adult life.

A confrontation between two people is essentially this: ***an invitation by one individual, extended respectfully to another, to consider changing a behavior that creates distress for them whenever it occurs.*** It **is** possible to achieve a resolution without a lot of "drama" occurring. The goal of this dialogue model is to help those who are interested experience the successful resolution of differences more often.

PREPARATION

When confronting someone, it helps to set the stage for success. It is important to *invite* the other to resolve a problem. Aggressive approaches generally result in negative reactions from others. For example, "We're going to talk about this right now!" is clearly **not** an invitation but instead a demand.

Instead, ask the person if they are available now for a dialogue to resolve a problem. It is important to treat the other with respect, since we want to be treated that way as well. If they say they are free to talk, then the two of you can now move into the dialogue. However if the other person says that this is not a good time for them, please respect that and do not push them into it. It is quite fine to ask them when they might be available. Hopefully, the two of you can agree on a time to have the dialogue. However, please note that it is **not** OK for either person to **never** be available. This dialogue only works if there is an attitude of good faith by both parties.

THE THREE ELEMENTS

STATING THE PROBLEM

Generally, the “problem” is an issue about a behavior that creates distress for one of the parties in the relationship. It could be something that the other does or does not do. The problem needs to be stated in behavioral terms.

Example: “Last night you did not wash the dishes like you promised.” This is a good example of making a behavior statement. What **not** to say would be something like “I can’t count on you for anything, can I?” Or “When will you ever follow through with anything?” These are attacks on the other and will likely result in a reaction that will derail anything constructive.

It is also helpful to make the problem statement a single sentence if possible. If you go on and on talking about the problem, you’ll lose your audience. Keep it simple and direct. It is very helpful to introduce the problem statement by beginning with “**When you...**” and fill in the behavior issue. So using the previous example of the problem about the dishes, the problem statement would look like this:

“When you didn’t wash the dishes last night like you promised...”

This is the proper way to state the problem and the first of the three dialogue elements.

STATING YOUR FEELINGS

The second element of a successful dialogue is the communication of the feelings experienced when the problem behavior occurs. This can be very challenging for most people who were not raised in families that modeled the open expression of emotions. Communicating feelings requires the use of “emotion” words that express the impact of the problem behavior. For example, if the problem behavior is about an agreement that is not kept, you might feel disappointed and hurt and irritated. The most commonly used way to express your feelings would be to start with “**I feel....**” So a good way to communicate it using the first two elements would look like this:

“When you don’t wash the dishes after you promise to,

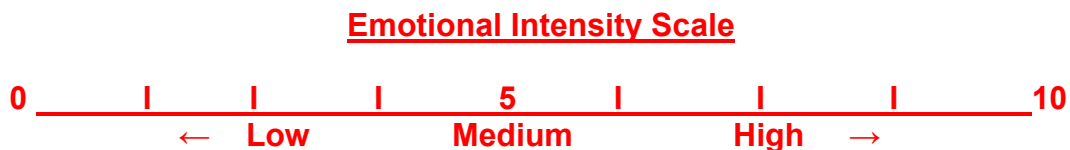
I feel disappointed, hurt, and irritated.”

Notice the use here of the phrase “I feel” when stating your feelings. This is very important because it shows your willingness to **risk** being vulnerable with the other. This creates a more relaxed and safer feeling experience for the listener. It also uses the word “I” instead of the word “you” in the communication. This suggests someone taking ownership of their own feelings instead of sounding accusing. That is why it is not helpful to say “you made me feel...” and then say feeling words.

It is essential that to communicate emotions in this dialogue, a feeling word vocabulary is required. It allows someone to **accurately** communicate the feeling being experienced. For some people, starting off by even being able to say they feel “bad” is a good beginning. However, over time it is good to develop a larger vocabulary. For those using this web site (www.johngouletmft.com), there are some feeling word lists available that can be downloaded and/or printed.

A NOTE ON EMOTIONAL INTENSITY: Feelings vary in strength or **intensity**. That means any feeling can be experienced in a range starting from a minimal awareness, on through moderate intensity, and up to the maximum that can be felt. In other words, feelings or emotions are not an “all or nothing” event. Yet many people grew up in families where things went from calm to catastrophic in the blink of an eye. This can make communicating feelings very difficult if we only know how to express feelings at their most extreme intensity.

Instead, think of emotions as being similar to a light switch on the wall in your home. The “on/off” light switch is **not** the way we experience feelings. The better image is that of a “dimmer” wall switch that allows the intensity of light to vary from “off, up to the maximum light intensity-and every level in between. Here is another way to diagram the feeling continuum:



The number 1 out of 10 would indicate the lowest intensity level of an emotion. The number 10 out of 10 would be the most extreme level one could feel. Any emotion we can experience would fall on somewhere on this scale. This awareness gives us the option of communicating the approximate level of an emotion we are experiencing. This is very important if we ever want someone to listen to us about our feelings. For example, if I blast someone with far more intensity than fits the problem behavior, I will have a new problem. The other person will sense the “unfairness” of it and probably react with some upset. On the other hand, if I understate my feelings, the other person may not understand the importance of the issue to me.

Yet it is often true that some couples, who have a long history of unresolved problems, can easily have intense feelings when even “little” things happen. This

can be a result of leftover feelings of hurt and anger that some people refer to as “baggage”. On top of that, we may have residual feelings connected to unresolved experiences from our childhoods. So it becomes a challenge to communicate the exact level of emotion that fits each individual event that occurs. It becomes our responsibility as adults to separate how much of what we are feeling belongs to a particular problem behavior, and what percent of it does not. Otherwise, we will unfairly hit our partner with an intensity they do not understand or deserve at that moment. So the intensity may not “fit the crime” and will likely upset them, causing the dialogue to break down at this point.

So if my partner simply looks at me in a way that I judge to be a “put down”, and I tell them I’m feeling rage (i.e., 10 out of 10 intensity level), they will not understand. They may also feel hurt and angry as well. However, if I take the time I need to think about it, I can do a better job. I might find that the last 100 times they did that same behavior, I was irritated but said nothing. That could create a huge amount of energy built up within me! This pattern is often called “gunny sacking”. Their actual behavior for that one event itself may only rate a 1 out of 10 level of intensity. So now I honestly explain to my partner that 90% of the intensity I felt for that “look” was my unshared baggage from the past. That will make it easier for them to listen to the 1 out of 10 level of intensity that I believe belongs to the behavior of this present incident.

It is important to be checking to be sure we are not “**reacting**” with too much intensity, but instead are “**responding**” with just the right amount of intensity being communicated.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT ANGER: Of all the emotions we can express, **anger** gets the bad rap. Anger is not considered a “nice” emotion. It is also thought of as a powerful and sometimes frightening thing. It is usually anger that people associate with bad things happening. In some cases, people will avoid dealing with anger in any form if they can. Now this is strange because anger is purely an emotion as is the feeling of happiness or sadness. So why do so many people view anger in such a negative way? Usually because lots of people grew up around family members who **showed** them **by their behavior** that they were angry. Sadly, this often meant behavior that left them as children feeling shame and self doubt. When a child is shamed and/or abused it is the **inappropriate behavior** that hurt them and not the communication of the feelings of anger.

This is why it is so important to be able to **communicate** your feelings of anger and not “**act them out**” by doing destructive behavior (name calling, demeaning, criticizing, etc.). It helps to have a good **anger word vocabulary** and to know the right word for the right intensity level. I have a self help document called **The Anger Scale** that will aid in fitting the best word for each level. There is also a document called **Anger Feeling Words** you can use to select the best word for each intensity level.

STATING YOUR REQUEST (TO GET RESOLUTION)

One of the biggest causes of unresolved conflict is that there is never any real closure or resolution to the problem. So what often happens is that people keep arguing about the same issue over and over again. The original problem does not get resolved, so it gets recycled as an ongoing source of continuing hurt and anger.

Closure simply means that the person with the problem makes a request that will help them “let go” of the issue. It doesn’t mean that it’s gone from their memory when closure happens. It **does** mean that they feel satisfied that they were heard and understood **and** the other person cared enough to want to respond to their need.

It is important to ask for what you **really** think will help put the event and/or problem behind you. Surprisingly, many people are not used to asking for what they need and struggle at first to think in these terms. Some examples of what might be asked for could include:

Asking the other for a response that demonstrates they understand the problem.

Asking for a measurable change of behavior.

Asking for an apology.

It is essential that requests are **clear and measurable**. This way the person making the request knows when it is being met. It is also valuable for the person meeting the request. They then know that they have in fact kept their end of the agreement. For example, asking for someone to have a better “attitude” is not clear or measurable. However, to ask someone not to call you ugly names when they are angry is clear. Also, don’t be too cautious when asking for something. Ask for all of what you honestly need. You can always negotiate with the other person if necessary. But if you only ask for what you **think** they will give you, then you’ll get less than what you need. That means you will **not** feel a sense of closure after the dialogue is finished.

One of the better ways of communicating what is needed is to begin the statement by saying: **“I am asking you to...”** The way this would look in the complete three element communication would be as follows:

“When you don’t wash the dishes after you promise to,

I feel disappointed, hurt, and irritated,

And I am asking you to please keep that agreement in the future.”

Notice again that this is a **request** as indicated by the wording and **not** a demand. This is why it is so important to stay with this format and not begin to “wing it”. What then happens is that people tend to fall back on old familiar patterns that don’t work well. The words we use are the most powerful means we have to communicate with others. So our choice of words **is** important if we want a good outcome.

PUTTING THE DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Though this three element portion of the dialogue can be used with anyone, it is best used in personal relationships in a more complete form. This helps increase the chances of a complete resolution to the problem.

REFLECTING BACK

The term “reflecting back” means to literally say back to the person who was just sharing all that you heard. Try to think of it as an instant verbal replay. This additional element is important for a couple of reasons. First, we often don’t **really** hear what the other person has said because we are mentally getting our “rebuttal” together to defend ourselves. When that happens, we miss some of or the entire message sent to us. When the person gets that we aren’t fully paying attention, they now have a **new** issue. The other reason we need to accurately reflect back what we hear, is that we **all** have our expectations of what to expect from other people. That is based on our past experiences. So we tend to have built in “distortions” that can leave us hearing a message that is different from one sent.

Example: One partner in a counseling session shared the complete three part issue about the dishes not being washed as stated in our example. The partner who was listening reflected back: “You’re saying I’m incompetent!” That is clearly **not** the message sent. However, that partner grew up with a critical parent that **always** gave them the message that what they did was never good enough. So that is what they tended to expect in any confrontation.

After the three part communication is sent, it needs to be reflected back. That in turn gives the sender an opportunity to clarify any distortions as well as checking about if their partner is really listening. We all tend to pay more attention if we know there will be a “pop quiz” after we listen to our partner. It is also important to know that **the three elements can be sent one at a time or as the complete message**. For example, if your partner is fine with problem, feelings, and request all sent as a package, then great! However, if they process things differently, they may prefer to hear each element (the problem, the feeling, and the request) individually. If so, hopefully the sender can be patient and send each element

individually to be reflected back. It is also fine to change the order of the first two elements. Some people prefer to hear the feelings first before the problem behavior. They report that it can lessen an initial reaction to get defensive.

WRAPPING IT ALL UP

The final step is now for the listener to respond to the request that has been made. The easiest outcome might be that the listening partner is able to respond to what was asked for, and at that point the dialogue would be complete for the partner bringing up the problem. This would then constitute closure for them. But sometimes that is not possible. So if the listening partner cannot meet the request, it now may be necessary for a negotiation process to begin.

Example: One partner asks for a hug every day from the other. But if the relationship has been very conflicted up till then, the other may not be at a place to do that. So they may offer 1 hug a week to the request as the best they can do. **This is not a bad outcome!** If the listening partner keeps the agreement, then the partner making the request is getting **some** of what they need and it builds trust and hope. A series of kept agreements in a relationship can be very healing for a troubled couple. Compromising is clearly better than insisting on everything and ending up with nothing, i.e. an all or nothing approach.

Sometimes the partner listening is legitimately unable to meet the request. If so, then they may move into the dialogue and help their partner understand what **their** struggle is about. So anything can be “grist for the mill”, i.e. useful and new dialogues may evolve. The lack of resolution for many issues is what tends to create baggage in a relationship. People feel “lighter” and happier if they don’t drag this stuff into every interaction.

Another thing to be aware of is your own physical response to the emotion of anger. Even when a dialogue is successful, you still may feel some emotional arousal. It takes time for your body to metabolize the numerous chemicals released into your bloodstream by your autonomic nervous system. Anger can trigger the body’s “fight, flight, or freeze” response. Your adrenal glands flood your body with stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. This is why it is often better to take a **time out** of at least one hour before requesting a dialogue. The time gives you both an opportunity to calm down. If you are able to dialogue while heated, your body will need time to come down even with a successful dialogue outcome.

DO'S AND DON'TS: Don’t react in mid-dialogue as the listener if you don’t agree with what you hear. If you interrupt, then it will all break down. You’ll be able to talk when it’s **your** turn. Don’t get into another problem related to the matter being discussed. It is **essential** that you resolve one problem at a time; otherwise you will not complete the dialogue and get closure. Don’t argue the “facts” of an event. Memory is fluid and you’re not right as often as you think. It’s been said that in a marriage, ***you can be happy or you can be right - but not both.*** So

you choose which you most want. Here is something else important to remember: listening and reflecting are **not** the same as agreeing with the details your partner shares about an event. So if your partner says they think you've been abducted by aliens from a UFO, and we'll assume you have not, reflect back; "so you're saying you believe I was abducted by aliens from a UFO, is that correct?" Do practice this dialogue together as much as possible when things are quiet. That way you can reach for this tool when things get heated. Do use all the resources that are available to you such as books, tapes, seminars, groups, and therapists. Remember, you want light and not heat! Good luck!

FINAL NOTE: I have included a diagram version of the dialogue that I hope will be helpful to you. It offers a simple layout or "flowchart" of the elements of this dialogue. Please look it over and refer back to the material explaining the dialogue. Many people keep a copy of it handy for use at any time. Remember that communicating is a skill like any other, just like riding a bicycle. The more you practice, the better you get!

Problem Solving Dialogue “Flowchart”

Sender

Begin with...

Listener

Step 1 **State the problem** > **“When you...”** > Reflects back statement

Step 2 **State the feelings** > **“I feel.....”** > Reflects back feelings

Step 3 **Request solution** > **“I’m asking...”** > Reflects back request

Step 4 **How to process Reflecting:**

- If not accurate.....Sender restates/clarifies
- If accurate.....Sender confirms

Step 5 **Listener responding to request:**

- If in agreement.....Closure
- If not = Negotiation.....Closure

End of this side of transaction – Reverse roles if needed

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