

Communication exercise:

The individuals learn to listen to and hear the grievances of their partner in a way that leads toward understanding, appreciating, and accepting the differences that make each of them and their relationship unique.

Partners face each other and decide who will be the first to speak, while the other listens. The speaker's job is to talk simply about one important problem using only "I" statements and feeling words, such as "I feel suffocated when you ask me how I am feeling all the time. It makes me want to run away from you." Two or three sentences are usually enough. The listener's job is to put aside his/her own point of view on the problem just for now (he/she will have a chance to rebut next) and listen carefully to what the partner's experience is, how the partner feels about the problem. To put him/herself in the shoes of the partner.

The speaker begins. The therapist reminds of the ground rules, if necessary, including the form of the communication. This often takes several tries the first time around. Then the listener states what he/she heard, in the form of "You said that you feel suffocated when I ask you how you are feeling all the time. You said that it makes you feel like running away." The speaker then rates the response for its accuracy. We move on when the speaker gives the listener an excellent listening rating, the speaker feel heard.

Now it is the listener's turn to be the speaker. "I feel abandoned and lonely when you do not tell me how you are feeling. I think that you don't love me." etc.

This excellent little exercise teaches speaking one's feelings so that they can be heard by the other (owning responsibility for one's own reactions) listening to your partner so the he/she actually feels listened to, and taking the time to confirm what is heard or perhaps heard wrongly, (communications become clarified in the process). Relationships take time and this kind of hard work to maintain. It usually pays off immediately, with a deepened feeling of intimacy and rapport, a softening of boundaries and rigid roles. It provides an opening through the dense thicket of mutual projections to a glimpse of the reality of the human being on the other side.

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