



What happens in Imago Relationship Therapy?

Imago Relationship Therapy, developed by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. and expanded by a variety of talented therapists, is a compilation of ideas and skills that help couples move through the naturally occurring stages of relationship: the romantic stage; power struggle; transformation or transition when each person takes responsibility for their part in contributing to the difficulties in their relationship; to what might be called, “true love/real love” when each person knows that while conflict is inevitable, they have skills to move through the process of learning to honor their differences, so they can feel safe, passionate and connected -- what many people would say is their wish for their relationship.

A key skill is the “intentional dialogue,” a structured conversation or dialogue with the intention of fully hearing the other person until you can see the other person’s point of view with compassion whether you like it, agree with it or not. The structure allows both the partner who is more verbal and the partner who is less verbal to have a space to express and hear what actually matters to the other. Many couples say that this process “evens the playing field” and makes talking about anything possible, productive, and allows for resolution of issues that have sometimes been talked about on and on over the years. The three parts of the intentional dialogue are: mirroring, validation and empathy. Each part has specific sentence stems that help the listener and the sender create a safe/safer space to hear and have more of a chance to fully understand and appreciate what their partner is saying.

A second key skill is a clear way to ask for changes in behavior that insures a safe experience so that the partner’s primitive brain -- the part that can only fight, flee, submit or freeze, and not listen, hear, or understand -- is not triggered. The request for change needs to be positive and “smart” -- specific, measurable, achievable, relevant to the issue at hand and time limited. There are five other skills, too.

To experience the depth of this work, here are seven sentence stems for dialogues that a couple might use in the next week:

- ~Something I appreciate about you is . . .
- ~Something I like about us as a couple is . . .
- ~Something you do that helps me feel close to you is . . .
- ~A way I can help myself (stay calm during) or (bring up) difficult topics is . . .
- ~I love it when we . . . and when this happens, I feel . . .
- ~If I could change anything about myself, one thing I would change would be . . .
- ~One thing I like about you is . . . and one thing I’d like to see more of in you is . . .

In the course of dialogues with a partner, and in stretching to meet each other’s needs while also doing what we need to grow, we see that we can be ourselves and still be loved. Finally, we can relax. A conscious relationship has potential to correct the distortions of our care taking and socialization. It is a path that leads us to joy and aliveness. In order to have a different relationship, we must do some things differently. This work teaches couples what to do to make a conscious, safe and deeply loving relationship.

Let’s talk!