

What if Our Feelings are Usually the Same?

by Marge & Con Terr

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Dear Lovebirds,

There is hope! The first encouraging sign is that you are dialoging regularly and that you do want to know each other on a deeper level. Describing similar feelings is something that happens to many couples at some point in their dialoging journey.

The underlying cause of "Same Feeling Syndrome" (SFS) is a fear of conflict. As we get to know each other we become quite adept at learning how to respond to each other in ways that will minimize conflict. We get so good at it that we don't even realize we are doing it!

Try this test. Go back over your last month's dialogue and see how many of those "identical feelings" are ones that you feel comfortable with. If at least half of them don't make you uncomfortable admitting to them or sharing them with your spouse, you may be settling for "safe" in your dialogue at the expense of depth and honesty.

Now, why would you want to change your dialogue? After all, on the Weekend we talked about working toward unity and your letters contain the same feelings so that must be unity - right? Not so. Unity means that we are focused on our relationship with each other and with God. Unity is living in responsible and intimate relationship.

The first thing to do is to decide to trust in the love and the goodness of your spouse by voicing those uncomfortable feelings.

Remember from the Weekend that feelings are neither right nor wrong, so whatever feelings you have should wind up in your letters. But, being the complex and very clever creations of God that we are, we sometimes need help getting beyond our "safe," surface-level responses and getting to the feelings underneath.

So, let's try the technique that the two of us call exploratory dialogue. First, pick a question from a risky area. This will most often be one about sex, money, in-laws, children (your own), or religion. If you can't think of one that is risky, go through the list of 90 questions you took home from the Weekend and find a question that you would normally skip. Better still; ask your sharing group to help you pick some that they think might be risky for the two of you.

When you write your letters, start out by mentioning all of the feelings that you are aware of in this area. For example, if you mention how happy you felt when your first child was born, you might realize that you also felt a little bit (or a lot) of anxiety about your ability to be a good parent and you might have felt some sadness that your parents were stuck in a snowstorm 50 miles away and couldn't be there for the birth and you felt grateful that you had such an attentive doctor, and so on.

Now stop a moment and review what you have written. Search your soul and pick the feeling that makes you most uncomfortable (admit it, it was probably the strongest) and develop your description of that feeling.

Don't spend more than a sentence or two on the source of the feeling. Use as many techniques to develop your description as you can. Be sure to focus on your feeling and don't slip into writing about how your spouse "makes you feel that way."

When you exchange your letters, choose one feeling to talk about – either the strongest from the letters or the strongest feeling after reading the letters. Spend a full 10 minutes doing the best you can to get to a point where you can feel your spouse's feeling. Set the kitchen timer to make sure you don't stop after three minutes.

Finally, congratulate yourselves on your willingness to risk and your desire to get beyond sharing just the surface of yourself with your spouse. Remember that there is no such thing as a bad dialogue as long as it is centered around sharing your feelings and making a sincere effort to be open and honest with each other.

***Matrimony's* sample dialogue by Marge & Con Terr**

Our dialogue question: What is most difficult for me to ask you in our relationship? How do I feel asking you this?

Dear Marge.

(Description of the most difficult request.)

Asking you to make love is still the most difficult for me. There are times when I very much want to make love and as we are going to bed, I can't bring myself to ask. Sometimes I tell myself I'm trying to be considerate, but that's a cop out. I'm failing to trust in your honesty and your gentleness.

(Exploring the jumble of feelings surrounding this area.)

When I'm thinking about asking, I feel very vulnerable. I'm usually naked and I feel exposed. Sometimes I judge I'm being selfish and self-centered by asking. Sometimes I feel resentful I want to blame you for the way I feel. I almost always feel frustrated. Our lovemaking is so powerful and it shouldn't be so difficult to approach you.

(Focusing in on the strongest feeling.)

My strongest feeling out of all this is the vulnerability. When I do ask you to make love, I feel vulnerable like it would only take a small jolt to shatter me. I'm like a china doll that can be broken with a single tap of a hammer. In some ways, the feeling is almost like admitting a weakness. The feeling of vulnerability is a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10. It leaves a taste in my mouth like an old copper penny. I am tentative as I reach out to you when I'm feeling this way, and my arms almost feel as though they're tied to my sides. My need is to love and be loved by you

I love you,
Con

Dear Con,

(Description of the most difficult request.)

It's hardest for me to tell you when I'm feeling down and that I don't feel well. I want your love, but don't know how to ask or even what to ask.

(Exploring the jumble of feelings surrounding this area.)

When this happens, I'm feeling depressed and almost ill. When you ask me what's wrong, I feel annoyed and embarrassed. I long for your love, but I feel pathetic. I don't want to admit feeling depressed. I expect you to somehow see what's wrong and know what to do.

(Focusing in on the strongest feeling.)

The strongest feeling is embarrassment. It's a 9 on a scale of 10. My shoulders seem heavy and slumped. It makes me want to crawl away and go to sleep. It's a dark brown icky color. It sounds like off-key screechy singing. Inside, it's a lump in my throat. I don't want to raise my eyes to look at you. I wish you would know to take me in your arms and not ask me questions. But I know I need to tell you and to talk about it.

My need is to be loved, but I don't feel lovable. Somehow, it's not okay for me to feel this way. I will try to remember that you can't read my mind, and to be patient about telling you what's going on with me. Thank you for being so understanding.

I love you,
Marge