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“What is the Goal of Dialogue?”

“Why Should We Dialogue Anyway?”

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If you're compulsive about rules, the way we are, you may have picked up dialogue following your Weekend, just because you were told that it would be good for your relationship. We did.

It seemed like a simple idea, and we were willing to try it purely because we would try anything that meant we would not have to settle for average in our marriage. And it was good for us. We talked about areas where we didn't even know we had feelings. We explored our feelings about sex, which we had never had the courage to talk about in the past.

Then came a time when the "dialogue honeymoon" was over. Not only did we argue over what question to choose, we argued over whether we were doing it "right," and we began to avoid dialogue altogether.

A few events conspired to change our attitudes. First some good friends assured us that any dialogue was better than no dialogue. If we were trying to increase our communication, it had to be a good thing. And yes, there is value in dialoging every day. That value is the deeper communication line that we open to each other every day. A new level of intimacy and trust develops just because we stick to a habit that is for us. It has been a precious gift to each other to know every day that our relationship is important enough to do something to nurture it. When there is something difficult that I need to talk about, I know that we have the time and tools to tackle it. We can choose to stay tuned in with each other every day.

The second event that had an impact on our attitudes toward dialogue was a presentation in which a couple shared about really working on the goal to know each other more deeply. The goal of dialogue is to know and experience the feelings behind the external behavior. Dialogue can be a tool to enable us to touch what is going on inside each other.

When we finally began to see dialogue as an opportunity, rather than as a chore, we each committed to taking responsibility for daily dialogue. This was different from the attitude that, "if you remember and get the books and a question, then I'll submit to dialogue." This new commitment means that we've removed the uncertainty, nagging and guilt over whether we'll dialogue today. Each of us is motivated to take initiative. Neither of us is lurking around, hoping the other will forget.

We want to dialogue because putting effort into experiencing each other more intimately helps us to meet our needs. There is tremendous love in saying "I want to know what it's like to be you." There is satisfaction in achieving that experience and feeling that intimate connection. My need to be loved is filled when I hear "I know that feeling you're describing." When this happens, I am no longer alone.

So how can you go about trying to experience each other more intimately through dialogue?

Steps to a more meaningful Dialogue

1. *Commit to the daily dialogue habit.*
2. *Develop an attitude of willingness.*
3. *Become an active listener.*
4. *Practice listening and accepting throughout the day.*

First, both of you need to commit to dialoging every day. If you're going for it, then just do it. Tell each other that your relationship is the most important thing in your life. Write it in your letters and say it out loud. You each need to hear it!

Second, develop an attitude of willingness to examine your own behaviors, attitudes, needs and feelings. Work on true honesty in describing your motives and feelings. Revealing yourself is what opens the door to more intimacy.

Third, the dialogue time following the letters should be probing, sensitive and revealing. This is a time to practice listening with the heart. Put blame and defensiveness aside and strive to learn about the other.

Fourth, carry the skills you practice at dialogue time over into the way you live with each other. Talk about your feelings and ask each other about current feelings throughout the day. Become a more active listener in your everyday conversations. This is how your relationship begins to be transformed.

Are you describing true Feelings in your dialogue?

Guidelines for identifying feelings:

- Feelings are automatic responses to a situation or to something that's on your mind.
- Feelings are different from thoughts, ideas, judgments or opinions.
- If you're unsure about your feelings, think about how you're reacting inside ("in your gut"). Are you tense inside, knotted up, ready to burst, empty and hollow, or shriveled up?
- Does the feeling make you want to run away, go to sleep, or run and jump and laugh?
- Use statements like "I feel _____" and make sure the next word is a feeling word. I feel happy, angry, disgusted, reluctant, uncomfortable, frustrated, ecstatic, light-headed, amazed, confused.
- Stay away from judgments and blame in your descriptions. "I feel like no one likes me" or "they make me mad."
- Dialogue is most rewarding when you can examine what is going on beyond just the initial impression, so work at coming up with more than one description for your feeling. Practice really does help!