

Turn Dialogue Blahs into Dialogue Ahas!

by Marge & Con Terr

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Dear Marge & Con,

We went on our Marriage Encounter Weekend four months ago. We used "The First 90 Days" questions faithfully, but since they ran out, we're struggling to find questions for our dialogues. Can you help?

Signed,
Struck Dumb in Dubuque

Dear Struck,

Lots of us can identify with your struggle. Even after years of dialogue, the two of us sometimes find ourselves sitting at the kitchen table saying "I don't know, what do you want to dialogue about?"

Con: A severe case of the Dialogue Blues can be a frightful thing to behold. It leaves one feeling stuck, like driving into a mudhole and no matter how I rock the car or step on the gas, we go nowhere. But there's good news - we've discovered that there are two possibilities at work when we get stuck like this. 1) We are hiding from something we really need to dig into; or 2) it's time for a Dialogue Brainstorm.

Marge: We don't get a lot out of dialogue if we're spending our time on insights into my feelings on changing my socks. And unless something significant is happening at work, we can talk about that anytime. "Newsy" types of topics really shouldn't be cluttering up our notebooks. (An exception might be when we are unavoidably separated, such as when one of us travels for business.) We get the most from our dialogue when we are focused on learning something about each other. When dialogue becomes a chore, it's because we've removed the element that makes it a useful and interesting tool. Namely, we've quit looking at our current feelings, attitudes and behaviors. We're coasting. Obviously, we can only coast if we're going downhill!

Con: Yeah, that's exactly it. Most often it seems that when we've quit looking at our current feelings, we are living in possibility #1 - we are hiding from something we really need to dig into. I remember the last time I got all upset about our finances. The topic of finances was the last thing I wanted to dialogue about. My feelings of fear and inadequacy were too intense for comfort. I kept finding it harder and harder not to think about finances and I had very little energy or creativity when it came time to come up with a topic for dialogue.

The funny thing is I think you know when something is bothering me like that. When we went through this most recent financial crunch, you would propose a question in the area of our finances and I would sort of pooh-pooh it and suggest something else.

Marge: I remember. It was really frustrating. Some of that is behind us now that we have agreed that we will use any question that one of us brings up. If it's important enough for one of us to propose it, then it must be an area we need to explore.

Con: I'm finding that some of the questions I used to avoid are ones you would propose as a way to let me know that you thought we needed to talk. More than once, I've been really surprised at the intensity of the feelings about an area we've gotten into this way.

Marge: Another way we've found some good dialogue questions is to brainstorm. Usually, this happens when we are sitting at the kitchen table and we've just had a dialogue that left us thinking we need to dig deeper into this area. Like the time we were talking about buying a new car. We started with the fairly obvious question of "How do I feel about buying a new car?" That brought up some feelings, but it seemed to be only the tip of the iceberg.

Con: We sat there and tried to think of more questions and we wound up with the following questions:

"How do I feel about driving a new car?"

"How do I feel about paying for a new car?"

"How do I feel about buying a used car instead of a new car?"

Those showed potential, but then the questions took an unexpected turn.

"How do I feel watching you drive off in our new car?"

"How do I feel about my driving skills?"

"How do I feel about your driving?"

"How do I feel when I think you don't trust my driving'?"

"In what area do I have the most trouble trusting you? How do I feel about my answer?"

"How do I feel when I see you working to trust me in an area that is not comfortable?"

Now we were out of the area of talking about money and we were getting into some meaty things like trust issues between us and self worth issues. All of these questions just popped out of our mouths in a matter of a minute or so. When we use this technique, it is important to say whatever pops into your mind and to write it down as soon as we've said it. When we run out of ideas for questions, we can go back over them and rate them according to how intense we think the feelings might be about each question. The scariest, riskiest questions go at the top of this list.

Marge: Those brainstorming sessions have produced some great results for us. It's helpful to remember that dialogue is not for solving problems, but for experiencing each other's feelings. That's why we look for areas where there are strong feelings. Because of these dialogues, we learn how to communicate better because we know better what each of us is feeling inside.

Tips for Choosing Areas for Dialogue

Six areas that are important to our relationship are sex, money, in-laws, parenting, death and religion. Explore each topic from many different angles.

After an argument, definitely use that topic for a dialogue. Stopping in the middle of the argument to dialogue on the intense feelings can be a terrific way to really hear each other.

Go out to dinner alone and dialogue on the best quality of your spouse as you wait for your order. (We find this to be very romantic!)

Read a relationship-promoting book together and use the topics to formulate questions. Some good titles: *Do I have to Give up Me to be Loved by You?* by Drs. Jordan & Margaret Paul; *The Dance of Anger* and *The Dance of Intimacy*, both by Dr. Harriet Goldhor Lerner, *Living on Less and Liking It More* by Maxine Hancock; *Parenting by Heart* by Dr. Ron Taffel; *Happiness is an Inside Job* by Fr. John Powell, SJ. This can also be useful if you have to be separated by business travel.

The area of sex can be difficult to begin. Try reading together and dialoging on the issues as they are presented in the book. Suggestions: *The Joy of Sex*, edited by Dr. Alex Comfort, or *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom* by Dr. John Gray. A note of caution - these are great for learning more about your partner's (and your own) preferences, but they also offer a few remarks that are not in keeping with our Catholic values.

Fr. Chuck Gallagher also offers an excellent series on living as a passionate sacrament, with support for praying together, parenting, working together to make the world a better place, and just becoming better lovers. Many dialogue questions are included. Prices are reasonable and the series can be obtained through his publishing office: The Pastoral and Matrimonial Renewal Center, 67 Prince Street, Elizabeth, NJ, 07208. (908)353-8730.

Sit down together and come up with a list of questions for next week.

Talk with other couples about how they come up with questions. Support each other with one-ingers to let them know you just dialogued and are thinking of them. Perhaps you could ask each other for questions, or even meet to dialogue together occasionally. Reading your letter in front of friends will really help you to practice describing your feeling.

The more you work at your dialogue, the better you get at it. That is, practice on describing feelings and listening to each other does count, so don't give up!

Think back sometimes at all the dialogues you've done together. The question "How do I feel about our dialogue?" can help identify what you would like to improve on and what you've appreciated the most.