

# How Do We Enrich the “Dialogue” Part of Our Dialogue?

by Marge & Con Terr  
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Dear Marge & Con,

We have been working hard on describing our feelings in our letters, but we need advice. When it comes to dialoguing after the writing, we just sit and look at each other's feelings (which are often the same), and there isn't much to say. Dialoguing for ten minutes on feelings seems to be a long time. What would you recommend?

Signed,  
Silent Sacrament

Dear SS,

Thanks for your letter. You have no idea how many times we've heard this question! You are not alone. But the key is to consider the goal of dialogue: to understand, accept, and ultimately experience each other's feelings. You are on the right track - you suspect there's more - and there is. You need to break the "three-minute barrier" by continuing to talk and dig deeper for the first three minutes. After that, you will probably both be absorbed in the dialogue and have less trouble continuing on the feeling.

**CON:** The first thing that is important is to decide whose feeling we are going to talk about. When we finish reading each other's letters, we start our dialogue by saying back to each other the strongest feeling we heard in the letter. Yesterday, we dialogued on our feelings about trying to work out a budget together. After we read our letters, the discussion went something like this:

**CON:** *"You're saying your strongest feeling is fear"*

**MARGE:** *"Yes, that's it. It sounds like your strongest feeling is frustration."*

**CON:** *"Yes. I think your feeling was strongest shall we talk about your feeling?"*

**MARGE:** *"I agree. Let's use my feeling."*

**CON:** Now we have established that we understand what the strongest feeling is. This sounds elementary, but I remember some rather strained dialogues we have had because one or the other of us didn't pick up on the strongest feeling in the letter.

**MARGE:** Or even worse, we each talked about our own feeling rather than focusing on one feeling. I would say something about my feeling and he would respond with his own feeling.

**CON:** That's verbal ping-pong, not dialogue. We're each maneuvering to score points rather than listening deeply.

**MARGE:** When we choose my feeling to dialogue on, I prefer to have Con start out by giving me feedback on what he's read in my letter. It gives me a place to start when giving more details on my feeling.

**CON:** So I might start with:

**CON:** *"You described your fear as being like not wanting to walk into a dark cave because you don't know what will jump out at you. So, is it a fear of the unknown, or more like a fear that we'll end up fighting?"*

**MARGE:** *"I think I'm more worried that we'll end up fighting. The fear is avoidance. I'm afraid to face our budget because I don't want to wind up blaming each other for our financial situation."*

**CON:** *"How does the fear feel physically?"*

**MARGE:** *"It is tightness in my stomach. It's like turning my head to avoid looking at something I don't want to see. It's very uncomfortable and leaves me restless. I have to find distractions."*

**CON:** *"I can relate to that. It's suddenly time to mow the lawn or take the kids to the park when we're ready to look at the budget."*

**MARGE:** *"Yes, exactly. I'll do anything to get out of it."*

**CON:** *"Can you think of a time when you recently experienced the kind of fear you're describing?"*

**MARGE:** *"Well...I did experience the same feeling when I dropped a fork in the oven while I was checking if the meat was done one day last week. I started to reach in automatically to get it, and then pulled back when I realized I would get burned."*

**CON:** *"Okay, so it's not a "scary" or "frightened" kind of feeling exactly. It's more like a fear of experiencing something bad that happened to you before. Like getting burned or experiencing rejection."*

**MARGE:** *"That's right. The feeling is strong, but it's fear tinged with worry or anxiety. It's a muddy grayish-brown kind of feeling."*

**CON:** *"I think I can picture it. When the subject of the budget comes up, your stomach tightens and you try not to think about it. You think about what else might need to be done right now, instead. You worry that we've run out of money and all there is to do is to figure out who's to blame. It must be kind of like last year when we were waiting for them to announce the layoffs at work. Is that right?"*

**MARGE:** *"Yes. That's it. I feel a lot of relief that you took the time to understand without getting angry with me."*

**CON:** *"I did start to feel defensive, but I really got wrapped up in discovering more about you, and forgot about the issue."*

**MARGE:** *"I guess I need to look at why I am reacting this way. I need to put aside my assumptions and attitudes about how the discussion will go and trust that we can do the budget lovingly. Maybe it would help if we prayed about it."*

**CON:** *"I know how worried you are about it. Let's set aside the time for the discussion and pray for openness to each other before we begin. You mentioned in your letter that you think this fear is rising out of your need to belong. It's like we need to be on the same side of the discussion, instead of opposing each other."*

**MARGE:** So, first we agreed on which feeling to discuss, then we elaborated on the feeling until Con could reflect back to me what his understanding was. We kept going until he could picture it.

**CON:** To me, it is like being like an artist trying to paint a picture of a scene that Marge saw when we were not together. I ask her questions and then try to sketch the scene. Marge tells me what is right with the picture and offers some more details to fill in the parts that are off-target. When I finally hear her say "Yes, that's just how it was" it's almost as if I had been there too.

**MARGE:** What we have just described is the way things go on a dialogue where the answers come easily. There are times in when we finish reading our letters and find ourselves at a loss for words. I remember that happening the last time we dialogued about how we felt when the kids fight. I was feeling so alone in my feelings. His letter told me how differently he felt and I was sure we were headed for another frustrating fight where nothing would be any clearer than it was before.

**CON:** That was a tough dialogue for me, too. I felt a lot of pressure to say something intelligent. My first reaction was to start problem solving or to try to analyze the feeling by asking if it reminded her of something from her childhood.

**MARGE:** That kind of response leaves me feeling frustrated and defensive. I'm afraid I'm going to have to justify the feeling.

**CON:** I can understand that. Sometimes I feel the same way. It really helps me when you start with something reassuring like "It looks like our feelings are very different in this area. I want to understand your feeling better."

**MARGE:** That helps me, too. It also helps me a lot to have physical contact. When we are sitting face to face and holding hands, it softens my defensiveness and reminds me that I am talking to my lover.

**CON:** Even with love and patience there are times when we get stuck. That's when the "hot pen" technique gets translated to the "hot lips" technique. I try to keep asking questions, even if it isn't certain that they are well focused. Often, somewhere along the line we start to connect and get back together. I have to admit that this is pretty scary for me. I am an analyzer and an answer man. It isn't easy to ask questions when I don't know where they will lead.

**MARGE:** Sometimes the questions leave me feeling uneasy, too. I don't always see the connection between your questions and my letter. I wonder what your motives are in asking the question. It requires a real decision to love to put that defensiveness aside and try to answer the question.

**CON:** I think that's the most important attitude we need to build up - the attitude that I can trust you fully and that it is safe to be completely open to you. Dialogue is not always easy or fun. There are dialogues that end leaving us feeling incomplete and disconnected from each other. We have come to see that these are not failures, they are starting points. It is something to come back to the next day or the day after when the picture we're trying to paint for each other has become a little clearer.

**MARGE:** So, the answer is to keep practicing. The greatest love we can show for each other is the willingness to ask that next question or try out that analogy that doesn't quite seem to fit when what we most want to do is to remain silent.

Remember that we don't cause each other's feelings. Avoid blame by phrasing your description so that you take ownership of your feeling.

"I feel angry when you come home late. I am working on understanding why I feel so angry about, this." is much more appropriate than: "You make me so angry when you come home late. Why do you do this to me?"

It's okay to say that you don't like someone's behavior. But our feelings are rooted in our own attitudes and needs.

### **Tips for Talking through the Dialogue**

- **Dialogue is important to us. We need to act like it!** Set prime time, as free of distractions as possible, and keep the schedule each day. Establishing the habit itself is a vital step that creates an important, new level of trust in our relationship. P.S.--"Prime Time" is not bed-time!
- **Each of us needs to take responsibility for the quality of our relationship and our dialogue.**
- **Choose questions that are truly relevant to you and challenge you to take a risk.** When we share deep feelings and are truly vulnerable with each other, our relationship grows.
- **Try starting the dialogue the same way each time.** Decide together which feeling to use for the dialogue. For example, "Which feeling should we talk about?" Or each of you restate the other's feeling and then determine which is strongest "Your strongest feeling is anger? How strong is that right now?" "I see you feel afraid, is that stronger than the frustration you described?"
- **The listener should be absorbed and silent while the person with the feeling is talking.**
- **Make the decision to love.** That is, stick with the dialogue even though you may feel a little self-conscious at first, or if you feel defensive or resentful about the topic. For the sake of your lover, put aside those strong urges to react, and just love him by listening,
- **Talking about feelings takes practice, so don't give up!**