

# Obstacles to Great Dialogue

By John & Bunny

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Over the past seven years, we've experienced lots of other obstacles to great dialogue. Just as the greatest enemy of a great marriage is a good one, one of the greatest obstacles to great dialogue is being content with "good" dialogue. How often we've settled for good, don't-rock-the-boat dialogues. We're dialoguing daily and everything's smooth. If there's an area that's touchy or threatening, we treat it like wet paint. We conveniently select questions that skirt around those sensitive areas. We aren't willing to risk our comfortability and take the chance to stretch and grow. It might hurt or strain us. We're reaching for each other's feelings intently during our dialogue, but we're not putting in the little extra effort that would move us off the plateau and on our upward journey again. We excuse ourselves by saying, I can't; it's too hard. There have even been those nights when I threw my dialogue book across the room in total frustration, thinking "We'll never change. What's the use of all this struggle?"

Then there's the obstacle of dialogue for dialogue's sake. We have the underlying attitude of "Let's do it and get it over with." We're thinking about meeting our dialogue obligation for that day rather than loving each other.

We've found something really terrific in Marriage Encounter and the social community aspect is very appealing. Where else can you get together with such friendly, warm, caring people and spend an evening talking about the things that really count in life? But if we're not dialoguing, we feel uncomfortable. It's hard to go to a Renewal or a circle meeting, because feelings of guilt come creeping in and we're ashamed. We think others are judging us to be less than they are. So instead of dialoguing because we really want to and because we believe it will help our love grow, we take the focus off ourselves and actually dialogue as our ticket of admission to Marriage Encounter.

One of the biggest obstacles we face constantly is being so active in M.E. and community that our dialogue suffers. All too often we let our good works push ahead of our #1 commitment to each other. We've got to finish writing that talk or we've just got to be at that great get-together being held. We can't miss out on the excitement and not be in on what's happening in the ongoing Encounter. After all, we tell ourselves, that experience will enrich our couple relationship. And in so doing, our dialogue may slip down a rung or two on our priority ladder.

And what happens to our dialogue on weekends, holidays, and vacation? As long as it's just us and the kids, we make out pretty well. But when our routine is changed, like when a relative comes for a visit, or we're staying with another family, we try to sneak it in inconspicuously, before going to bed, or just plain skip it. Even at home we often end up letting our dialogue slip to a bad time of day, either too late at night or when too many distractions are present. We forget about the value of prime time and slip our dialogue easily into convenient time.

Being polite or considerate of the demands on each other's time has been one cause of having sleepy-sand dialogues. We wait for each other to finish up whatever is being done, instead of saying "Let's dialogue now." Often we end up waiting for each other and losing our prime time and our excitement for us and our dialogue.

Another obstacle that we've experienced in our dialogue is getting so hung-up on the "rules" that we end up criticizing each other instead of sharing and experiencing a feeling and growing closer to each other. For example, we'd end up debating whether a certain word is really a feeling or a thought—especially when we first learned that words like "guilty, unloved, and used," are technically not feelings but really are judgments or attitudes. Instead of searching deeper and asking how being used feels, we'd say, "Used" isn't a feeling, and our dialogue would end up in an argument. Or we'd debate whether something said was a garbage dump. We've pretty much overcome this by realizing that the rules for dialogue are just guidelines to lead us in our dialogue toward a deeper sharing of our feelings together, not laws to limit or stifle our love.

Sometimes instead of saving our discussions for after our dialogue, we use our dialogue time for carrying on a conversation. Dialogue is reaching out for each other's feelings, not simply having a loving discussion. One way we get into this position of talking instead of dialoguing is when I apologize for a feeling, or explain why I have that feeling. At these times, we usually end up discussing our attitudes and judgments instead of focusing our attention on the feeling underneath the thoughts. Feelings are neither right or wrong; but, attitudes and judgments depending on the correctness of the data, can be right or wrong. Reaching for feelings should only take 10 minutes. Discussing our attitudes may take hours.

Selecting questions is another whole area we have to work at constantly. We've found that in order for them to be really meaningful for us, they have to be very personal. We've found that beginning with HDIFA usually causes us to focus more on ideas than feelings. We also have to stick to a particular area for a while in order to really grow closer, rather than shot-gunning all over.

We wish we could say we have all the answers to overcoming all the possible obstacles to great dialogue, but we can't. There is no pat answer for each and every obstacle or for each and every couple. We don't even have all the answers for ourselves. We do know that many times for us it has simply been a matter of becoming aware that the obstacle exists and then being willing to try to do something about it. We have to make a decision and then follow through on it to see if it helps.

When we reflect on our dialogue "history," it kind of reminds us of an anecdote told by Mark Twain. It seems that when he was 18, he couldn't get over how dumb his father was; but by the time he became 21, he was amazed at how much the old man had learned in three years! Why is it that for so many of us, we have to learn for ourselves rather than from the experience of others who have gone before us? Well, history proves, we keep making the same mistakes over and over, so we guess that we should expect that within our dialoguing community, too.

The one great mistake we made for so long was that we were satisfied to be "committed" to daily dialogue. Now that word, committed, left us just the loophole we needed to occasionally skip a day or even two, without much of a flinch of our conscience. We were dialoguing, and we even accepted that we'd probably use dialogue for the rest of our life. But why the cop-out? . . . the incomplete yes? . . . the willingness to excuse ourselves for "just a little" sloppiness in our commitment? We probably can't really answer these questions with 100% accuracy, and it doesn't really matter why. The fact remains, we hadn't given up our "no power," in this area, and for various reasons we allowed ourselves to skip. "It's too late, and I think half-asleep dialogues are useless." "When we're visiting in someone else's home—relatives or whatever—it's too hard to find the time or place to be alone." "We had a fight and can't dialogue when we're angry." "People who dialogue every day seem more interested in the number of times than the quality of their dialogues." etc., etc., etc. This "no power"—the control we have over our dialogue by saying no—has probably been the biggest obstacle to our daily dialogue and to having really great dialogue. The "no" can be a flat refusal to take the time or it can be very subtle, like not wanting to dialogue in a particular area, maybe one that's threatening to either of us. We can use our no power to manipulate and control our dialogue.

About two years ago, we agreed we would never skip a day of dialogue again. And, we haven't. It hasn't been all that tough to do either. We regret all the time we wasted with cop-outs and excuses, and wish we had just done it right in the first place. Giving up our no power in this area has been the biggest boost to our relationship since our original weekend. We've discovered that we MAKE prime time happen a lot more often now that we know there'll be no skipping even if it gets to be 3 a.m. Giving up our no power also eliminates the . . . "I was waiting for you to be ready." Who is going to initiate and when? These questions still remain, but now we know they must be asked some time before we go to bed!

We have already all given up our no power to dialoguing today. And that's what John and Bunny plan to do tomorrow. We'll give up our no power to our 10/10, give up our control to keep it from happening. For us, come hell or high water, working late, circle meetings, PTA, baseball games, unexpected company, plugged-up toilet, flood, or blizzard, we promise you we'll take 10 minutes to write a loveletter and 10 minutes to share a feeling together in our dialogue, every day.

Oh, if you think YOU can't do the same—sure you can!!! How much wasted time and energy is spent on excuses why I can't write, or I can't find my feelings or describe them, or I can't dialogue? Our good friend, Chuck Gallagher, has a famous one-word cure for all relationship obstacles—"CHANGE." We're asking you to take the cure. Some of you may be thinking right now, "That John and Bunny are crazy. They've really gone overboard." You might have had some similar opinions about your team on your first weekend, too. We know we're asking an awful lot of you. We're asking you to trust us, to do it our way for now. Let us love and help you. Give us your "no power" and let us challenge you to make that beautiful marriage of yours even better. We love you and we need you and your dialogue.

Like Don Quixote, as long as we reach for the unreachable star, we can touch it. And together we'll make that impossible dream a reality in our own love lives. God bless you. We love you. Enjoy your dialogues. Enjoy each other.

And that's another bonus of *daily* dialogue; we have not yet gone to bed without at least trying to heal any rifts in our relationship. Even when we can barely hold hands, we do and we pray and dialogue. We've come pretty close to letting an argument become more important than us, but so far the 10/10 has won out.

The best dialogues always concern our relationship:

1. What is there inside of me that causes me to be cautious when a commitment is asked of us? HDIFAMA?
2. HDIF when I reveal my feelings to you?
3. What are my feelings when I know you are looking forward to our dialogue?
4. What are my feelings when I know you are looking forward to our lovemaking?
5. Is my privacy an obstacle to our relationship? HDIFAT?
6. What attitudes towards our relationship am I least willing to share with you? HDIFAMA?
7. Is our sexual relationship as important as our dialogue? HDIFAMA?
8. What is there inside of me that prevents me from making a promise to be faithful to our dialogue? HDIFAMA?
9. HDIF when you hold me tenderly in your arms? DILD
10. What changes do I have to make in order to keep those warm and tender feelings alive everyday? HDIFAMA?