

Imago Intentional Dialogue – Basic Concepts and Explanation of Skills

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Basic Concepts

The *Imago Intentional Dialogue* is a powerful method of healing hurting relationships and helping couples to be reattached in love. It is the main technique used in Imago Relationship Therapy, a type of couples therapy developed by Dr. Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., author of the best-selling book *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide For Couples*. This article includes my innovations.

The best way to learn how to use the dialogue method is to be coached by a licensed therapist trained in Imago Therapy. The purpose of this article is to help you and your partner use the intentional dialogue at home.

Two types of dialogues are explained—problem focused and general.

An intentional dialogue, sometimes referred to as the *couples' dialogue*, is not a discussion. In a discussion two people express their thoughts and opinions back and forth with each other. In an intentional dialogue one person speaks about what is on his or her mind and the other listens. The listener mirrors back, meaning restates what the other said, without adding comments or opinions.

In a dialogue you focus on the *process* of your relationship, not your problems. Problems in a relationship develop due to a dysfunctional relationship process. How you and your partner behave toward one another is a process, which is driven by communication. Your relationship process either causes your problems or prevents problems. For this reason the Imago dialogue focuses on your relationship process. Fixing the process enables you to fix your problems.

The dialogue is a structured way of communicating. At first it may seem awkward using it to communicate, but staying in the structure is vital to making it safe for both you and your partner to communicate. Safe means neither feels attacked or judged. It is called an intentional dialogue because you both are intentional to make it safe for your partner to both talk and listen. That means you will not be judgmental, belittling, or express anger during dialogues. It also means you are intentional about giving your partner your full attention as a demonstration of caring.

The theory behind the Imago dialogue is that understanding one another brings healing and changes in both of you. The dialogue emphasizes giving and receiving deep empathy. Empathy is emotional oxygen for relationships, and empathy will help you and your partner become reattached in love.

In an Imago dialogue one partner is the *sender* and the other is the *receiver*. Each partner takes a turn being sender and receiver, and your therapist coaches you as you do. The sender talks about a problem or anything else related to his or her experience. The receiver listens and then mirrors back

what was heard. Mirroring simply means saying back to your partner his or her words. Essentially the sender is giving a report and the receiver is listening to it. Because it is a report no questions are asked. Asking questions is judgmental and will make your partner feel investigated and blamed. And asking questions makes the dialogue feel unsafe for your partner.

I think the essence of the intentional dialogue is best expressed by this comment:

“Mirror my feelings even though you don’t agree with them. Let me know you understand what I’m trying to say.”

In order to help the sender communicate his or her experience and feelings at a deep level, he or she completes sentence stems. The following are the basic sentence stems used in a *problem focused* dialogue:

1. I want to talk to you about... Is now ok?
2. What I am concerned about is...
3. When that happens what I am afraid of is... or, when that happened what I became afraid of was...
4. Concerning that what hurts me is... or, how that hurts me is...
5. What those feelings remind me of from my childhood is...
6. When I was a child I learned to cope and protect myself by...
7. It would be helpful and healing if you would...

Typical topics for problem focused dialogues include: a problem affecting your relationship, your fears in the relationship, changes you want to see in your partner, and past wounds.

Couples in therapy engage in problem focused dialogues because of the healing nature of those dialogues. But *general dialogues* are also effective for strengthening relationships. Topics for general dialogues can be anything that interests you, not just problems and complaints. You can even do appreciation dialogues, for example: *“One thing I appreciate about you is...”*

Dialoguing at Home

You can use the intentional dialogue at home if both of you learn the basic concepts and develop and *strictly* adhere to the skills needed to do a dialogue. Make a commitment to each other to unconditionally respect any and all of each other’s requests for a dialogue. Above all, respect the structure of the dialogue process. Without adherence to its structure the dialogue process will not be safe and it will not work. It is suggested that the best approach is to first learn how to do the dialogue by working with a therapist trained in Imago Relationship Therapy.

Skill for Both Sender and Receiver

Non-verbal Behavior—People communicate more with their body language than with the actual meaning of their words. Keeping your non-verbal behaviors in check is a skill you need to use whenever you do an intentional dialogue. Such behaviors as judgmental facial expressions, like smirking and rolling your eyes, will make your partner feel judged or attacked. So will raising your voice, as well as any critical body gestures. During a dialogue pay attention to your non-verbal expressions, making sure they are not judgmental.

Don't interrupt—this is both a sender and receiver skill. When you are listening to either the sender's message or a mirrored statement, do not interrupt. Do not give suggestions, directions, or coach your partner by nodding your head, or try to give a correction. Just listen.

Skills for Senders

Initiates—the sender initiates a dialogue. Request a dialogue by saying, “*I'd like to have a dialogue; is now ok?*” If your partner says now is not ok ask to set a time to do it within the next twenty-four hours. The dialogue belongs to you and you are completely in charge of where the conversation goes.

State topic in one sentence—introduce your concern as a title, in one sentence only. Keep it short and to the point. Use the sentence stem: “*I want to talk to you about..., is now ok?*” For example, “I want to talk to you about how we argue, is now ok?”

Stay on one topic only—as the sender, talk about one problem at a time only and stay focused on just the one issue. Making your partner listen to more than one problem at a time can make your partner feel overwhelmed and attacked.

Talk about yourself—as much as possible when talking about a problem, talk about yourself in the situation rather than focusing directly on your partner. Instead of finger pointing, talk about your experience in the problem and how it affected you. For example, “I feel intensely afraid and panicky when we're in the car and you tailgate.” Instead of, “You make me intensely afraid and panicky when you drive and tailgate with me in the car.” As a rule, avoid using “you messages.” Instead use “I messages.” For example, “when that happens I feel...” or “when you did that I felt...” rather than saying, “you make me feel...”

Don't flood—because your partner's job is to accurately mirror back to you your words, it can be difficult to do that if your message is too long. When you have a lot to say, speak one or two sentences of your thoughts and then allow your partner to mirror your words and check for accuracy. Following that, give another two sentences and allow your partner to mirror again. Repeat doing this until you have finished expressing your full thought. Pay attention to keeping your messages in small packets so your partner can more easily and accurately mirror them back to you.

Sending a correction—after you have listened to your partner's mirrored response, he or she will ask you if the mirror was accurate. If it was accurate say “yes.” If it was not accurate then say “*No, what I needed to hear you say is...*” or, “*What was missing was...*” Sometimes a correction needs to be sent more than once. Be patient with your partner. Keep in mind that you are working together to foster empathy. Be intentional about being patient. Also you may need to send a correction when your partner uses the summarizing skill at the close of the dialogue.

Be non-judgmental—as you communicate in a dialogue do not criticize, belittle, or make expressions of anger. When you enter into a dialogue you should have one purpose only, and that purpose is healing. Never use the dialogue to grind an axe or to vent anger. Use both your verbal and non-verbal behaviors to remain non-judgmental.

Talk about primary feelings only—the deepest level of empathy focuses on feelings. Anger is a secondary emotion. That means it is always preceded by other underlying emotions, which are called

primary emotions. And these are the feelings and emotions that you should focus on communicating. For example, you are angry because your spouse criticized you in front of company. Anger is the secondary emotion, but your anger was prompted by a primary emotion, such as humiliation or embarrassment. During an intentional dialogue your work is to communicate your underlying primary emotions and not your anger. In fact, that is part of what it means to be intentional. And, communicating these underlying emotions is the most therapeutic part of the dialogue process. Keep in mind that expressions of anger in a dialogue are never helpful and never necessary. Expressing anger is felt by your partner as both judgmental and an attack. Pay attention to not using the following words: frustrated, annoyed, disappointed, and upset. These four words are anger words. They may not be as intense as words like pissed, aggravated, and mad, but they do communicate a degree of anger. Your therapist will help you to talk about your primary emotions.

Don't ask questions—an intentional dialogue is not an interview or investigation, and for this reason asking questions corrodes the expression of empathy that the dialogue is designed to foster. Asking questions is judgmental and will make your partner feel investigated and blamed. Asking questions makes the dialogue feel unsafe for your partner. As the sender, think of what you are doing as giving a report. Report making does not involve questions.

Be specific—when you want to talk about a problem in a dialogue be specific. Do not generalize. The following are examples of generalizations that should not be used in a dialogue: “I want to talk to you about your attitude.” “I want to talk to you about how you treat the children.” “I want to talk to you about our lack of intimacy.” To be specific, talk about a real example of the problem that you witnessed or experienced. For example, “I want to talk to you about the things you said to me on Sunday night.” “I want to talk to you about how you reacted to the kid’s behavior this morning.” “I want to talk to you about last night when I wanted to have sex with you.” Also, do not say things like: “You always...” or “You never...” These types of comments are generalizations and they cause a breakdown in communication because they feel judgmental.

Get to the point—when sending try not to get bogged down explaining too many background details concerning your issue or problem. When you begin a dialogue your first sentence stem that you complete is: “*What I’m concerned about is...*” Try to complete this sentence stem in two or three sentences only. Think about what is the point you are trying to make and try to communicate it without giving a whole lot of background details.

Skills for Receivers

Respecting the Request—this is more of an attitude than a skill. When doing dialogues at home, you should be committed to respecting any request your partner makes to have an intentional dialogue. If you feel you are not available when the request is made, then be committed to doing a dialogue within twenty-four hours of when the request was made. In general, be committed to doing it as soon as possible.

Attending—to be intentional also means that you are deliberate to demonstrate that you are both interested in listening and that you care. This is done using good attending skills, such as sitting up straight, squarely facing your partner, and maintaining good eye contact. It also involves focused listening, meaning listening without being distracted by thinking about your point of view or how you would like to argue your position. Just listen intently so you can accurately state back what was spoken. Make your partner really sense your full attention.

Mirroring—is the main skill used by the receiver. When you are in the role of the receiver allow the sender to be completely in charge of where the conversation goes. Your job is to just listen and mirror. Imagine that as your partner is talking that his or her words are like pieces of a puzzle coming out of his or her mouth. Your task is to give back those pieces of the puzzle by restating only what you heard as accurately as possible. Even though you may know what the pieces to the rest of the puzzle are, you only communicate back what was spoken. In other words, do not add pieces of the puzzle that were not communicated. Do not ask a question or insert a comment or use a judgmental tone of voice. Simply restate what you listened to. When you are in the role of the receiver keep in mind that you have a single goal, and that is to accurately mirror back what was heard. Mirroring involves using this lead sentence: *“What I heard you say is...”*

Accuracy— as the receiver you have a single goal, and that is *to communicate to your partner that you understood accurately what was heard*. Do not add or subtract from what the sender said. Do not second guess or give an interpretation, such as saying, “what I think you mean is...” That is an assumption and not a mirror and it will cause a breakdown in communication. The most accurate response is to parrot or restate exactly what was spoken. Therefore, do not try to paraphrase the sender’s words. Paraphrasing diminishes the quality of the mirror because it tends to be less accurate.

Checking—after you finish mirroring, then check your mirror for accuracy by asking: *“Is it accurate?”* or *“Did I get it right?”*

Ask for more—after you have mirrored your partner and asked, “Is this accurate?” and your partner says, “Yes,” then ask if there is more about what he or she just said. Ask, *“Is there more about that?”* or *“Is there more about what you just said?”* These two questions invite your partner to tell you more about his or her last thought only. If you used a question like, “Is there more?” your partner could talk about almost anything, even bringing up a new topic. Because an intentional dialogue is focused on only one topic or problem at a time it is important to ask only about the immediate thoughts that your partner spoke.

Processing—two behaviors that will disconnect you from the dialogue process are anger and response planning. As the receiver you will disconnect from the process of the dialogue whenever you get angry. Your anger disconnects you from the process and the dialogue changes from safety for your partner to hostility. You must be vigilant to remain focused on the process at all times. If and when you feel yourself getting angry, say to yourself, *“I’m focused on myself. I need to shift my attention back solely onto the dialogue process.”* Response planning will also disconnect you from the process. Thinking about how you want to defend your point of view or argue that your partner is wrong and you are right, will disconnect you from the process. Remember this: The dialogue process is more important than the content your partner is delivering to you. Listening does not mean agreement. The process takes precedence over the content. So, do not let your anger or your desire to plan a response derail the process.

Summarizing—when your partner finishes all he or she needs to say, you then give your partner a brief summary of everything you listened to. When you finish summarizing ask your partner: *“Was this a good summary?”*

Validating—after you finish summarizing and your partner tells you it was a good summary, proceed to validating your partner. You validate what your partner communicated by stating what is true about it or how it makes sense. You explain to your partner how the communication, or a certain part of the communication, makes sense from *his or her point of view*. Keep in mind that validation is not

about agreement. Validation amplifies the empathy you give to your partner. Use the following sentence stem when doing the validating skill: *“And what you said makes sense because...”* This skill does not require you to check for accuracy. The sender listens to your validating statements and then you move onto empathizing.

Empathizing—after you finish validating, empathize by telling your partner how you imagine what he or she communicated makes him or her feel. Put yourself in his or her shoes and think about how you would feel if the situation or concern happened to you. For example, “I imagine how this makes you feel is sad.” Be careful not to express a thought, for example, “I imagine how this makes you feel is that I don’t care.” “I don’t care” is a thought and not a feeling. Feeling words are usually one word only, for example, sad, happy, afraid, lonely, unloved, etc. To empathize use the sentence stem: *“How I imagine this makes you feel is...”* And then ask, *“Is this accurate?”*

Encouraging—at the conclusion of the dialogue, after you have summarized, validated, and empathized, you can give your partner encouragement. Think about what you can do that would help your partner. Use this sentence stem for giving encouragement: *“In order to encourage you or to provide healing, I would like to say..., or I will do the following...”*

Sender Responsibilities

- Initiates the dialogue
- States the topic in one sentence
- Speaks about self and not his or her partner
- Uses I messages
- Sends in small amounts (does not flood)
- Checks mirror and resends corrections when needed
- Keeps to one topic only
- Does not ask questions
- Does not criticize, judge, or belittle
- Does not talk about or express anger
- Pays attention to non-verbal behaviors
- Uses good attending skills

Receiver Responsibilities

- Respect all requests for dialogues
- Gives focused attention
- Allows the dialogue to belong to the sender
- Mirrors accurately and checks
- Stays processed focused—avoids focusing on anger and planning a response.
- Summarizes
- Validates
- Empathizes
- Encourages
- Pays attention to non-verbal behaviors
- Uses good attending skills

The Full Problem Focused Dialogue – *Procedure Outline*

Sender	Receiver
<i>Initiates</i> “I would like to have a dialogue, can we do this now?”	<i>Respects</i> “Yes.”
<i>States the topic in one sentence</i> “I want to talk to you about... Is now ok?”	<i>Respects</i> “Yes.”
<i>Completes the sentence stem</i> “What I am concerned about is...”	<i>Mirrors</i> “What I heard you say is...” <i>Checks</i> “Is this accurate?” <i>Asks for more</i> “Is there more about that?”
<i>Completes the sentence stem</i> “When that happens what I am afraid of is...”	<i>Mirrors – Checks – Asks for more</i>
<i>Completes the sentence stem</i> “Concerning that what hurts me is...”	<i>Mirrors – Checks – Asks for more</i>
<i>Completes the sentence stem</i> “What those feelings remind me of from my childhood is...”	<i>Mirrors – Checks – Asks for more</i>
<i>Completes the sentence stem</i> “When I was a child I learned to cope and protect myself by...”	<i>Mirrors – Checks – Asks for more</i>
<i>Completes the sentence stem</i> “It would be helpful and healing if you would...”	<i>Mirrors – Checks – Asks for more</i>
<i>Listens</i> <i>Sends correction if needed</i>	<i>Summarizes</i> “In summary what you said was...” <i>Checks</i> “Was this a good summary?”
<i>Listens</i>	<i>Validates</i> “And what you said makes sense because...”
<i>Listens</i> <i>Sends correction if needed</i>	<i>Empathizes</i> “I imagine how this makes you feel is...”
<i>Listens</i>	<i>Encourages</i> “In order to encourage you or to provide healing, I would like to say..., or I will do the following...”

The General Dialogue—is not focused on a problem or complaint. Therefore you *do not use the problem focused sentence stems*. You and your partner communicate as sender and receiver with an emphasis on mirroring. The sender may talk about anything of interest and the receiver mirrors. The dialogue ends

with the receiver using the summary skill and if appropriate also the validation and empathy skills. The general dialogue allows you and your partner to experience emotional connection. It is a way of giving and receiving support to and from one another. For example, one of you might talk to the other about what happened at work or while at home during the day. The general dialogue is a time of quality interaction, support, and caring. Having a general dialogue date once a week will work to keep your relationship fresh and alive. Each of you should take a turn being sender and receiver.

Example of a Simple Intentional Dialogue:

[This is a shortened version of the full problem focused dialogue. Not all the sentence stems are used.]

Sender - Initiates

“I would like to have a dialogue, can we do this now?”

Receiver - Respects

“Yes.”

Sender - States Topic in One Sentence

“I want to talk about what happens when you come home from work.”

Receiver - Respects

“Okay, I want to hear you.”

Sender - Sends

“What I’m concerned about is that in the evening when you come home I don’t get greeted or acknowledge by you.”

Receiver - Mirrors

“What I heard you say is that I don’t acknowledge you.”

Receiver - Checks

“Is this accurate?”

Sender – Answers and sends a correction

“No, what was missing is that in the evening when you come home I don’t get greeted by you.”

Receiver – Mirrors again

“So what you said is that in the evening when I come home I don’t greet you or acknowledge you.”

Receiver - Checks

“Is this accurate now?”

Sender - Answers

“Yes.”

Receiver - Asks for More

“Is there more about what you just said?”

Sender - Answers and Sends

“Yes there’s more. When this happens I feel afraid that you don’t really love me and I feel alone.”

Receiver - Mirrors

“What I heard you say is that when this happens you feel afraid that I don’t really love you and you feel alone.”

Receiver - Checks

“Is this accurate?”

Sender - Answers

“Yes.”

Receiver - Asks for More

“Is there more about what you just said?”

Sender - Answers

“No.”

Receiver - Summarizes

“To summarize, what I heard you say is that when I come home from work I don’t greet you or acknowledge you. And, this makes you afraid that I don’t really love you and it makes you feel alone.”

Receiver - Checks

“Was this a good summary?”

Sender - Answers

“Yes.”

Receiver - Validates

“And what you said makes sense because if you’re not getting my attention you can’t know whether I love you, and that would make you feel alone, and in a relationship you are supposed to feel connected?”

Sender - Listens only

Receiver - Empathizes

“And I imagine how this makes you feel is hurt.”

Receiver - Checks

“Is this accurate?”

Sender – Answers and sends a correction

“No, what I need to hear you say is that it makes me feel unloved and alone.”

Receiver - Empathizes Again

“And how this makes you feel is unloved and alone.”

Receiver - Checks

“Is this accurate?”

Sender - Answers

“Yes.”

Receiver - Encourages

“In order to encourage you starting tomorrow when I come home I will give you a hug and a kiss.”

Sender - Invites a Response

“Would you like to respond and have me be the receiver?”

Receiver - Answers and sends

“Yes, I would like you to understand how I feel after a long day at work.”

(At this point the couple has switched roles, and a new dialogue begins.)