

A Simple Way to Help Overcome Empathic Resistance and Move RE Couples' Dialogues Forward

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I have adopted a new stratagem in structuring and coaching dialogues within RE that I think other RE therapists and program educators may find useful in helping couples deepen their dialogues or in helping one or both partners overcome what I would term “empathic resistance.”

What I mean by empathic resistance in this context is something more subtle than either person in a dialogue not being able to verbally empathize with the partner. Sometimes the one person actually is able to verbally empathize, and yet that person goes on to express his or her own perspective in a manner that betrays that the partner's perspective has not been genuinely incorporated into what the new expresser goes on to say. In other words, the one person empathizes verbally, and does so in a manner that is acceptable to the partner, and yet the dialogue takes on the quality of two separate conversations taking place, like the metaphorical two ships passing in the night. Or, the dialogue takes on a kind of stuck quality in that the new expresser responds to what the partner had previously expressed in a manner that conveys that the new expresser has not integrated the partner's perspective into his or her own perspective, thereby perpetuating a “me versus you” stance where the new expresser's perspective is simply presented in opposition to the partner's perspective.

What this might look like in practice is that the new expresser in effect repeats him or herself or continues a line of presentation of his or her own perspective as though the partner hadn't said anything at all. The therapist is likely to experience this as there being no forward movement in the dialogue. This stands in contrast to what the therapist would typically experience if the dialogue were progressing in a manner whereby each person's new self-expression advances from and goes beyond what the previous expresser had communicated. In this more favorable scenario, what tends to happen is that each member of the couple gradually expands his or her perspective so as to incorporate more of the other person's perspective, which creates the sense of an evolving shared perspective. When this doesn't happen, and the dialogue begins to feel repetitive and/or stuck, the therapist may have the sense that the new expresser isn't genuinely taking into account and responding to what the partner had previously shared. At the same time, the partner who had previously expressed may be left feeling as though the new expresser is in effect ignoring or, even worse, dismissing what that person had previously communicated. This is what I am referring to when I refer to a more subtle form of “empathic resistance.”

The first time I became aware that this was happening, I sensed that the husband in the dialogue was expressing in a manner that in effect discounted what his wife had just shared with him. My spontaneous intervention – a form of Therapist Troubleshooting whereby the therapist can intervene in order to prevent or address a perceived problem in the process even when neither client expresses that there is a problem – was to ask the husband to pause his self-expression and consider “what might make sense to you about what you just heard your wife express to you.” My aim with this intervention was to help the husband overcome what I experienced as an

implicit denial of the plausibility or legitimacy of what the wife had expressed, even though he had verbally empathized with it quite well, and to the wife's satisfaction.

Now, I was not suggesting or implying that the husband had to agree with what his wife had said, and I made that quite explicit. I explained that there is an important difference between not agreeing with something and yet it making sense. But what I was picking up on was that the husband was in effect telling himself, by how he was expressing himself to his wife, that he didn't really think that her perspective had much, if any, plausibility to it, i.e., that it didn't even make any sense to him. The husband understood what his wife had expressed, and was able to verbally empathize in a manner that left the wife feeling understood. And yet, when he became the expresser and responded from his own point of view, what he said conveyed that he didn't give much credence to what she had said. Again, I want to stress that this was not a matter of the husband having to agree with the wife's perspective. The husband was fully entitled to express his own very different perspective. But I sensed the potential for the dialogue to become stuck in that I could see that the wife was feeling that the husband didn't even consider that her perspective was worthy of being taken seriously. In other words, I was picking up that the wife was feeling as though her perspective was being discounted and dismissed. In my clinical experience, that is a danger point at which there is a high risk for a dialogue to deteriorate or become emotionally deadlocked.

So my asking the husband to pause to consider and express what made sense to him about what his wife had expressed was by way of encouraging him to reflect more deeply on what she had said in a manner that would at least allow him to acknowledge not just to her *but also to himself* that (at least some of) what she had expressed was plausible and "made sense." The intent here was to help the husband move past an implicit stance of not regarding his wife's perspective as something to be taken seriously. One way of understanding this is that when a couple has a conflict or disagreement it is not uncommon that one or both regard the other person's perspective to be "strange," "peculiar," "eccentric," "weird," or just plain "not making any sense at all." The point, then, in asking the husband to reflect on and express what might make sense about what his wife had communicated was to help him move past his implicitly continuing to regard his wife's perspective as not having any plausibility or legitimacy so that he hopefully could acknowledge that at least in some respects it did indeed make sense to him even if he did not necessarily (or fully) agree with it.

The impact of this intervention was immediate. The husband paused, thought for a moment, and then was able to say to his wife that much of what she had said did make sense to him. I asked the husband to state explicitly what did make sense to him about what his wife had said, which he did. I then invited him to go on to say what he now would like to say to his wife in light of that. What he went on to say all of a sudden sounded very different from what he had started out saying. More to the point, what he expressed conveyed more openness to his wife's perspective and more of a cooperative spirit in the sense of beginning to think in terms of how their differing perspectives might not be quite so far apart as he had imagined, and how they might work together to find a way to bridge the apparent gap between them.

On the basis of this success, I began to experiment with having each partner in a dialogue

incorporate a “what makes sense to me” transition at the point that a person shifts from having been in the empathic mode to now moving into expressive mode. Over time, what I have experienced is that this helps deepen couples’ dialogues and helps move them forward because there is a lessening of a “me versus you” stance and, conversely, more of a developing sense of shared perspective and mutual acceptance. The reason is that each person acknowledging “what makes sense” to him or her about the partner’s perspective helps to counteract the danger of a dialogue remaining stuck because either or both people implicitly view the partner’s perspective as “just not making any sense at all.”

As a result, I now make it standard practice whenever I teach couples the RE dialogue process to ask that each time a mode switch is made in a dialogue, the new expresser begin his or her self-expression by sharing “what makes sense” about what the partner had just expressed. There are several benefits to adding this new transition piece to the RE dialogue process. The first benefit is that it further helps slow the dialogue process down in the sense of inhibiting what can still be a certain tendency, even after empathizing, to simply want to respond to what the previous expresser communicated in the form of a rebuttal. The second benefit is that it encourages the new expresser to pause to actively consider what the partner has shared before going on to express from one’s own perspective. The third benefit is that with each person in effect being obligated to verbally acknowledge what makes sense about what the partner had previously communicated before expressing for oneself, this helps overcome what for some people is a kind of residual empathic resistance to accepting the plausibility or legitimacy of the partner’s perspective on its own terms. And even when such an implicit denial of the plausibility or legitimacy of the partner’s perspective is not present, having each person begin his or her self-expression with an explicit acknowledgment of what makes sense about what the partner had just expressed tends to foster a more collaborative stance to working through an issue in that each person is more actively working at genuinely integrating the partner’s perspective into his or her own perspective.

The way I actually introduce this new transition piece is at the point in a couple’s first dialogue where the first mode switch is made. What I coach the new expresser to do (since this is the first time this person will express) is (a) to begin with an underlying positive (just as the partner had been previously coached to do), then (b) to express what makes sense about what had just been expressed by the partner, and then (c) to go on to say whatever it is that the new expresser would like to say in response regarding the issue at hand. I describe the “what makes sense to me” piece as distinct from and a step beyond empathy, though it presupposes empathy. I refer to it as “validation” of the partner’s perspective, by way of acknowledging that “I can see how you would feel x, or be concerned about y, or desire z (whether or not I agree with you).” (Validation in this context functions differently from how validation functions in Imago therapy.) I also explain that what is important about this is that it lets the partner know that his or her perspective is not regarded as strange or weird, and that this helps move the dialogue forward because it begins to build a sense of mutual respect and acceptance even in the face of a potentially challenging issue about which there has been serious disagreement.

From that point forward, I coach each new expresser to begin with “What makes sense to me about what you’ve shared is...” If per chance the new expresser forgets to begin that way, I gently

request that he or she come back to “what makes sense” about the partner’s perspective before expressing his or her own perspective. I also teach couples that the partner who has been the expresser can initiate a mode switch by explicitly asking: “I’d like to know what makes sense to you about what I’ve just shared; and then I’d like to hear your thoughts and feelings.” In the long run this is perhaps an even better way to help couples incorporate this transitional validation piece into their dialogues.

My experience has convinced me that incorporating into couples’ dialogues this new transition piece of having each partner validate the partner’s perspective before expressing one’s own point of view pays immense dividends. I therefore recommend that therapists and educators employing the RE dialogue process experiment with this new way of structuring and coaching a couple’s dialogues. I would be happy to hear your experience and feedback on this. You may reach me by email at robscuka@earthlink.net.

Postscript: After receiving feedback on a nearly identical version of this essay at the 2008 AFREM Conference workshops, I would now add the following clarifications. As with any recommendation, it is exactly that: A recommendation for RE therapists to experiment with this “what makes sense” transition from empathizing to expressing not as a rigid formula to be automatically employed at the beginning of every change in role but rather (a) as a facilitative structuring device that can help overcome empathic resistance when it clearly presents itself in the course of a given dialogue, or (b) on a regular basis with couples who are frequently at loggerheads with one another over contentious issues and who display a regular pattern of not taking the partner’s perspective seriously and responding to it in a meaningful manner. Conversely, there may not be a need for some couples to employ the “what makes sense” transition if they (a) regularly are responsive to one another’s differing perspectives while dialoguing about challenging issues or (b) they are engaged in very deep personal exploration and sharing about an issue where there is an evident heart-to-heart connection even in the midst of a challenging issue about which there are genuine differences. As to the potential concern that having couples employ this “what makes sense” transition might actually interfere with a more naturally flowing heart-to-heart connection that deepens through the dialogue, I have not found this to be the case. That is not to say that it might not be experienced as cumbersome by some people, but I have observed couples incorporate the “what makes sense” transition very naturally into their dialoguing in a manner that flows quite naturally and in no way interferes with a deepening heart-to-heart connection. To the contrary, I observe that this transitional validation piece helps many couples focus themselves as they move from empathizing to expressing, and in its own way it facilitates people in gaining clarity about how to express in a manner that will be meaningful to their partner as well as to themselves.

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