
Therapist's Thoughts E-Zine For September 2006

TELL ME ABOUT...

This month I regularly found myself assisting my clients in reducing conflict through a very specific listening style. The goal is to get out of the trap of defensiveness, trying to win, trying to be right or trying to hammer your point home when you could be listening instead. When you listen without your personal agenda getting in the way of the one who is speaking, many wonderful things can happen:

1. The speaker is not interrupted.
2. The speaker gets some relief from their pent-up feelings.
3. The speaker experiences you as a good, amateur therapist.
4. The speaker does not ramble on and on.
5. The speaker does not emotionally escalate.
6. The speaker sees you as a collaborator in their process instead of the enemy.

Imagine your partner says, "I felt angry when you didn't keep your agreement with me and I'd like you to keep your agreements." You have a pretty open-ended range of choices in your response. Unfortunately, people usually make it about themselves and escalate the conflict by saying something defensive like, "Its not my fault," or something superior, like, "You don't keep your agreements either," or a long explanation about what, when, why or how it happened. Stop. Breathe. Get a hold of yourself instead. You didn't have a problem until the message was delivered, so you can wait until the message deliverer is understood before you share your reaction to what they said. It takes strength to lean into the wind. Step outside of yourself or the relationship for a moment and just listen. When a child falls and skins their knee, is it best to tell them they are clumsy or not paying attention or is it best to give them comfort and relief and then, later that day, suggest they keep their shoes tied? The shoe tying suggestion isn't going to be heard when the child is emotional anyway.

So, with your partner, what you need to do is approach him or her with the heart and mind of a child. That is, be curious instead of defensive. Say this instead: "Tell me about..." What this does is shift the energy away from your response of potential escalation and puts it where it belongs -- with the speaker who has the problem. Solve their issue or problem or concern first. For the example above, you could say, "Tell me about your anger," or "Tell me about the agreement," or "Tell me about why it's so upsetting," or even just "Tell me more."

You will get a very different response from someone who believes you are interested in his or her pain. They may tell you about a related early childhood wound, or about a past relationship, or they may tell you more about you, giving you a chance to change and grow into a better partner. There are so many upsides to this that most couples are very glad they adopted it.

Once again, I am grateful to my clients because being with them helps this material bubble up in me.

Sincerely,

Russell
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