

Dialogue on Feelings

The *only* purpose in dialoguing on feelings is for your partner to *understand* your feelings and for you to understand your partner's feelings. This is not a time to *do* anything about how you feel. It is not a time to try and explain, analyze or justify your feelings. As the listener to your partner's feelings it is not a time to try to change, fix or advise your partner on how he or she feels nor is it a time to try and change yours or your partner's *behavior*. Dialoguing on feelings is learning to accept your own and your partners feelings *as they are*.

“Feelings” and “emotions” are synonymous, although the first thing we typically think when we hear the word “emotion” is some dramatic display, while a “feeling” is more of a hidden inner event. The definition of a feeling is an *inner reaction* to a particular person, place or situation. This inner reaction has a number of properties to it. There are inner images (*pictures* that we form in our minds), inner conversations (things that we *tell ourselves* on the stage of our mind) and inner body sensations (*physical* sensations in various parts of our bodies). Feelings also have *surface manifestations* that include *posture* (how we hold ourselves) and movements.

Feelings can be pleasant or unpleasant and they can range in intensity from mild to strong. Feelings can also have a certain *color* to them illustrated by how we sometimes spontaneously describe them. We can sometimes feel “blue” when we are down, we can be “green” with envy or jealousy, we can be so angry that we see “red”, when we are on top of things we can feel “sunny” and “bright”, or guilt may take on a certain “darkness” or “blackness”. Feelings are neither right or wrong, good or bad. In fact, feelings don't *mean* anything. They are simply what they are. A feeling is a feeling is a feeling.

Allowing feelings to *be* the way they are is to *describe* feelings. When you describe something you are *in the moment* and seeing and hearing something *as it is*. You are not *doing anything* with the object of description. You are not trying to change it into something it is not. You are trying to see it from as many different vantage points as possible so that you can make as full a description as possible. To describe something requires you to take the role of an *observer*.

The language of our inner world is not as clear as the language we have for objects and external events. Very few of us have ever been trained or encouraged in the language of feelings. As children, we knew feelings well and we expressed our feelings spontaneously and creatively. As we grew older and became “socialized” the focus on feelings became less and less important and for many of us feelings were often denigrated even as it is

today in our culture. We now live in a world of opinions; this is what “should” be and that is what “should not” be, this is “right”, that’s “wrong”, I’m right and you’re wrong, you’re to blame, it’s your fault, this is what I “think”; or we have one belief system pitted against another.

While we often hear statements like, “You can’t let your feelings control your actions”, consider this—your feelings already *do* control your actions. The degree to which you do not unacknowledged your feelings, is the degree to which your feelings *run your life*.

As human beings we have many different ways of dealing with our feelings. The most fundamental way that we deal with our feelings is to *conceal* them from others and even to ourselves. Or we try to *change* them. We suppress them, deny them, drink over them, drug over them, eat over them, exercise over them, get into pornography or just simply try to pretend they don’t exist. All of these ways of dealing with our feelings reflect a basic attitude that *we should not feel what we feel* so now we must try to *do* something about them.

When we experience an emotion we can either “be” or “act out” the emotion or we can *acknowledge* the emotion. It is one thing to be angry and upset and call you names and put you down; and it is another thing to *acknowledge* that I am upset and angry. When I acknowledge the feeling, I am at the same time owning and being responsible for it. You can hear me and seek to understand me. If I am *acting out* the emotion, I am attacking *you* and making *you* responsible for it. Communication stops and a wall will inevitably develop between us.

While you may have come to therapy to focus on particular “issues” in your life or relationship, it will be important and necessary to create a foundation in which to deal with those issues. Trying to change things without ever understanding how one another feels is impossible. The best you can do is to change your behavior or continue in the never ending circle of trying to change your partner’s behavior through control, nagging, criticizing and the like. The “change” that arises from such attempts is short-lived at best.

Describing feelings with your partner allows your partner to know a little piece of your inner world and for you to know a piece of your partner’s world. It is a sacred time in that it is a time when you are learning to be *present* to yourself and your partner. It is what true communication is all about and is the basis for developing a loving relationship. Love has no agenda. Love does not try to change. Love accepts something *as it is*.

When you are loving and feeling loved (not just in the romantic sense), your relationship will reach new heights and dimensions that you cannot even imagine.

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