

Engage emotions—Transcript

Listen to, understand, and consider your emotions and those of your partner. Find ways to make them your ally instead of your enemy. This relates to the intuitive side of your brain and your emotional centers. Some examples of harnessing feelings to increase your desire to communicate include:

- Cultivating images that evoke feelings of urgency;
- reading inspirational stories;
- remembering your personal love;
- vividly imagining the good feelings that you will experience when acting the way you want; or
- making a change in your environment that will concretely remind you of the new ways of relating you are developing.

For example, I know people who have been very much committed to taking time to communicate after one of them has had an affair. Then they say, “Oops, I have been neglecting my relationship and I really don’t want to lose my family. I better get busy and make time for communication and connection because I want to rekindle our love and enjoy my grandchildren.” That gives them intense feelings about wanting connection, and then it is easier for them to change whatever they need to change to make room for communication.

Hopefully you will wake up to the need for connection way before something as tragic as an affair has to wake you up. If you want to reconnect, but are afraid to be hurt again by your partner’s indifference and/or hostility, thinking of the positive feelings of closeness, having someone to share things and dreams with, and enjoying an equal partner can give you the strength to try again even when you are cautious.

The trick is to find ways to increase positive feelings and minimize negative feelings, since desire tends to follow more easily when we experience pleasurable emotions. Then visualize experiencing those positive feelings.

Sharing and listening to emotions

One of the problems with finding the desire to communicate is that we experience so many big and small crises and stressors in our jobs and daily activities that it's difficult to take a moment to truly connect with what we are feeling. Let alone with what our partner is feeling. As a result, we are not in touch with emotions and when enough pressure accumulate, we explode, affecting our relationships.

In order to understand and process you emotions, you have first to be able to identify them. And identifying, understanding, and processing you emotions is prerequisite to communicating about them. Unless you communicate, your partner can't comfort and/or support you. See how complicated things can be?

Today I want to share with you three tips for recognizing and sharing emotions.

Tip 1: Relax and take your time. Communication takes time. And talking about emotions takes even more time. If you are having a hard time labeling an emotion, stop for a moment and think. Clear your mind of other issues. Search for a feeling word. And pay attention to your body. When a word comes to your mind and you feel your body relaxing, you have probably hit the right word. Try to expand your vocabulary about emotions. Here are a few examples you can use as a starting point. Keep adding to the list! **[Clara, maybe you can put the positive emotions and negative emotions in a table side by side?]**

Positive Emotions

- Amused
- Appreciated
- Lucky
- Satisfied
- Silly
- Turned On
- Joyful
- Safe
- Proud
- Powerful
- Playful
- Fascinated

Negative Emotions

- Alienated
- Tense
- Misunderstood
- Powerless
- Ignored
- Inferior
- Criticized
- Ashamed
- Betrayed
- Numb
- Unsafe

Tip 2. Ask Open-Ended Questions. If you ask questions that require only a yes or no answer, you are destroying conversations before they even have a chance to begin. You are accidentally slamming the door that you are trying to open. Instead of “Did you watch that movie?” ask, “What was your favorite part on that movie?” Instead of “Are you upset?” ask, “You seem upset – what’s going on?” Ask this type of questions and you will find yourself desiring more connection and your partner desiring to share more with you.

Tip 3. Tell stories. Everybody has great stories. I do. And so do you. I am surprised how many people have never told their story. You should try it. It starts with “I was born in...” You may be surprised what comes out of your mouth next.

If you’re telling your story to a curious listener the opportunity for discovery is boundless. Your family story. Your first kiss story. Your broken leg story. They all hold insights into “you” and how you think about relationships.

As a couple you should also tell your collective story. Another way to think about this is to take time for reminiscing. Talk about your shared history. If you decide to tell together your whole story, you will invariably find it filled with ups and downs, laughter and tears. How you tell your story as a couple is as important as the story itself. Connected couples tend to “glorify the struggle” while couples whose connection is broken focus more on the struggle itself. It’s important to learn how to focus on the stories of perseverance, connection, and joy.

Do not underestimate the power of stories. Our brains are designed to be drawn into and motivated by stories. Most of what we know about human history has been passed down through oral tradition. Stories have the power to build and transform relationships. They provide context for the rough spots and remind us

that there is something bigger than the struggle. They create the desire to continue writing your story.

So, relax and take your time. Ask questions. Tell stories. Indulge curiosity and discovery. Create context for exploring each other's likes, dislikes, personality quirks, hopes and dreams. Focusing on your friendship and cultivating connection will strengthen desire. It's the best thing you can do for your relationship as a whole.

It's really not terribly complicated. Maybe start by sharing, "this are three words I think describe you." And then ask, "What three words would you use to describe me?"

Compassion and Empathy

One of the most powerful ways to nurture desire is through compassion and empathy. This might seem as a no brainer, but in reality it's complex. If you look back on your past conversations with your partner, you may find that in many situations you have felt that they were upset for "illogical" reasons, that they were "overreacting", or that they "should" have had a different emotional response. You offer your opinion and suggestions, try to play the "voice of reason," and unconsciously botch the entire attempt at helping them.

You will also likely remember many, many cases in which you have been the recipient of such "help," and been left more frustrated and upset than you were in the first place.

How then can you change your approach to such conversations?

First, remember that **Understanding must precede advice**. We all have subjective experiences of situations we experience. Everyone's emotions are valid. Most of the time, when your mate (or anyone!) comes to you with an issue that has made them upset, they don't immediately ask for advice, for you to problem solve, or even ask your opinion on the matter. Most of the time they are silently asking for your understanding and compassion.

They want to feel that you are on the same team – that you are on their side. When your partner comes to you and says that their boss has criticized their work recently, complaining that they have been treated unfairly, the last thing they want to hear is that they have been tired and overstressed and that potentially

the solution is to sleep more and have a better attitude. They want to hear you say, "That sounds so frustrating! I can understand why you are so upset."

This will increase their desire to say more, to communicate more fully with you. It will increase your heart connection. It will lower fear, which tends to vanish desire. When we feel that we are being judged by our partners for our emotional reactions - that they feel that our responses to upsetting situations are unjustified - we come away shattered.

Already emotionally vulnerable, we are further hurt because we feel that we have been criticized by someone we trusted. Our ability to make the right judgments has been questioned and the very cause or validity of our suffering has been rejected as illogical. We are offered simple, quick-fix solutions (that we don't want to hear!) instead of compassion and empathy. We wonder why we even tried talking about it in the first place.

Do you see what I mean? You have first to listen to understand. To listen with compassion and empathy. To put yourself in the other person's shoes. To stop your judging thoughts.

Second, **offer compassion and empathy**. Think, if it were me, how would I like the other person to respond? The dictionary defines compassion as "sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others." It lists as synonyms: pity, sympathy, empathy, fellow feeling, care, concern, solicitude, sensitivity, warmth, love, tenderness, mercy, leniency, tolerance, kindness, humanity, charity. It is probably the highest manifestation of love.

Empathy has a similar definition: "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another." Therefore, empathy refers to feeling the other's feelings, while compassion is the offering of your concern, care, and kindness.

A recent New York Times feature an article titled "Is Marriage Good For Your Health?" It reports on a study that shows the presence of at least one loving, compassionate word or phrase during an argument between a couple can lower risk of heart disease. Taking a moment to pause, taking yourself out of the equation and attempting to see your partner's point of view can be crucial, especially if you are having an argument.

Like any behavior, reprogramming yourself to listen and breathe instead of lash out, takes practice. Looking at interactions through the lens of compassion takes

practice. Thinking about other's feelings takes practice. Some ways to practice increased compassion and empathy in your relationships are:

1. *Stop thinking so much about yourself.* There's an ancient Indian saying that the total amount of unhappiness in the world comes from thinking about ourselves and the total amount of happiness in the world comes from thinking about other people. It's the reason we get so excited, as adults, to give rather than receive. It's also the reason why cultivating love and compassion for a partner feels so great in the first place.

2. *Be aware of your thoughts.* Your partner fails to compliment you on the meal you spent hours preparing. Emotions can get you carried away quickly. Mostly because the way your thoughts go: "he never notices what I do around here" or "this is another sign of how selfish she is." Hostile thoughts will elicit bad feelings. Try a bit of compassionate thinking instead: "he must be really worry about something when he is not even aware of what he is eating," or "this is another sign of how tired she is. Good thing I made dinner for her." Monitor the ways your mind can quickly jump from A to Z and stop the negative thinking.

3. *Pause.* Once you have awareness of the lightning-fast way your minds turn molehills into mountains, use it. Some say our mood changes every minute-and-a-half. If your partner really hurt you or deserves to be called out on something, it can probably wait a minute, right? And in pausing, you're giving yourself the ability to check out your thoughts and evaluate whether or not they warrant the emotional response you've generated.

You need to develop the brain's neuropathways that help you to pause, to momentarily disengage your automatic reactions. Otherwise, you can trigger a chain reaction that derails your best intentions and strategies. Emotions can drive illogical reactions. That's why a pause is powerful: it restores your ability to access your heart and your intuition. It restores your ability to think.

Pausing allows you to double-check with your mind: "Do I really want to go in that direction? Am I sure there's not a better alternative here?" which can make all the difference in your relationship.

4. *Follow the golden rule:* "do unto others as you'd have done unto you." Do you like to be affirmed? Make it a point to increasing affirmation or encouragement to your partner. You'll most likely see a similar response returned to you. When you pause, keep this idea in mind. How would you want to be treated if you were in

the same situation? Or if you'd made a mistake like he/she had? How do you respond to someone shouting at you? And, how wonderfully unexpected is it to see your partner stop and try to see it your way (whether or not he actually succeeds! how great is the effort?).

5. *Cultivate a balanced life.* While compassion depends on selflessness, if you are out of whack, mentally, physically or emotionally, it's hard to see outside yourself. You and your relationship will be well-served to practice respite, leisure and balance. The benefit of being fulfilled, of having worked out the kinks—be that during a walk, a power nap, a yoga class, a course of graduate study or a night away from the kids—can't come from your partner. It can only come from you. Being a better, more complete and peaceful you will allow your relationship to flourish.

6. *Practice, starting right now.* Practice compassion every day. Practice on everyone you know. Practice with your partner. Practice with the kids. That annoying coworker? Think about what made him/her that way. What challenges does he face? Put yourself in his shoes and see if you don't feel more connected and empathetic to his plight. Say your wife is constantly "nagging" you to put your dishes in the dishwasher immediately after a meal. You don't see it as a big deal, but to her, it represents a big annoyance. At the end of the day, if putting dishes in dishwasher helps her to be happier and less stressed, why wouldn't you do it? When you feel you've made a misstep and acted without compassion? Start over. It's that simple.

Acting compassionately towards the one you love is a practice, not a perfection. Start small. Lay a hand on his shoulder while you're discussing a tough subject, call her "my love" before you point out how she failed to inform you about dinner with her parents, for the third month in a row. Take the highest road whenever possible—is winning an argument worth diminishing your partner? Or would you rather go to all lengths, including overriding your own egotistical needs, to make him/her feel happy and secure?

Remember, compassion and empathy are the most effective way to kindle desire, both in yourself and on the other. Practice everyday the suggestions given this week and you will notice a difference in your communication and in your relationship.

