



About this Resource

The purpose of Intentional Dialogue, developed by Harville Hendrix, is to achieve understanding, not agreement. Being understood is priceless and the benefits bountiful. Intentional Dialogue is a structured way to mindfully communicate about difficult issues. Its purpose is to create emotional safety, which will deepen connection and significantly increase the ability of the listener to listen and the person sharing to practice non-harming speech. By taking turns to respectfully hear each other with open ears and an open heart you can get out of the typical power struggle (someone is right or wrong). Instead, the goal is to respect each other's different viewpoints. This structured yet conscious way of speaking can have endless positive effects on improving the communication in your relationships, organization, and leadership. The following practices were designed for use within the container of a supportive therapeutic relationship, but can be adapted for a variety of other settings, including the classroom.

Mechanics of Mirroring

Mirroring teaches you how to speak and listen well in order to create safety and connection in the space between you and your conversation partner. Your conversation partner is longing for you to hear them and accept them without judgment or criticism. This is a whole new way of talking and listening! The sentence stems in the Mirroring process help provide safety, structure and predictability in your communication. Using the sentence stems allows you to slow down the inner chatter in your mind and be available to listen and share with your partner in a connecting way.

Making an Appointment: "Is now a good time to talk about it?"

Honoring boundaries is essential in a mindful conversation. Your partner may not be ready to have a conversation the moment you request an appointment. It is okay to delay! Set a time to talk as soon as possible, when you and your partner are both available. Then show up at precisely that time. Be respectful of the need for sharing and being available for listening.

You can also establish availability establish availability and permission to proceed with a conversation or offer a suggestion:

- I'd like to hear more about that and I am available to listen to you. Tell me more
- I have something I want to share with you; Is it ok with you if I make a suggestion? I want to clarify; Are you available to listen to me? It would be helpful if you could reflect what I am saying. I find that very helpful.

Checking for Accuracy: "Let me see if I got that."

Research shows that the rate of accuracy while listening hovers around 13% for most of us, even when we are relaxed and focused. That means an 87% distortion rate! Mirroring is saying back to another person what they said, accurately and without interpretation or distortion. Checking for accuracy ensures that the Sender feels heard.

Those of you who know how to reflectively listen will recognize this step. Basically you mirror or reflect back as clearly and simply as you can what the other person is saying. Hendrix suggests you mirror as “flatly” as possible. What that means is as much as possible, mirror back what is being said WITHOUT DISTORTION. Resist the tendency to explain, justify, defend, attack or solve problems. You are just mirroring back what the other person has said in your own words. This step is more simple than most people make it, but it is also harder to do. (Not complex, but not easy)

Some useful lead-in phrases:

- Did I get that right?
- So you...
- It sounds like you...
- So when...you...

Validation: “You and what you are saying are valuable.”

You might not utter those actual words, but validation is the process of letting the other person know that what they have said to you is valued. The difficulty in this step is that sometimes what the other person is saying may not make sense, or you may not agree with them. The beauty of this process is that you don't have to agree with them to be effective with this. Use phrases that are honest and validating.

Some useful lead-in phrases:

- Given what you have gone through, what you are saying makes sense.
- From your viewpoint, I can see that there is some logic in what you are saying.
- Now that I have heard more of your feelings, I'm starting to understand this.

Showing Curiosity: “I want to learn more about that.”

This question expresses curiosity and is an important component of safety and connecting. As you reassure the speaker that you are open to what they are saying, you begin a wonderful journey into their world. You experience connection, even if you find the subject area challenging or unfamiliar.

Some useful lead-in phrases:

- What was that like for you?
- Are there other times you've experienced that?
- How does it feel when you talk about it now?
- What did you do (or what will you do)?

Empathy: “I feel some of what you are feeling as well.”

In this stage you explore and talk about how you can feel some response to what they are feeling. The focus is on talking about what the feelings are, and how they are felt. (Both your feelings and theirs)

Some useful lead-in phrases:

- It looks like you are feeling...
- What is it like for you to feel so...
- How do you experience that feeling?
- That must be difficult to feel so...how does it affect your life?
- Listening to you this closely, I'm feeling some of your pain

Summarizing: “Let me see if I got all of that.”

This allows the Receiver to summarize briefly (in two or three sentences) what they heard.

- Here is what I heard...have I left anything out?
- What else did you want to communicate?
- What have I left out?

Cautions & Challenges

- Avoid agreeing or disagreeing — instead focus on understanding your conversation partner’s experience.
- Avoid uninvited problem solving — instead explore what the person has tried, what they think is best, what their ideas are. Elicit and trust your conversation partner’s intuition.
- If the impulse to talk about yourself or give advice arises, see if you can allow it to pass without acting on it.
- Keep the process open by allowing for differences of opinion or courses of action other than what you would have chosen.