

Initiating Calm Discussions



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Initiating Calm Discussions

Your motives are good. You want to bring up a topic without triggering defensiveness in your partner. You want to talk it through all the way. This isn't always easy. Over time, without the ability to bring up desires and issues that are essential to you, your relationship can get very stagnant or lonely.

After reading "Having Calm Discussions" you'll be able to bring up or initiate a tough topic and encourage your partner to talk it through with you. We'll explain three different perspectives for every discussion. We'll introduce two different roles for you and your partner to use to improve challenging discussions. We'll explain how and why your brain complicates communication when the stakes are high. And we'll present a six-step exercise that prepares you to bring up even the most sensitive topic.

But first of all, why bother?

Effective initiation is a cornerstone to keeping intimacy and vibrancy in your marriage.

No one ever tells you what an essential skill this is. Without the ability to effectively initiate conversations with your partner, you are in danger of repeating old fights.

And with it, you've got flexibility. This skill can be used spontaneously or it can be done formally: the more charged any particular topic is the more formal you will want your approach to be. On a day-to-day basis, you can spontaneously initiate saying things that you like about your partner, and assert things that you care about and that matter to you. Then, you can focus the same skills on the harder stuff when you're trying to change a pattern, so that you're not having the same old fights. That 'harder stuff' is what we'd like to help you with.

Three Possible Perspectives

In any high stress discussion, there are three possible perspectives or viewpoints. Here is an insight about each one, along with an example statement and a possible outcome:

1. Your own. (This is the easiest viewpoint to see, and the most immediate.)

Insight: When the perspective for the discussion is our own, we're likely to become the most aggressive, demanding or attacking. It's so hard to see the other person's perspective, so we get locked in and we're not able to appreciate it.

Example statement from a partner: "No one could help me because at that point I was both unwilling and unable to see my wife's perspective."

Outcome: The higher our level of stress the more likely we are to tenaciously hold on to just one pinhole perspective – our own. We only see things from our perspective and in an argument we're highly motivated to get our partner to see our perspective first and foremost.

2. Theirs. (You're able to see things from your partner's perspective.)

Insight: Here, we slow down, listen, recap and ask questions for clarity. We demonstrate an openness to better understand our partners and their perspective. Recapping and asking questions helps you see the perspective of your partner, and that's when things can start to shift because the discussion starts to feel more collaborative.

Example statement from a partner: "I heard you say that you could do this home repair project yourself. Does that mean that you don't want me to remind you about it?"

Outcome: If you can listen and ask questions without defending yourself or blaming, you're doing a really good job. You are showing evidence of being open to your partner's point of view.

3. Both. (You can actually hold onto two perspectives at once.)

Insight: This is where you're like a journalist or a detached observer. You can see the problem as if from a view of 100 feet. You can see how two people are struggling with this problem and imagine a better process for how they can talk about it.

Example statement from a partner: "You know, I can see your point. I don't like it in the moment. But I can see how you would feel that way."

Outcome: This is where really creative solutions can start to be generated. It's where you and your partner feel like you're collaborating, you're applying a whole pyramid of skills at this point, and you're really humming as a collaborative team.

Now that you understand the three different perspectives in having discussions, let's focus on how exactly you bring up a tough topic.

How to Initiate Talking About a Tough Topic

Some of us might do this impulsively. Others might circle around the topic and confuse the other person. First you can ask yourself, "What is the problem?" Then ask yourself, "How do I say the problem in as few words as possible and still make it clear?" By directly asking yourself these questions you're having to identify your own desires and express aspects about yourself that are different from those of your partner so you can better understand each other.

You have a growth opportunity each time you bring up something with your partner if you can begin to look at your discussions not only as improving things between you and your partner, but also as improving something personally for yourself. When you do this well, you'll be stronger for it.

As you might expect, there are two roles to play in a conversation between two people. If you are the 'initiating' person, then your partner is the 'responding' person. Each role has its own responsibility or challenge.

Here are the roles:

1. The Initiating Person, or Initiator

This person has a tough challenge: to bring up an area of concern without launching into a series of accusations about what their partner is doing wrong. The initiating person sets a strong foundation that invites the partner to listen. This encourages a more positive conversation than when the initiating person implies that the partner should adjust their behavior to meet their desires.

2. The Responding Person, Or Responder

This person has a tough challenge as well: to resist the urge to butt in and set their partner straight. They have to make sure not to build a case against the initiating partner, but instead to open-mindedly listen to what their partner wants to say. Emotionally that's hard to do. That's the opportunity for growth for the responding person.

Even if each person is clear about his role in a conversation, however, it doesn't mean everything will automatically go smoothly.

How Your Brain Gets In The Way

When you bring up a sensitive topic, painful discussions from the past may come up. We all have two different brains: a logical one and an emotional one. The logical one solves problems. It thinks in a very linear way. Our emotional brain, however, is more non-verbal; it reacts quickly and it processes a lot of non-verbal, less conscious material. This emotional brain has stored those miserable, unresolved conversations, and the next time one of those topics comes up, that topic can be even harder to work through.

This is why almost any topic that's charged has the potential for activating a lot of stored distressed pain and remembrances of discussions that have gone sour. Those discussions might have been with your partner, or they might even have been between you and other people.

All of that comes to the forefront when you discuss a potentially highly charged topic with your partner, and that's what makes talking about those things so difficult.

Managing the impact of your emotional brain starts with both the initiator and the responder getting clear about how they want to communicate more effectively.

As the **initiator**, your own preparation to initiate the conversation can make a significant difference in how effective it will be. You'll want to think through the following steps:

1. How do I want to be during the conversation?
2. What issue will I bring up, and how important is it?
3. What are my ineffective attitudes and thoughts that get triggered?
4. What do I then do, and why?
5. How can I apologize to my partner in order to move forward?
6. What kind of response do I want from my partner?

Each step is described in more detail in the following pages and includes exercises to better prepare yourself for your initiating role. We also let you read about an actual therapy session in which we guide the conversation in a more formal way, to ensure that each partner is understanding how they can best contribute.

Step 1: How do I want to be during the conversation?

How do you want to be as the person who brings up the problem? Calm? Open-minded? Generally people don't think about this, but it's important to think through so that you can bring up a problem in a way that reduces the defensiveness of your partner.

Let's look at a past session with Cheryl and her partner Don. We helped Cheryl to understand and use the initiating role with Don.

PP (Dr. Peter Pearson): *If it's going to be a sensitive topic, what kinds of traits or qualities would you like to demonstrate as you initiate the conversation?*

Cheryl (the initiating partner): *For me, it really helps if I can remind myself to stay compassionate.*

PP: *Both toward yourself and toward Don?*

Cheryl: *Mostly I'd put it toward Don.*

PP: *It might be interesting to think about being compassionate toward yourself as well because you're struggling with the problem. I know for me, I have to remind myself to stay calm because sometimes I can get pretty energized.*

EB (Dr. Ellyn Bader): *And wound up.*

PP: *I can get pretty energized when I talk about something. When I get too energized it is counterproductive, because then a part of my wife Ellyn reflexively starts to back away in order to take care of herself. I have to put the brakes on the level of volume and the level of energy that I bring up around a topic.*

In this session, we proceeded to challenge Cheryl to be really open about what her struggle was and to be reasonable in stating areas of concern to her partner in a way that's not attacking or blaming.

If you get clear about how you want to be, the answer to “how do I do this” will start to come naturally. What’s important is where you put your focus, not just that you’re focused.

Where am I focused?

Imagine that you’re in a car on a racetrack and you’re going 180 miles an hour, and there are cars on both sides and a car behind you. All of the sudden, your car gets a flat tire. That’s not uncommon in high-speed racing. You start to lose control and you’re spinning around at 180 miles an hour, and you see a brick wall in front of you. What do you think your eyes instinctively lock onto?

Without training, you’d likely just stare at that brick wall, brace yourself, hold onto the wheel and hope that somehow you survive this inevitable Armageddon in the car. That’s natural.

What you have to do is pull your eyes off that wall, and then focus on where you want that car to go. If you look in the direction you want that car to go, your hands will automatically start steering in that direction. You have to be really conscious of where you want to go.

It’s called focal point discipline, and it’s actually a way that Lieutenant Dave Storton of the San Jose Police Department teaches high-speed driving to cops. He says you have to look where you want the car to go, not where it’s about to crash.

That same focal point discipline applies when you’re talking about a really tough topic as the initiator. If you want to make it go better, you have to focus on how you want to be during the conversation.

Let’s walk through the first step. Write down how you aspire to be as the initiator here:

After you’ve figured out how you aspire to be, the next step is to identify one problem to discuss with your partner.

Step 2: What issue will I bring up, and how important is it?

You might even consider what this problem represents to you so that when you bring it up, you do so with a more three-dimensional understanding. Remember that you can eventually tackle a number of problems plaguing your relationship. To be effective, however, it’s best to choose just one. You might, for your first, choose a topic that has not been hashed out as much as others, while you develop your process and skills.

What is the problem that I want to bring up?

On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being really crucial, how important is this problem?

After you've answered these two questions, you can review silently so that you have the whole process of what you want to ask in front of you, either in your mind or on paper. You'll have a bird's eye view of how you'll start the conversation, so that you just don't blurt it out. You now know how you're going to be and you've thought about the problem.

Step 3: What are my ineffective thoughts and attitudes that get in the way?

In what ineffective ways are you thinking or reacting when your partner engages in or perpetuates the problem? These are really variations of either blaming your partner or feeling like a victim yourself. These could have been one or many of the following:

- I feel hurt
- I feel helpless
- I feel fearful
- I feel hopeless
- I feel anxious
- I feel disgust or pain
- I feel sad or lonely
- I feel inadequate

Try sharing these feelings with your partner. Your partner gets a peek behind the curtain if you say, "Here's what goes on in me when this problem shows up, and I may not have really expressed this very well to you. When the problem shows up, here's what I think about you. I think you're [fill in the blank in some negative way]."

When you think those negative thoughts about your partner, you can develop a core negative image or even a whole series of negative beliefs about your partner. New negative thoughts reinforce those pre-existing negative beliefs and every additional criticism makes them stronger.

In a funny kind of way, when you verbalize your own negative thoughts, they lose some of their power. You're acknowledging your own negativity and being accountable for your own ineffective thinking process. And in being accountable, you begin to have a sense that maybe that's not a complete and accurate picture of who your partner is.

As you can imagine, however, when your partner starts hearing these negative thoughts you're having, he or she might be very uncomfortable. You can counter this somewhat by divulging unflattering ways that you perceive yourself.

You're demonstrating accountability, and in relationships so often we point the finger at our partners rather than being accountable for ourselves. Just admitting something unflattering about yourself can make your partner start to feel a little relieved even before they have to say anything.

Write your ineffective thoughts and attitudes here:

Let's Check In

So, how are you doing so far? Likely you're stirring up thoughts in your head, problems that you have, and things that you'd like to change. We've been through three steps already to start to organize this information, and you've started to integrate your partner's considerations.

What if, though, when you've actually started to implement these steps, either you or your partner find yourself going off track, or getting frustrated?

You can remember, and encourage your partner, to stop and take a breath! Decide whether or not it's a good idea to continue, or to pick up the conversation at an agreeable time later on. If your partner doesn't seem to be willing to hear you yet, even in this more open and honest framework, that's ok. Be persistent. Your partner can likely already tell that there is something different about your approach this time, and may just need some time to adjust his or her mindset.

Ready to move on? Great!

Step 4: What do I then do, and why?

The ineffective thoughts and attitudes that you identified are probably influencing some type of behavioral reactions – some that you might not be proud of, or some that you'd simply like to discontinue.

In continuing to illuminate and share these behaviors, you can let your partner know that you acknowledge them, and that you're addressing them in order to do something about them. You may add more background, for example saying, "When I get triggered like this, it reminds me of earlier situations when I received enormous criticism in my family of origin. So when you do this, it triggers all those memories. I end up pouting, disengaging or walking away. I don't want anything to do with you. I just shut down. I'm not proud of that, but that's what I do."

By telling your partner that's what you do, you lower your partner's defensiveness. Your partner is less likely to marshal an attack in the back of his or her head. You have basically taken the wind from their sails by owning up to your own part before he or she can even point a finger at you and say, "Yeah but look at you. Here's what you do!"

It makes a huge difference in the responding partner when you claim – or own – whatever you do that doesn't help the situation.

Admitting your own shortcomings can be a breath of fresh air for your partner. It's not something that's widely practiced. We rarely experience it with our partners, and we certainly don't see it among leaders, celebrities or politicians.

With a lot of couples in our practice, a common response is, "I feel more in control. I feel more grownup when I tell my partner, 'this is what I do that I'm not proud of.' I just feel like I'm more in charge of myself."

Identify what it is that you do, and why?

Step 5: How can I apologize to my partner in order to move forward?

This is the ultimate owning up.

You say something along the lines of, "I apologize for pouting, for disengaging, or for cutting you off (or whatever is your most recent ineffective behavior). I understand that it just stops you from any further discussion. You can't go on because I disengage. I apologize for cutting it off and leaving you twisting in the wind with absolutely no idea when or if we'll ever resume the discussion again. I'm sorry for doing that."

Boy, does that lower the defensiveness of your partner and make it easier to listen to you! They're getting an outright apology. They may even say or think to themselves, "Yeah, next time you want to bring up a problem, feel free. I can listen to this for a long time."

What might your apology look like? You can write some thoughts here:

You're almost there after the apology. One more step to go.

Step 6: What kind of response do I need from my partner?

Here's your shining moment. You've demonstrated some empathy for your partner by apologizing, and now you can be clear about the response you would like from your partner. Very often they just don't know what would really be a bull's eye response to you in your distress whenever the situation comes up.

So you tell them. "I still hope you'll respond to me in a better way by doing_____." Or, "Here's how I hope you would respond to me in a better way:_____."

Continuing to demonstrate empathy and compassion for your partner, you could say, "It might be difficult for you to respond to me in this way, because if it was easy you would probably already be doing it. I don't think it's going to be easy for you, and here's why I think it would be hard for you to respond to me this way:_____."

Again, you're demonstrating empathy and insight. Make sure that you're not just putting out your request and waiting for the miracle. Offer what you might do in this collaboration to help them respond to you in a more effective way.

Now your partner is probably thinking, "Wow. They want me to do this, and they're even willing to help me. That makes it more collaborative." And in true compassion for yourself, you could finish by saying, "It's hard for me to respond in a better way, but I'm going to do it anyhow. Here's why I'm going to put forth the effort to help you respond to me in a better way..." and continue with the compassion.

What is the response you want from your partner in this situation going forward?

This conversation or discussion is not a process for negotiation. You're just setting up deeper understanding and deeper clarification of the stressful topic. It's one person – you, the initiator – putting it out there and saying, "Here's a three-dimensional look at this perspective that we've been stumped about and stumbling through."

If you like, you can continue reading our session with Cheryl who is in the initiating role, and Don, her husband, who is in the responding role, to see steps 2 through 6 above in action. (Remember, we're formally guiding them through this session – this is not necessarily how the average conversation would play out, but the cues can help you understand the steps they're taking.)

PP (Dr. Peter Pearson): *Is there any other way in which you'd like to be a good initiator, Cheryl?*

Cheryl (the initiating partner): *I want to look at both sides and have a whole view that this unfavorable part is only one part of Don, and it's not all of him.*

PP: *Cheryl, what you just said is really good... reminding yourself in the situation that it's only one part of Don that shows up. It's not the entirety of who he is. That really helps you create a more compassionate perspective, so good for you for expressing that.*

And, Don, how do you want to be in the responding role?

Don (the responding partner): *I want to be calm, but I also want to be very open-minded to what she has to say and listen.*

PP: *And be receptive?*

Don: *Yes.*

PP: *All right, get yourselves in the mindset of how you want to be, and then Cheryl is going to start off and state the problem.*

Cheryl: *Here's the problem, honey. For a while you've been very stressed about work and very preoccupied and very unhappy. I feel like it's taken a lot of your energy and I don't feel like I'm getting enough attention from you. That's the problem.*

On a scale of 1-10 it's probably about an eight, because it represents to me that I'm not able to have my desire for feeling special in this relationship met.

PP: *OK, Don, can you respond to Cheryl by recapping what she said?*

Don: *You're recognizing that work has been very stressful for me lately, and that a lot of the time I'm not giving you the attention that you would seek in this relationship. On a scale of 1-10, it's about an eight in importance, and you're feeling like you're not getting your needs met at this time.*

PP: *Don, if you would do one more thing – it could be really helpful for you to say to Cheryl, "It makes sense that you would experience this because_____."*

Don: *It makes sense that you would experience this because of the work situation and the way I've been moping around the house.*

EB (Dr. Elyn Bader): *Because you recognize that you've been moping around?*

Don: *Yes.*

PP: *In a sense, not only are you recapping, which you did really nicely, but also you're beginning to validate her reality, which adds another layer of openness and empathy to the whole situation.*

Did you feel anything when Don told you that it makes sense that you would feel this way?

Cheryl: *It was so wonderful to hear. I was feeling a little uptight bringing this up, and I could feel my whole body was a little bit tense. I was trying to think, and I was having a hard time thinking clearly. Then when he said that, it was like everything opened up.*

PP: *The next step for you, Cheryl, is to say, “When this pattern shows up, my ineffective thoughts or attitudes are_____.”*

Cheryl: *My ineffective attitudes and thoughts are that I develop this kind of negative core image of you as somebody who cannot provide me with what I need emotionally, and so I just start running with that. I just say, ‘I can’t get it, it’s not here, forget it, why bother,’ and it kind of gets a little bit blown out of proportion, and global.*

Don: *So the way you see it is that ineffective thoughts come across when this is happening. When this pattern is going on, you get the sense that I can’t provide for the needs that you really want met, or the emotional support.*

PP: *Cheryl, what’s your emotional reaction when you have this attitude?*

Cheryl: *I think I feel sort of defeated, and I get mad and sort of shut down. I feel unimportant. I know that’s not a feeling; it’s more of a thought.*

EB: *When you’re thinking that, what are you feeling?*

Cheryl: *I think it’s a little bit of despair.*

EB: *It sounds like some kind of deflated feeling.*

PP: *Then you can say to Don, “Here’s what gets triggered in me. Here are the earlier experiences that get triggered in me when I think and feel this way,” and then Don can recap what you say.*

Cheryl: *I feel sort of deflated, defeated, and in despair. It really reminds me of when I was growing up and I didn’t feel like my parents had the time or the energy to devote to me, to be interested in me, to be excited about me and what I was doing, and I kind of always felt like I didn’t matter.*

PP: *Can you recap that, Don?*

Don: *When this pattern is coming up, Cheryl starts shutting down and she feels inadequate. I guess a feeling of despair and unimportance were the words that came up. I see that you recognize that it’s from when you were growing up with your parents. That’s the same kind of feeling that you got from your parents who didn’t have the time for you.*

PP: *That’s what gets stored in the emotional brain. How do you like the way Don’s responding to you so far, Cheryl?*

Cheryl: *Pretty good. I know that he’s getting a little distracted because his phone is ringing, but I really appreciate that he took the time to be here during his workday. I know both things are going on.*

PP: *So you have an extra measure of appreciation of Don’s willingness to show up and participate in this?*

Cheryl: *Yes, exactly.*

PP: *The problem even shows up as you're talking about it.*

Cheryl: *Yes.*

PP: *This is pretty good. What do you do that you're not proud of when you feel this way, Cheryl?*

Cheryl: *Don, I think sometimes I get critical of you and I start lecturing, or I start trying to give you ideas on what you can do to get out of the way you're feeling. There's that going on, and then the other thing is that I kind of withdraw, and I go off and try to get my needs met on my own.*

PP: *Don, recap that, and then I'm going to ask Cheryl to apologize for that.*

Don: *First off, I recognize that. I see that pattern, and it's good that I see it. I know you're not proud of getting critical. You recognize that, but you also start withdrawing.*

PP: *Is there a part of you that appreciates Cheryl for being able to describe this and own up to it?*

Don: *Absolutely. Especially trying to draw it out is very difficult at times when we're in that situation. Right now it's a calm situation where we're discussing it, and I can recognize it also. Because I can recognize it, I see that she recognizes it, and then we can come to a better understanding of what's actually happening.*

PP: *You could just summarize by saying, "I really appreciate your owning and recognizing what you're doing."*

Don: *I do appreciate that.*

PP: *Then Cheryl, if you'll apologize to Don and say, "I do this and I'm sorry."*

Cheryl: *I do apologize for being critical and for not speaking up and being more clear, but rather just sort of withdrawing.*

PP: *Exactly. Cheryl, even though you treat Don badly, you still hope that he will respond to you in a better way by doing what?*

Cheryl: *I would hope that you would respond to me in a better way by leaving work at work, and when we're home being more present with me.*

PP: *Say more about what that means. Saying, "to be home and be more present," is pretty general.*

Cheryl: *You could suggest things that we could do together. You could remember significant dates, and make a suggestion that we go do something or just spend time talking, being present, having fun and playing together.*

PP: *And, the initiation of those things means a lot to you because?*

Cheryl: *What it would communicate to me, if you suggested those things, is that you were thinking about me and about us, and I'd feel important to you.*

PP: *Don, can you recap what you're hearing?*

Don: *That's a lot.*

PP: *Yes, it's a lot and we can tweak it as you recap what you remember.*

Don: *I think you [Cheryl] would like me to respond in a better way, leaving work at work and being more present with the time that we do have together, and spending more time talking and having fun. Suggesting activities for us is a big thing I can do for you... to make you feel important, for you to understand that you do mean a lot to me and to feel that. I think that is a big thing for me to get a handle on.*

PP: *If it were simple, you'd already be doing this, Don. Cheryl, now you say, "Here's why it might be hard for you to remember..."*

Cheryl: *I know it's difficult for you to respond to me that way because you get really caught up in the emotion of what's going on at work, and it's hard for you to put it aside and just leave it.*

PP: *Is there anything else that you would want to add to that, Don, why it might be difficult for you to respond in the way Cheryl hopes and would prefer you to react?*

Don: *Yes, it is difficult because I am on call quite often.*

Cheryl: *No, you're not.*

Don: *I am.*

Cheryl: *Once a month. Sorry, we're breaking protocol here.*

EB: *Apparently he feels on call more than that.*

PP: *Do you know why it might be difficult for you, Don?*

Don: *I've actually been taking steps toward making a difference, leaving my cell phone, shutting it off and being present. For all intents and purposes I thought I was making progress in this area.*

PP: *However, you're saying there's a strong pattern in a part of your brain that gets preoccupied with work, and it's hard to turn that off.*

Don: *Yes.*

PP: *Cheryl, here's what you can do. Instead of just making the request from Don, you could say, "Here's how I might help you respond to me in a more proactive way..."*

Cheryl: *I might help you to respond in a more proactive way by requesting it and asking you if you could do something like that every once in a while.*

PP: *Let me give you a tip that might work for you. It's a way for Ellyn to remind me of things so that I don't feel controlled, or feel that I'm just resentfully complying. I'll just use the example of taking out the garbage. It is my job.*

Ellyn would look at it and say, "When are you going to take out the garbage?" Or she would put it in the middle of the kitchen floor – hint, hint – because it was kind of hard to walk around it and ignore it. But I could.

When Ellyn started to say to me, "I really appreciate it, Pete, when you take the garbage out on time," I'd remember it was time to take the garbage out. By saying, "I really appreciate it when _____," it was a way of reminding me without being parental.

You could say the equivalent of that to Don. You could say, "Don, I really like it when you take the initiative in suggesting things that we do." That's it, and then let his imagination take over. How does that sound?

Cheryl: *That sounds great. Don, I really appreciate it when you suggest fun things that we can do.*

PP: *If she said that, Don, how would that sound to you?*

Don: *It would sound pretty good. I did invite her to a baseball game today.*

EB: *I have one other suggestion, Cheryl. It seems you definitely want to look and see through Don's perspective, and you're not running away from acknowledging the negative thoughts in your head.*

It seems that when you get into that deflated place, you have the same problem that Don has. At that point, you don't want to initiate a conversation. You don't want to tell him you're sinking. Can you suggest that he suggest some excitement, or even ask him, "Can you do what I can't do right now, because it's really hard for me to get out of this place?"

Cheryl: *For sure.*

EB: *Don, I'm wondering if she said to you, "Don, right now I'm having that same problem you're having and neither of us is wanting to initiate a discussion right now," would that be a good cue for you, or would you not be able to know what she was talking about?*

Don: *No, I think I would know what she's talking about. I think it would be a good cue to get us out of the pattern, just to break that initial pattern we fall into.*

EB: *So, Cheryl, you would be able to recognize and verbalize in that moment that you have the same issue he does?*

Cheryl: *Does it just come with awareness? I think that when I'm in that place, I develop this pseudo-self that's really quite detached from those feelings, if you know what I mean. I'm not really aware that I'm feeling despair or deflated consciously all the time. I more go into just taking care of myself.*

PP: *You just disengage?*

Cheryl: *Yes.*

EB: *But some part of you knows that you're missing something with him.*

Cheryl: *Yes, definitely.*

EB: *The part that knows you're missing something with him doesn't take a risk.*

PP: *Or, doesn't want to take a risk.*

EB: *Or, hasn't taken a risk yet.*

PP: *It takes energy to do that, too, because you have to stop that kind of downward spiral of disengagement. It takes energy and awareness to stop that spiral. Here's where we come to the last question, Cheryl.*

Would you be willing to make this effort to speak up and say something to Don? Even before things get bad and maybe when things are going reasonably well, you could say, "Don, I really appreciate it when you take the initiative," so you don't have to wait until things are terrible. It's a way of just expressing an appreciation and a reminder to Don before things get bad.

And, if so, why you would be willing to make this effort? Can you let us know the benefits to you and/or to Don and/or to your relationship? Why would you be willing to make this effort to help Don be more responsive to you?

Cheryl: *I think I would do it because I really truly want to feel fulfilled in this relationship. I want to learn those skills for knowing how to create that in my life, and I know that I have a part to play in that.*

PP: *Don, can you just recap what Cheryl said about being willing to do this?*

Don: *Because Cheryl wants to feel fulfilled in the relationship, she's more than willing to suggest these things to break these patterns that we fall into. And to help me. And I thank her for that.*

PP: *Absolutely. Cheryl, when you feel more fulfilled, how do you treat Don more effectively? How do you treat him better?*

Cheryl: *I don't have to hold onto this negative core belief that he can't give me something that I want or desire in the relationship, and I can really spend more time engaging with the positive parts of him.*

PP: *Absolutely. Then there are a lot of benefits to that. At that point, you have the potential to begin bringing out the best in each other.*

Cheryl: *That's exciting.*

PP: *Yes, it is.*

EB: Yes, it is.

PP: Cheryl, would you express any appreciations you have now toward Don for listening, responding, recapping to you, and, in fact, not responding to his telephone?

Cheryl: I want to thank you for listening and allowing me to share this with you because it really has been weighing on me, and it feels really good to be able to say it. It feels good that you could hear it, and just stay with me to be here and be willing. I really appreciate that.

Don: Thank you.

PP: Don, do you have appreciations that you can express to Cheryl for her willingness to talk about this topic in such a three-dimensional, and even apologetic, way?

Don: I'd like to thank you because, for me, it just feels like this relationship is important and that you trust me enough to bring these issues up in a safe manner. Also that you can actually voice all of that so that we can continue to grow in this. Thank you.

Cheryl: You're welcome.

Wrapping Up

Connection successful! And understandings are now shared. In the session described above, we got to see how Cheryl and Don worked through their inability to discuss a tougher topic, and watched them take a step back to really figure out why each of them felt like they did in the situations that naturally occurred.

In most situations, the responder, or the partner not initiating a discussion, is likely not as prepared or coached as Don was. You as the initiator, however, are now able to go much further with your partner just by educating yourself on these steps. It's not easy, but it's certainly worth your effort in the end.

Please look for our follow up eBook, "Responding in Calm Discussions," if you or your partner would like to learn more.

Hats off to you for reading this material, and for really thinking about the possibilities in your own relationship.

We're here on the journey with you.

Pete and Ellyn

For more ways to help your relationship, [click here](http://www.couplesinstitute.com) to visit our site.