

"Beyond 'I Messages:' Safe and Sane Couples Communication"

August 15, 2006 Teleseminar

with Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson

Zoe: Hello, everyone. Welcome to this evening's teleseminar, "Beyond 'I Messages,' Safe and Sane Couples' Communication," led by Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson.

I'm Zoe Laidlaw and I work with Pete and Ellyn. I know many of you are familiar with their work but I do want to take a minute to introduce them for the new people who are with us tonight.

For more than twenty years, Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson have been helping couples resolve issues and create strong, loving relationships. They are the founders and directors of The Couples Institute, which offers workshops, therapy and teleseminars like this one tonight to support the growth of relationships.

Pete and Ellyn have been featured on over 50 radio and television programs including the Today Show and CBS Early Morning News.

One of the hallmarks of their work is the practical nature of their exercises. They provide immediate relief and long term growth at the same time. Tonight's material is no exception. So let's get started.

I'm going to mute everyone, then Pete and Ellyn will speak until it's time for them to call from participants. At that point, I will un-mute everybody.

You may remember that when you signed up for this teleseminar, we offered a free transcript. It will be available about 2 to 3 weeks after this evening. It takes a while to get the recording and get it transcribed and put together.

When it becomes available, we will email all of you and let you know the link where you can download it.

Peter: So you don't have to take notes. We're going to cover a lot of material too fast for you to take really good notes. You'll be able to go back and get the structure of how to have this kind of dialogue along with the instructions to make it easier.

Ellyn: Pete and I will be doing some teaching about the principles involved in "Beyond I Messages." Then, Pete will do an interview with Rachel and Michael demonstrating the principles. After they're finished, I will talk about some of the highlights of that. Then at the end, we will open it up for questions from those of you who are listening.

There are three primary points that we hope to communicate tonight.

The first is how to effectively initiate emotionally charged discussions. Every couple is going to have, at times, emotionally charged discussions. It's inevitable. You can't avoid it when you're in a close, loving relationship with somebody and you have so many interdependencies.

We want you to come away with some ideas about how to get those conversations started in a productive way that goes beyond what is the traditional "I message."

We are also going to be talking about the importance of changing patterns and why it is so important to change the typical pattern couples use.

Last, we will be looking at how you take your whole brain into account in managing your emotional reactivity with each other.

Peter:

The primary goal for tonight is to teach and demonstrate a different kind of dialogue. That is how to break those patterns of ineffective communication. Breaking the pattern is important to know instead of looking at how to solve the problem.

So what we are going to do is set the foundation for better solutions.

What I notice so often in my office is that couples want to get pretty rapid relief from a problem. So they want to go immediately to describing the problem, describing the stress and then, trying to set up a solution.

Too often, it doesn't work if the problem is very complex. The problem is that there is kind of an instinct for humans to take the same problem solving patterns about where they are going to eat, what movie to see or where to go on vacation and apply that to much more complex and emotionally embedded problems. It really doesn't work.

When couples come in, the number one problem is, "We need to improve our communication."

Generally, there's some kind of abstraction when I ask couples what that means. They say something like, "Well, we need to focus on being more understanding or being understood. If we understand what's going on, that would be better communication." So the focus is on content.

Often, when couples come in, it's more traditional to say, "Here is what you say. Listen to your partner and then, take turns." That is the easiest to teach. But that approach leaves out one whole region of the brain. It leaves out the brain that's emotional. It is technically called, "The Limbic System."

When we leave out your emotional brain and just focus on content and structure for how to talk about problems, we all, including Ellyn and me, hit the wall. There is something about getting into an argument where one part of us says, "Boy, is this stupid. It's going nowhere."

She's getting defensive. I'm getting defensive. Yet it's like you're falling out of a tree. You can't seem to stop yourself. You just keep going even though you know it's just getting worse. And the longer you talk, the worse it gets.

You have to include the emotional brain, because that's what's the running the show, to really start talking about problems.

If you don't include the emotional brain as part of the solution, you might as well be trying to make rapid progress in a rowboat and only using one oar. The emotional brain actually evolves sooner. It's been around a lot longer evolutionary-wise than our pre-frontal cortex, the thinking brain.

The emotional brain really is designed to be in tuned with danger. It seeks safety, either emotional or physical. It seeks security. It wants to be safe. That is the primary function of the emotional brain. So here's how it applies to communication.

When we have had intensely bad experiences in our lives, which seem to be more than we can manage or bear, that is a kind of trauma. That trauma gets stored in the emotional brain. It gets recorded, stored and then, as we go through life, anything that looks similar to what is stored in that emotional brain will activate the emotional brain to point it on alert.

At that point, if the emotional brain is highly activated, all we want to do is to get away from that threat. That primary instinct is so powerful that words and logic just can't override it very often.

Sometimes, that emotional brain, that system, gets stuck in an "on" position and is always scanning for threats that remind it of bad experiences.

Now, through brain scans etcetera, we know that a logical brain cannot override the emotional brain. It cannot really regulate the emotional brain just using logic and reason. That is why often when we try to apply logic to a highly volatile subject, it doesn't work. Because under stress, the emotional brain takes priority.

Here's a quick parallel. When you drink too much alcohol, the booze will temporarily disable one part of your brain called the cerebellum, which is responsible for keeping your balance. That is why a cop will use the field sobriety test. When they think people have drunk too much, they ask them to simply walk heel to toe.

If you've had too much to drink, you can't do it because that part of your brain has been disabled.

Well, under high threat, your emotional brain disables your thinking brain, the part of your brain that has socially appropriate responses,

"This is what I should do." You can't remember all the structure you've had about how to communicate effectively because that part of your brain has just been disabled by the emotional brain. That is why if we just teach people the structure of how to talk to each other it is often not sufficient.

When we are under threat, there are three major things. When we feel threatened by our partners emotionally or physically, we want to fight back and generally, that means we criticize, we yell, we get sarcastic.

What that emotional brain is trying to do from an instinctive position is to subdue the threat so that we can feel relief. That's why we yell. It's an attempt to feel relief, to get re-centered, to get re-grounded. But it's horrible for the person on the receiving end of it. So, trying to dominate the threat is major way to respond.

The second major way is to escape from it. We simply call that withdrawing. We shut down and get away from the person who seems like too big of a threat. We can't dominate it so we just withdraw, shut down and close out that person. It's an attempt to protect ourselves and get a semblance of safety.

The third major way that we try to get safe from a threat is by going into some kind of resentful compliance or some kind of surrender. That is designed to replace a threat. It's a self-protection to get relief.

Now, when you think about it, all three mechanisms, (1) attacking, criticizing, blaming, (2) sarcasm or withdrawing, cold shoulder, shut down or (3) resentful compliance activate in our partner their protective mechanisms. So now, you have two people who are limbically functioning.

Their emotional brains have just taken over and there is no communication that is productive except reducing the stress. You've got two people now under stress trying to reduce it. Let the games begin.

To have a much more effective communication about topics that are sensitive, which means each person probably has some kind of history around that topic that makes it sensitive, we have to use the thinking brain and integrate it with the emotional brain so that the emotional brain doesn't take over.

What we are going to do now is give a demonstration of how we integrate the two brains when we start talking about a difficult topic. Here we have, with my gratitude and appreciation, a volunteer couple.

I thought it would be easier to do a demonstration so you could actually see it take place and see how it unfolds rather than just giving you the steps. Then you think, "Wow, what does that really look like under pressure? What does that really look like when people apply these steps and what kind of outcome can we expect?"

So I thought having a live demonstration would be more effective than just describing it.

We have our courageous, serious, valiant couple. Rachel and Michael, welcome.

Michael: Thank you.

Peter: As we get started, we are going to teach you, first of all, how to integrate the brain and then in a few minutes, we'll talk about the structure itself.

How are you feeling now being here?

Michael: Well, it was a pretty big lead in but I'm excited and nervous at the same time.

Peter: Rachel?

Rachel: About the same, excited and a little nervous.

Peter: What I want to do is walk you through some steps so that when you actually talk about the topic itself, you can do it in a much calmer, centered way so it doesn't trigger those historic reactions that can lead to a bad discussion.

Who is going to bring up the problem tonight?

Rachel: I am.

Peter: So Rachel, you have a topic you want to discuss. What is the topic?

Rachel: Following through on threats when we are disciplining our kids.

Peter: You create a consequence and try to figure out how you are going to follow through with it?

Rachel: Yes, how we do it differently.

Peter: Typically, when you have these discussions, where do they head? What happens?

Rachel: They head into who's right or a power struggle. Instead of having solidarity between us, I think the kids see, "Oh, I have an in," or "Way to go" instead of it being an agreement.

Peter: It sounds like an unpleasant discussion. Is that from your perspective too, Michael, that it turns into an unpleasant discussion?

Michael: This is really the first time I'm really thinking it through so it doesn't seem

to be as unpleasant to me apparently, as it would be to Rachel.

Peter: But you would not call it a pleasant discussion, would you?

Michael: Yes, I would agree with that.

Peter: It doesn't sound it. If one person is really stressed in the discussion, it's pretty hard for the other person to be relaxed about it.

Rachel, when you think about having this discussion with Michael, do you feel some tension in your body?

Rachel: Yes.

Peter: Where do you feel the tension in your body?

Rachel: I feel tension and anxiety in my stomach, my chest. It's like I'm taking shorter breaths and I have to struggle to take a deep breath. My stomach is in knots. There's just general tightness and I can feel my heart pounding.

Peter: You can feel some of it right now just thinking about those dialogues with Michael?

Rachel: Right.

Peter: On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being high duress, high stress, what it is generally when you approach these discussions with Michael?

Rachel: It's probably an 8 or 9.

Peter: It's right up there. Michael, when you think about having these discussions, when Rachel is so distressed, do you feel any tension in your body?

Michael: I feel the resonance stress from Rachel. If I see her stressed, I start to feel it.

Peter: In a sense, it becomes kind of contagious and then, you pick up on it. Where do you feel the stress in your body when she starts getting anxious?

Michael: In my chest and I get an anxious feeling.

Peter: You feel it in your chest and your breathing starts to pick up a little bit.

Michael: Yes.

Peter: Generally, when Rachel is really anxious, on a scale of 1 to 10, how strong would your anxiety symptoms be?

Michael: If she's really anxious, it would get me going if it happened for a duration. If it's an 8 or 9, it would probably start at a 6 or 7 and then gradually increase if it continues on for any length of time.

Peter: We are now going to start integrating the brain so that when you talk about it, you're going to be more centered, more calm and more relaxed.

First of all, what I want you to do is just go back and feel the tension in your body. When you think about having that discussion, where you feel that tension in your chest, that knot in your stomach? As you feel that, take your left hand and just rub it slowly on your left knee.

As you think about that tension and all those associated distressing conversations you've had—those power struggles, no resolution, not creating a very united front for your kids and not modeling the kind of parents that you want, you wanted to be together but couldn't—just rub your left knee and think about the tension you experienced from those discussions.

What we're doing right now is making a conditional response with your emotional brain. As you rub that left knee, you're just associating that left knee with a shortcut to where the emotional brain is.

Now, take two relaxing breaths. Take your left hand off your left knee. Take two relaxing breaths. That basically means exhaling completely. When you exhale completely, you automatically inhale more deeply.

You take two relaxing breaths because I just asked you to activate that emotional brain. And now, we need to calm that brain so it's not going to be activated from the discussion. I asked you to go into that emotional brain. You can feel the tension. Now, we need to calm it.

Take another relaxing breath and then, stretch your arms out to the sides and move them in circles, kind of like you were airplane wings moving in a circle. Stretch your legs and move your feet in a circle too if you're sitting down. This is for the purpose of releasing the tension in your body that starts to accumulate when we think about troubled memories.

You've gone into the place where it's difficult. You're trying to calm the emotional brain.

When you are in those discussions, Rachel, if you were coming from your higher self, if you were coming from your more evolved self in a perfect, interior world, how would you like to be when you're having this discussion with Michael? This is not how you want him to be but how you would like to be.

Michael will be thinking about how he wants to be as a good responder, as a good listener when you talk about this.

So from your higher self, Rachel, how would you like to be when you talk about this?

Rachel: Relaxed, feeling physically relaxed.

Peter: As you talk about how you would like to be, Rachel, just rub your right knee with your right hand.

You want to be physically relaxed. That starts with the body and that's where the emotional brain starts to activate right away. How else would you like to be?

Rachel: I'd like that combined with being able to hear clearly what Michael is saying. Then I won't jump anywhere.

Peter: How would you like to be as you describe the problem? What would be some good qualities or characteristics in terms of describing the problem to him?

Rachel: I'd like to be clear.

Peter: That clarity helps when the emotional brain is calm.

Rachel: Straightforward, fair.

Peter: I know what that means to me. What does fair mean to you?

Rachel: It means being able to appreciate what he's thinking or feeling and how that plays into what's going on.

Peter: That's really great. You would like to appreciate what he's thinking, what he's feeling. Could that include then the appreciation of the impact of what you're having on him, either positive or negative?

Rachel: Yes.

Peter: You can have this kind of alchemy and see what you're doing, how he's responding and make appropriate adjustments.

Rachel: And I'd like to face whatever it is head on instead of using my energy to state it in a safer way or using it to understand if Michael is trying to state in a safer way.

Peter: Sometimes, in people's quest to be safe, they get vague and unsure.

Rachel: They use sugar coating.

Peter: We all know that telepathy is an unreliable form of communication so it would really be great to be clear.

Michael, how would you like to be as a good listener to Rachel in this process tonight?

Michael: Certainly, I'd like to be relaxed. I would like to offer a sense of safety.

Peter: Keep rubbing your right knee, Michael, as you talk about this.

Michael: I would like to be able to present myself in a manner that Rachel feels understood.

Peter: So as the listener, you really want to communicate somehow that you understand what she is saying.

Michael: Exactly.

Peter: Terrific. Is there anything else?

Michael: I guess I would like to make sure that I'm being empathetic.

Peter: Dynamite. Now, here's what I want each of you to do. If you're able to, put both hands on your knees and move your hands up and down slowly. Think about the benefits if you each come from your higher self in this historically difficult dialogue topic.

Think about the benefits if you individually come from your higher selves and are able to help your partner also. If you come from your higher self, it encourages your partner to come from their higher self as well.

But we start with improving our response first rather than what is more typical, trying to get our partner to change and then, following along.

So as you think about responding from your higher self, could you each say what a couple of the benefits are?

Michael: Clearly, communication would go a lot quicker and smoother.

Peter: And the benefit of that, Michael, would be what?

Michael: We'd feel more connected, more appreciated.

Peter: And the benefits of that would be what, Michael?

Michael: A more intimate relationship.

Peter: Emotionally, perhaps physically. But you'd have a better sense of being a team in multiple ways.

As you rub both your knees, can you get a picture of yourself being that way, Michael, the way you described?

Michael: I definitely can.

Peter: Terrific. And the more details you have about that picture, the better, because you're going to be using more regions of the brain.

Rachel, the benefits for you would be what?

Rachel: It would be a stronger outlay of energy now but the best benefit I can think of is that, in the end, it will be much better for us. It will save us a lot of wasted energy after this beginning portion because our kids will understand what happens and what the consequences are regardless of who they're talking to.

It will be very straightforward for them and for us, it will be more straightforward. They won't play one against the other, go ask one and then, go ask the other. There's no point to doing that.

Peter: What good modeling that sets for the kids. It's great modeling for how to talk about tough topics.

Rachel: It will feel better, I would think, for both of us in front of them because it will be safer, stronger.

Peter: It will start to model what it's like to have different opinions and still talk it through. That's terrific.

When you think about discussing the topic now, what does each of you feel? Before it was an experience of tension and tightness. How stressed do you feel now on a scale of 1 to 10 when you think about having the discussion?

Rachel: I feel better. Probably, I would rate it more like a 5 now. It's more tangible to me, so I can more quickly dial into reducing the strain and the stress instead of it overrunning me.

Peter: Great. Can you give the picture of your success a name? When you picture yourself being really successful, can you give that picture a name so that will help us dial in even faster when we go through the dialogue?

Rachel: Success.

Peter: So success would be, for you, that picture of coming from your higher self. When we go through the steps, you can either rub your knees or repeat the word "success" so you can stay calm and in tune with your higher self. "Success" will be your power word.

Michael, do you have a name for your success picture?

Michael: Mine would be integrity.

Peter: So your higher self would be coming from integrity. When we do this, when you start feeling anxious or nervous, if you could just rub your knees and silently repeat to yourself, "integrity," it will put you much more rapidly in touch with that higher self as you listen to Rachel. Does that make sense?

Michael: Yes.

Peter: It's a really rapid way of getting there. And Rachel, if you start feeling nervous, you can just repeat silently to yourself, "success," and/or rub your knees, and that will put you much more rapidly in touch with your higher self. Does that make sense?

Rachel: Yes.

Ellyn: As both of you are being here now with that power word and rubbing your knees, I'm going to talk a minute about some of the thinking behind what Pete's going to be asking Michael and Rachel to do.

A long time ago, the concept of "I messages" was developed to help partners talk more productively. In fact, the traditional "I messages" went something like this: "When you do X, when you don't discipline the children the same way I do, then I feel Y." It could be "I feel angry," "I feel scared" or "I feel lonely."

Then the effect it has would be described with the hopes that the partner would do Z instead of X in the first place.

So embedded in the traditional "I message" way of talking about a problem is almost an inevitable backfiring because there's almost an implied assumption that if I tell you what you do and what I feel about it, then you will change.

When a partner doesn't quickly hop to it and change, then often, "I messages" get turned into being even more guilt-provoking or more blaming, with a heavy emphasis on making the partner responsible for what you feel.

So as Pete moves into this, he's going to do it in a different way with Rachel. He's going to have her be the initiator of the discussion and give her a way to start a good discussion, not a bad discussion. Because for all of us, when we're talking to our partners, we don't want to be digging ourselves out of a hole that we didn't even mean to create.

A lot of times, this traditional "I message" can dig us into a hole we didn't even mean to create when we started.

One of the ways to make this go better and to reduce the defensiveness

in Michael or to reduce the cross-complaining that a partner would typically do is for the initiator of the discussion to take a lot of accountability, to take a lot of responsibility for their own piece in what they want.

For example, Pete already asked them to define the way that they would like to be if they're successful: to be calmer, to be centered. That already creates a strong beginning. It's taking accountability for wanting to be more of a grownup in the discussion, for wanting to manage their own limbic brain as much as possible.

But then, as they get started, Pete will be asking Rachel to describe some of her ineffective thoughts and attitudes. As she does that, the purpose of that is really to avoid an emotional data dump.

If Michael was to hear just an emotional data dump, it would be very stressful. But hearing her describe and recognize some of the things that she does that are ineffective, that leads to not just dumping but actually, again, that kind of adult accountability.

And showing that you recognize how you are when you're ineffectual shows to your partner that you have some prefrontal cortex thinking or that you have adult thinking and accountability that you're applying to the situation.

Also, when he goes through this some more, he will be asking her some other questions, which make it clear that there's not an automatic assumption that Michael should change core personality traits.

That's essential because so often when our partners come at us with something loaded emotionally, we thinking, "Gosh, we're supposed to change something that is a challenge to our integrity," as Michael said so eloquently. Integrity is important to him.

Then also, there will be a series of questions that he will ask her to respond to that goes something like this: "Even though my responses are ineffective, I still hope you will respond to me in a better way by..." Or "Sometimes, I want you to respond to me in a more effective way because..."

He will ask a series of questions that actually get at the magical thinking that some of us have when we're emotionally stressed. When we're in that emotional stress, we get into a kind of a child level fantasy thinking that our partner will just comply and give us exactly what we want so we can have that wishful little kid dream.

He'll be helping her present it in a way that lets Michael know he doesn't have to comply in those ways.

Peter:

All the people on the call will be getting all the questions that Rachel and Michael are going to go through. The key is when you go over the questions and think about the answers, then it makes it easier to follow

the structure, and it makes it easier for your partner to respond to you. It's a structured way to get at breaking the pattern for how to talk about things versus solving it.

So here are the questions. A person says to their partner, in this case Rachel would say to Michael, "Here's the problem, which is..."

Rachel: Disciplining our children and our follow through doesn't match.

Peter: That's the problem. Then you would say why this is important to you. You've already alluded to that earlier but why is this important to you and what does it symbolize to you?

Rachel: It symbolizes a lack of solidarity between us and a place where we can work to be more of a team.

Peter: Then, on a scale of 1 to 10, how big of a problem is this for you?

Rachel: It's a 10 in importance because it states for our children what we expect and how to be successful.

Peter: When a person brings up a problem, initiates it, if they say to their partner, "Here's the problem. Here's how big it is for me. Here's how important it is to me. Here's why it's important," you give your partner some context of the problem instead of just launching into what our emotional brain wants to launch into. That's the context.

Now, here's where I'm going to ask Rachel to talk to Michael. This time, Rachel is going to be bringing up stuff, describing something that is not typical for couples to do when they talk about a problem.

The next question for you, Rachel, is when this problem of disciplining and being out of sync happens, what are your ineffective attitudes or thoughts? That basically means what are the different ways that you would either blame or feel like victim when this problem comes up?

Rachel: I feel like I have to be the bad guy or the disciplinarian and I feel alone. I feel like I'm not being effective.

Peter: So you feel like the bad guy, you're not effective. You feel alone. You're talking now about your negative thoughts and your negative emotions you have that are pretty ineffective. Are there any other negative thoughts or emotions you have?

Rachel: The emotions are different. Those are the thoughts. My emotions are fear, helplessness, anxiety, pain and along with the anxiety comes stress. Then I feel sadness.

Peter: Okay, so now we know why this feels like a 9 or a 10 to you, because of the intensity of all those experiences and emotions.

So as you talk about that right now, Rachel, just take a relaxing breath. Repeat your power word, "success." If it helps, rub your right knee with your right hand as a way of getting you re-centered again, better in touch with your higher self as we talk about this. That's will calm the emotional brain so it's not being activated just by thinking about what you think and feel.

When you think and feel those thoughts and emotions, what do you do that tends to be ineffective?

Rachel: I get upset and give up.

Peter: And when you're upset, what do you do?

Rachel: I take a big sigh and shut down, withdraw.

Peter: You withdraw and don't talk too much.

Rachel: It's not complete withdrawal but on that topic, I'll just say, "Forget it. I'm not getting anywhere. This isn't working."

Peter: Michael, could you just take a relaxing breath and recap the facts and feelings of what Rachel is saying to you? Your role is to either ask questions for clarity or recap what you're hearing or understanding. And not try to explain or justify yourself right now.

Michael: I hear the problem to be when we're out of sync in how we discipline our children, specifically when our follow through doesn't match. It's important to Rachel because this sounds like a rock of solidarity between us. We become ineffective as a team and we can't teach our children, which is obviously important.

And then, when this happens, I hear her thoughts to be very negative in the sense of the bad guy discipline and she feels alone, meaning that there's hopelessness. That's not the word she used but I feel a sense of hopelessness in those thoughts.

Peter: Is that fairly accurate, Rachel?

Rachel: No, I don't feel hopelessness. I feel overwhelmed.

Peter: It's an overwhelmed and helpless feeling.

Rachel: Right. It's not hopelessness.

Peter: That's a good distinction. So does it seem like Michael is capturing what you're saying to him?

Rachel: Yes.

Peter: Great. Keep repeating your power word, "success," rub your knee, take a relaxing breath. A part of you knows that when you withdraw or say things that aren't very nice, that doesn't work. It's not very effective but you do them anyway why?

Rachel: I don't know what else to do. I don't feel safe explaining the issues to Michael. I feel like blame is thrown at me so that takes the safety away.

Peter: Then you do what our emotional brain is designed to do, which is to seek safety. Ultimately, that means to withdraw because you don't feel safe in continuing to engage. It feels too painful, too emotionally risky, unsafe. That's a human, natural, normal instinct.

But even though you respond this way to Michael that are these are not effective ways, you hope that Michael will respond to you in a better way by doing what?

Rachel: Showing our children we stand together, being able to calmly respond to me or hear me without reacting. We will do the typical reaction. If I say something and he reacts, then I react and he reacts.

So if we could stop that at the beginning, that would go easier. That would help both of us to be able to predict the consequences of what happens to each of us from what we're doing and our children.

Peter: By talking about it in a more calm way.

Rachel: Yes and by sharing what we expect or where we're going.

Peter: It's sharing what you expect and sharing why it might be difficult for each of you to do, in the moment, what the other person wants. You can talk about it more calmly.

Michael, can you do another recap again?

Michael: I'm probably not as effective. I may be mixing it up a little bit. I heard you ask Rachel about what she wants to hear from me when these ineffective behaviors occur.

These ineffective behaviors include withdrawal because she's not sure what else to do that's safe.

What I heard though is I should try to not react, which makes sense.

Peter: Yes, stay centered.

Michael: But I'm not sure other than that what else to do at that point.

Peter: In the interest of time, let me suggest something and if it works for Rachel, she could agree.

I think Rachel is saying, "Look, I get so anxious. I get so scared. I don't want else to do. I feel helpless. But if you, Michael, could stay centered when you start to see me get activated and anxious and say, 'Wait a minute, Rachel, I want to work on this together with you. I want to hear clearly what your struggle is so I'm not going to defend or justify myself right now. What I want to do is hear more clearly what's important to you.'"

If you could do that in a calmer way, I think Rachel would not ratchet up to that number 10. Does that make sense, Rachel?

Rachel: Absolutely. That's perfect.

Peter: Is that pretty clear to you, Michael?

Michael: Yes, it is. That helps.

Peter: Great. Now, Rachel, what's something that you could do that would help Michael respond to you in a better way? He gets triggered too.

You could help him respond in a better way by saying, "I think it's difficult for you, Michael, to respond to me in a better way because..."

Rachel: "...you may feel threatened and we may be in a power struggle over whose way works best."

Peter: "I may be digging in and then it's hard for you to respond to me, Michael." That would make it hard for him to be a better partner if a part of you, Rachel, is digging in. Does that make sense, Michael?

Michael: Sure.

Peter: Now, Rachel, something that you might do to help Michael respond to you in a better way would be what?

Rachel: Clarify my purpose of being a united front together and stay focused on that and not jump to some other topic or get filibustered with something else. If I can keep going back to focusing on what we're talking about, I think that would be helpful in not reacting to him.

Peter: Does that make sense to you, Michael?

Michael: I heard clearly state the purpose of being a united front as part of what would help me respond to her.

Peter: And I think if Rachel could also say to you, "Michael, if you could respond to me right now in this moment either by recapping what you're hear-

ing or asking me questions for clarification about what I want in this situation..." would that be helpful, Rachel? Would that make it easier for Michael to respond to you?

Rachel: If I said, "If you could respond to me in this moment..."

Peter: If you could say to Michael, "Here's what I want in this moment..."

Rachel: Do I think that would make it better for him?

Ellyn: Let me back up for one second and say something. You did a great thing, Rachel, when you said, "...clarify my purpose" because in those heated moments, your purpose is still to be a team. It is to get to that place of solidarity.

So part of what you'd be doing by clarifying your purpose is really saying to Michael, "I'm not trying to be in a power struggle with you. I'm not digging in. We may be having a struggle here but I'm looking for solidarity and teamwork with you."

Rachel: That's perfect. That's it exactly.

Peter: It might be hard for you to do that because we all have our blocks. Your block on doing that would be what?

Rachel: I felt so much anxiety that manifested physically and instantaneously, upon receiving a reactive response from you.

Peter: Exactly, that's that limbic brain taking over again. It kind of overrides your desire to create a better team. It hijacks that thinking brain.

But as you guys do this more calmly, then you're more in control of that emotional brain.

There's one more thing. Rachel, if you could say to Michael, "Michael, I apologize that I just got triggered again and I reacted by..."

Rachel: I apologize to you, Michael, when I'm activated. I apologize to you for going into this physical distress and reacting back to you. That makes it harder for you to give me no reaction.

Peter: Right. It makes it a lot harder for him to give you the response you would like.

Take another relaxing breath. Is there anything else you want to add, Rachel?

Rachel: Yes. Michael, I love you and I appreciate you hearing me. I know we can work on our hurdles together. Thank you for your efforts.

Peter: Wow. What do you feel as Michael listened to you all the way through on this, Rachel? Just affection and warmth towards him?

Rachel: Yes. I feel heard.

Peter: Michael, what do you feel listening to Rachel talk about the problem in this structure?

Michael: It feels really good because you get to the real issue at hand. You get lots more gratified when you take it one step at a time. You get to really, truly understand the dynamic. It's really powerful.

Peter: Yes, you begin to see the systemic interaction. So right now, when you started before the dialogue, the tension was high. What is it for you now, Rachel?

Rachel: Much better. I feel about a 4. That's also your little trick, I guess I would call it, of breathing out all the way so you can take a deeper breath in. It's really helpful.

Peter: Just rub your knee. Appreciate the success. Repeat your power word again. The same goes for you, Michael, because you go through, historically, a really tough discussion and you did it really nicely, feeling much better about each other than you did before. So high five to you guys.

Ellyn: You guys did a great job. Both of you were giving Pete really clear answers, having given it thought ahead of time.

Rachel, you were able to identify that the tension to begin with was a 10 but you wanted to be successful. And Michael, you wanted to have integrity. Both of you recognized that you wanted to be more of a team.

Most couples do want to be more of a team. Then, when they hit the wall with their differences, they will feel alone. It's important to be able to describe that to each other and, Rachel, for you to recognize that when you got into that anxious state, you used to give up and shut down. Then, of course, the withdrawal is going to be a trigger for Michael.

You both did such a lovely job of articulating your own positions: that you didn't feel safe. In clarifying your purpose—that your purpose is indeed to be a team, that you want solidarity, that you don't want a power struggle – that just sets a whole different foundation for the two of you to go forward and talk more concretely about some of these issues.

Peter: The great thing is that what we did tonight was to set the foundation by breaking the pattern for how you talk about it. It wasn't designed to be a total negotiation, problem solving discussion.

We actually have a negotiation process on our website. If you go to www.couplesinstitute.com/couples and click the button for "articles," you'll find a collection that includes two on the subject. One is called, "*The Surprising First Steps of Negotiation*," and the other is "*Super Negotiating for Couples*."

What Ellyn and I have found out is that you really can't negotiate a topic without first having gone through this kind of process to break the pattern and make it safer to discuss things.

If they were in my office, I would say, "Michael, do you want to talk about your perspective as the initiator?"

Ellyn: It would be great at some point for the two of you to do that, to just reverse roles.

Peter: Yes, to reverse roles and Michael would talk about it. Then, if it felt like you wanted to negotiate, you could go to our website and get the whole series of steps for effective negotiation.

I want to thank both of you.

Ellyn: Let's open the lines quickly. We don't have much time left but if anyone has a question, just say your first name so we know who has a question.

Jan: Could just briefly say why you use the physical touch on the knee?

Peter: Literally, when we touch one side of our body, it activates the other side of our brain. Touching our left knee activates the right brain and touching the right knee activates the left brain. By touching both of them while we're talking, it really brings into play many more regions of the brain for the discussion rather than just getting caught and stuck in the loop of the emotional brain.

Ellyn: Another thing that can sometimes help is rubbing both knees and turning your head side to side. Then you really are creating an integration between the left and right brain.

Peter: It really helps us get out of that loop, where we're stuck in the limbic, emotional brain.

Participant: Do you have any problems with rubbing the knees?

Ellyn: Not usually, most people are pretty able to rub their knees. If they don't want to rub their knees, then we can have them tap their feet instead.

One other thing since we are just about out of time. I'd like some quick feedback from anybody what it was like listening to this, experiencing what the couple did.

Participant: I found it interesting and I also found it a little distant for our situation because their circumstance has to do with having children in common and a common problem whereas most of our conflicts are differences of opinion regarding situations. There isn't something that is a common thing we are working on.

The example seemed a little distant for grasping how we could apply it for ourselves.

Peter: You could take the same process using different words like, "When you disagree with me, Honey, here's what I think. Here's what I feel. Here's what I do that's not very effective."

Again, this is not a process to solve the problem. It's a process to start breaking the pattern and talking about it more easily.

Ellyn: When you have the sense of both of you buying into a process to change the reactivity and to create a better foundation for you how you talk about things with each other, that's a beginning in and of itself.

Margaret: You indicated on your website you have a way to discuss negotiations with couples. What about the process that you just went through? Is it on your website?

Ellyn: You're going to get this whole process. We're going to transcribe the call. You're going to get all the questions that Rachel had ahead of time.

We will get that to you as fast as we can. It takes a little while to get the whole things transcribed but we will get it to you as soon as we can.

Participant: Can you send it to someone who does not have access to a computer?

Ellyn: Call us and we'll arrange it.

Rachel: I'd like to say one other thing to the person who asked a question about having an issue that's not agreed upon. For us, we were talking about our kids, but there have been plenty of other issues that we've used this process on that have nothing to do with something we have in common, where we have completely opposite ideas. It's just made it safer to talk to each other.

Peter: Thank you. We really appreciate everybody who signed up tonight, and participated in this call.

Practice. This is like an athletic skill almost. It takes practice. It takes time. So please use the skills and create that kind of better connection with your partner and vice versa.

There's a part of each of you that wants to have a better relationship with your partner. You can use this with your kids as well.

Ellyn: We're really committed to providing a lot of information to people to help make relationships that flourish and are strong. We've just created a new website called www.TheCouplesInstitute.com.

If you go there, you can sign up for some free audio from us. You'll have a chance to write in questions to us and we will be answering them on a weekly basis.

Peter: I'm glad Ellyn mentioned that because it gives you a chance to write in questions for us that we will be responding to.

Zoe: Also I'd like to mention that Pete's weekend workshop for couples, "*Coming from Your Heart*," is coming up very soon. The next one takes place October 28 and 29 (2006). If you're interested, please email our office through the website or call (650) 327-5915. If you're out of the area, we've got a toll free number. That's (877) 327-5915.

We've had to turn people away from the last few workshops. He only does them a couple of times a year so if you're interested in coming, please don't wait too long to contact us.

Participant: Where is it going to be?

Zoe: It takes place in Santa Clara, California between San Jose and San Francisco. You will have those phone numbers and emails once you get the transcript of tonight's call so if you didn't get a chance to write them down, remember you'll get them in a couple of weeks.

That's it. Thank you for joining us. Good night.

* * * * *

The "initiator" in the demonstration couple had the following handout to help her stay on track. We are including it with this transcript because it will be useful for you, as well.

Guidelines for the Initiator

1. Tell your partner what the problem or topic for discussion is. Then describe:
 - How big of a deal is this topic for you? Perhaps you could put it on a 1-10 scale with 10 being very important.
 - Why this problem is important to you? You might include what the problem symbolizes or represents to you.

2. Think how you aspire to be when discussing this topic. This means coming from your higher self when talking about the problem. For example, you might be one or more of the following qualities: calm, assertive, candid, empathic, fair to both sides, reasonable, non-attacking, etc. The goal is to make it emotionally safe for your partner to really hear you so they can understand your perspective.

3. Use your power word and/or rub your knees as needed to stay centered during the dialogue with your partner.

4. Silently rehearse your responses to the questions below before starting your dialogue. (Your partner will be recapping and asking questions for clarity once your dialogue begins).

Use the following prompts to help you communicate clearly.

When this problem (the one described above) occurs:

- My ineffective attitudes or thoughts are (basically they will be variations of blaming or feeling victim like):

- My negative emotions are: (fear, hurt, helpless, hopeless, anxious, disgust, pain, sad, lonely, inadequate, angry, threatened, etc.)

- What I do when I have these ineffective thoughts and feelings is: (This will be some kind of behavior you are not proud of.)

- Even though my reactions are ineffective, I do them anyway because:

- Even though my reactions are ineffective, I still hope you will respond to me in a better way by:

- However, I think it's difficult for you to respond to me in a better way because:

- Something I might do to help you to respond to me in a better way is:

- However, it's hard for me to help you to respond better to me because:

- I apologize for treating you poorly (describe your reaction that is a problem for your partner –it's the one you are not proud of) which makes it even harder for you to give me what you want:

- What I want to add that hasn't been covered is:

Suggestions for the Inquirer

When your partner is talking about a problem and things aren't going well, try this "R & R."

R = Relax. Breathe deeply. Exhale completely. This will force you to inhale more deeply. When you inhale, do it slowly and when you reach the top of your breath, hold it for the count of two. Then slowly exhale. Repeat this twice. You will become more grounded and be able to think more clearly because your brain now has more oxygen.

R = Refocus. Refocus your thoughts on how you aspire to be as a good listener. Maybe you aspire to be patient, accepting, understanding or curious and look for the pain that your partner is not expressing. Maybe you will even ask your partner for the kind of response they desire from you in this situation.

Rub your knees as a way of helping you stay more centered.

Refocusing on these qualities will help both of you get grounded and back on track.