

Hearts and Minds—Verbal Intercourse for Couples

By George M. Prince

After marriage, as the relationship develops with children and the demands of work, the minds tends to lose their focus on each other. The husband and wife, while generally content, begin to believe they know everything worth knowing about the ideas, opinions, beliefs, prejudices, and blanks of her/his spouse. Verbal intercourse is restricted to everyday events and problems.

This is not toxic, but it represents the loss of a valuable asset: the opportunity to together grow each other's minds in capacity, scope, and intimacy—to broaden and deepen understanding and ability to relate. It may even increase satisfaction in Sexual intercourse!

The idea is not complicated. It has been amply demonstrated that *Dialogue* carried on between two or more people can work wonders in opening new vistas about both the subject undertaken, and the development of the people involved.

Here is how it works

Many couple's exchanges are triggered by a problem: Johnny has refused to eat his dinner, or has picked on his little sister. Or there is an issue between husband and wife: Harry is constantly late for dinner. Such problems are best dealt with using the traditional discussion procedure, or, in the husband and wife case, a process called *Self-Focus*, which will be briefly explained in the appendix. In Verbal Intercourse, the objective is to explore each other's thoughts, feelings, and associations about a concept or subject. It is certain that this will develop a new and deeper understanding, and it is quite possible that new and fresh ideas and understanding will emerge from such Intercourse.

Opinion, Prejudice and Bias

All of us have healthily developed opinions, prejudices, and biases. In a way, it is partly who we are! This side of us tends to come out in most discussions, and there is nothing wrong with that if we can maintain some open-mindedness.

But that is by no means all of us. We have vast experience and enough intellect to operate effectively, when we stay in a learning mode. We have all done a great deal of thinking and learning about everything we have encountered. In a significant way, each of us is a huge bundle of experience, thought, and feeling, and very little of it ever sees the light of day. We just do not have the opportunity to reveal to anyone else this remarkable reservoir of feeling and information. Further, because we do not regularly visit it, in a profound way, this marvelous asset, tends to lie fallow—undeveloped, unapplied.

The Root of Defensiveness

As a result of our development, from infancy to adulthood, we are very defense-oriented. We have learned to instantly evaluate every situation to determine whether it is going to be threatening and dangerous, or safe and nurturing. We have a black and white decision-maker in our brains. It is a very sensitive organ: the amygdala. From a long history of survival, the amygdala and its circuits “sense out” all the information in one’s instant situation. It is determining whether there is anything present that threatens our meaningfulness—our safety, and also our sense of self, our self-respect. If there is any threat or disrespect in the field, we become defensive. That means we will use our repertoire of defensive maneuvers to avoid feeling like a “loser”.

Amygdalas get their training partly from genes (inheritance from ages past) and from nurture—the way our parents and others treat us as we learn to be adults. To the degree we are brought up with love and respect, our brains develop ways of interacting that are appropriately open, friendly, and loving. We are recruiters, attracting people to us. To the degree we are neglected or abused, our brains develop sensitivities that trigger behaviors that are unfriendly and self-protective. When we are unfortunate in our upbringing we may become unrecruitable; negative reactors.

The world being what it is, and our parents only human, all of us get enough neglect and punishment to have sensitive amygdala circuits. The degree of our defensiveness depends upon the degree of damage done to us.

These developments happen early in infancy and childhood and are largely unconscious— out of our awareness. It becomes important for us to recognize that much of our defensive behavior is made up of strategies to help us tolerate threats to our selves that happened long ago and are seldom relevant to us as grown ups. But since the impulses are “real”, our defensive maneuvers just seem to happen. If we bring them to awareness, we are in a position to make conscious decisions about them.

Below is a chart to suggest the extent of these maneuvers.

Spectrum of Behaviors as a result of Parenting

| Reflects more neglect and abuse | | | | More nurturing | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Anxiety Driven | | | | Consciousness Driven | | |
| Aggressive | Antagonistic | Passive Aggressive | Neutral | Positive/Courageous | | |
| Disobedient | Adversarial | Distracted | Undermines | Attentive | Receptive | Supports confusions/ uncertainty |
| Quarrelsome | Opposes | Listless | Neglectful | Supportive | Responsive | Temporarily suspends disbelief |
| Combative | Controlling | Bored | Mistake-prone | Listens | Hospitable | Builds |
| Dominating | Contrary | Unresponsive | Misunderstands | Approves | Non-restrictive | Deals as equal |
| Hostile | Squabbly | Ignores | Careless | Credits | Open-minded | |
| Angry | Competitive | Oblivious | Disinterested | Connects | Optimistic | |
| Litigious | Cynical | Unconscious | Pessimistic | Jumps to favorable conclusions | Shares risks | |
| Contemptuous | | Doesn't get it | | | Listens approximately | |
| Critical | | | | | Protects vulnerable beginnings | |
| Non-Recruitable | | Recruitable | | Recruiter | | |

To add to the problem, a great majority of the exchanges with friends, partners, acquaintances, and fellow employees are framed in such a way that they invite opinions, decisions and reactions. We tend to take positions of support or difference and defend that stance. In these bull sessions and conversations it is expected that we will defend our point of view.

In Hearts and Minds—Verbal Intercourse our Objective is Different

Explore—when we think of explore we think of inquiry— research, delving, poking, digging , investigating, prying into, questioning, hunting—discovery! And the object of this exploration is our mind's treasure of stored thoughts, experiences, observations, and feelings. As *you* unearth *your* treasure, I give *my* self to listening and connecting , using your thoughts to trigger *my* mind's treasure of related experiences, observations, and feelings, which I then share with you.

Learn—During this intercourse some remarkable things can happen: we learn more deeply about each other. We discover differences that we combine into something we never before experienced: new understanding of each other. We create a quality of relating that multiplies our points of contact and enriches our relationship.

Develop—This intercourse taps into our stored assets of thought, belief, and speculative powers and “brings out the intelligence that lives at the very center of

ourselves—the intelligence that exists when we are alert to possibilities around us and think freshly. *Intelligence of the heart.*” (Isaacs)

Some Surprising Consequences

Your voice—One of the first surprises one gets from verbal intercourse with a spouse is the experience of *listening to yourself*! In this process there is no defensiveness and the purpose is to openly explore and enlarge, you are available to focus on the meaning you are creating for your partner, and in doing so, you hear your own true voice. This may not happen immediately, but as you practice and experience the difference in this way of relating, this thinking together, your own true voice will emerge. You will *know* each other more profoundly than ever before.

Your self—Just as you get to know each other to a new depth, you get to know yourself more completely than before this experiment in self-revelation.

Your relationship—And, as you get to better know yourself and each other, you invent new ways to behave that can enhance your relationship. One of the rewarding benefits is that you easily shift into your verbal intercourse mode whenever you have time together. And that not only enlarges your “knowing” of each other, you discover unexpected insights and subtle meanings that were not apparent before.

Awareness—As you increase the amount of thinking you share with your spouse, you become more aware of what is going on in other parts of your life. You begin to consciously search for the meaning in more of what goes on.

Aliveness—Because you are practicing *listening, respecting, suspending judgment, and speaking in your true voice*, you are more alive in the moment, in touch with “what is going on now”.

Field—Verbal Intercourse can take place only when the atmosphere or field surrounding you is safe and supportive. Verbal Intercourse gives way to the usual defense oriented behavior whenever the exploration spirit departs. Becoming aware of the factors that influence field puts you in touch with the elements that make up the interpersonal field. Just as you learn to protect the field in Verbal Intercourse with your spouse, you become more able to create a positive field with others in your life.

Container—The term “field” was first used in physics to describe the invisible forces surrounding a magnet. Psychiatrist Harry Sullivan first used it to capture the idea that there is an *interpersonal* field: invisible and visible forces that govern relationships. The signals that make up this field include *everything*—from the weather, to surroundings, to mood, tone of voice, relationship histories, and non-verbal cues. It captures the idea that every conversation influences field. When the field is carefully “protected” from negative inputs, Isaacs calls it a “Container” for dialogue.

Clues for determining Field

For many years a company, Syntectics, Inc, in Cambridge, MA used closed circuit TV to study interactions between people in invention sessions and business meetings. They were unaware of it at the time, but they were identifying actions that help determine the field. Below is a chart of their discoveries.

| | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Credit Card Convey Respect</p> <p style="font-size: 2em; font-family: cursive;">You Are Meaningful</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Non-Defensive Collaborative Maneuvers</p> | Accept ambiguity | Accept connect with |
| | Acknowledge | Assume it can be done |
| | Assume valuable implications | Be attentive |
| | Be interested | Be open-wholly available |
| | Be optimistic | Build on it |
| | Credit | Deal with as an equal |
| | Eliminate status/rank | Focus on what is going for the idea |
| | Give early support | Give up all rights to punish or discipline |
| | Join | Jump to favorable conclusions |
| | Listen | Listen approximately |
| | Make it no-lose | Paraphrase |
| | Protect vulnerable beginnings | See value in |
| | Set win/wins | Share the burden of proof |
| | Share the risk | Show approval |
| | Speculate along with | Stay loose until rigor counts |
| | Support confusion / uncertainty | Take on faith |
| Take responsibility for understanding | Temporarily suspend disbelief | |
| Value the learning in mistakes | Waste no energy in evaluating early | |

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|--|----------------------|---------------------|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Debit Card Convey Disrespect</p> <p style="font-size: 2em; font-family: cursive;">You Are Unimportant</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Unconscious Defensive Maneuvers</p> | Act distant | Do not listen |
| | Argue | Express pessimism |
| | Ask questions | Get angry |
| | Assume no value | Give no feedback |
| | Be bored | Inattention |
| | Be critical | Insist on precision |
| | Be cynical/skeptical | Interrupt |
| | Be dominant | Make fun of |
| | Be impatient | Make no connections |
| | Be judgmental | Name call |
| | Blame | Nitpick |
| | Challenge | Order |
| | Command | Point out flaws |
| | Compete | Preach/moralize |
| | Correct | Pull rank |
| | Cross examine | Put down |
| | Demand | Put on a stone face |
| | Direct | Put burden of proof |
| | Disagree | React negatively |
| | Disapprove | Scare/threaten |
| Discount | Take the ball away | |
| Do not join | Use silence against | |