

Communication

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A very rewarding experience for us as relationship counsellors is when the communication between a couple is re-established. Conflicts that seemed unsolvable lose their power and become disentangled. The energy that had been used to protect oneself and defend one's position can flow again.

How do we get to a break-down of communication in the first place?

It happens when we internalise communication by holding back. Rather than an exchange with our partner, the process is taken inside (internalised). Self-talk takes place.

This is a pattern that we develop in childhood. When we want something, express it and get a negative response, we then internalise and generalise this response. For example, a mother gets angry in response to a request of her child. The child then makes an unspoken decision, "I should not want that". This decision serves the purpose to prevent the child from re-experiencing a frustrating situation.

In adult life, we experience the discrepancy between "want" and "should" as internal conflict. Unaware of the tension, we may withdraw, and feel low in energy and motivation.

One partner's withdrawal can lead to the other's withdrawal. When this goes on for some time, and more and more experience is internalised, a point can be reached where there is virtually no communication between both, each of them heavily guarded behind the bastion of rigid armor. They no longer see each other, as there is a huge junk heap of old hurt between them. All they see is what they look for, which is a confirmation of their idea about the other person.

Martin Buber talks about ghosts who interfere heavily in human communication. Apart from two people, let's call them Peter and Mary, there are ghosts: there is Peter how he likes to appear to her, and Mary how she likes to appear to him. And there is Peter how he actually appears to her, and Mary how she appears to him. Then there is Peter how he appears to himself and Mary how she appears to herself.

It gets confusing when we address ghosts. It looks like we talk with each other, but in fact we talk to ghosts. Rather than seeing the other for who they are we look for what we expect, dread, fear or want to see. The other doesn't feel spoken to, probably gets annoyed, and unknowingly reinforces the ghost image we have of him/her. This can escalate further into what we have called "cancelling each other out". We feel stuck. It can be like being in a swamp. The deeper we are getting into it the more we get stuck. At times it might feel there is no way out.

The way out of this requires the risk to put down the armor of preconceived ideas or picture of the other, and the willingness to see your partner for who he/she really is.

Sometimes this is not easy. We become protective because of old hurt, and defensive in justifying our protection. What we often don't notice is that the hurt that we want to keep out

actually lives inside the walls of our castle. Unacknowledges hurt and unexpressed feelings burden us and sooner and later want to be released.

Safety of not being injured again is needed to open up. Counselling can provide this safe place when the counsellors support both in the validity of their behaviour, feeling and thinking.

When both partners take the risk of looking at each other and talking to one another, they can see the real person again. Different to ghosts who are rather pale and one dimensional, real people are more complex, a miracle and treasure box. There is a mixture of paradoxes and always a great deal to discover, when we truly meet and see each other. No matter how long we have been with our partner, we will never be able to know him/her fully.

In expressing ourselves simply: "I feel ...", "I need ...", "I would like ..." we communicate more directly. It helps if the partners take turn in speaking and listening, rather than competing for attention. Taking turns, one speaks, shares his/her experience, talks for and about him/herself, while the other listens actively, accepting the gift of their partner's sharing of themselves.

When both can dialogue in this way, real communication can happen again, and the energy that was used in internal processes and in self protection can again flow between both as a stream of love.

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