

Journal of Clinical Psychology Practice

Eight Key Steps to Building Collaborative Communication: Embracing Novel Solutions, Building Empathy, and Reducing Conflict

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Negative communication patterns and style (e.g., critical, defensive, contemptuous) have been associated with conflict and divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Moreover, couples who are able to emotionally connect to one another are more likely to report positive affective response to everyday, current event conversations which is predictive of less marital conflict (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Communication that is inclusive and non-divisive creates the necessary environment for fundamental shifts in cognitions and behaviors that facilitate conflict resolution, thereby reducing marital distress. Therefore, psychotherapy interventions that target communication style while attending to beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that occur within one's system or environment are likely to build secure emotional bonds that facilitate collaborative solutions to difficult problems.

Research on psychotherapy interventions that reduce marital distress demonstrate good short-term outcomes, and there is some empirical support for their long-term efficacy (for review see Christensen & Heavey, 1999). Prevention interventions that focus on communication within a system (Miller & Sherrard, 1999), empathy (Guerney & Maxson, 1990), and cognitive behavioral skills (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1998) have demonstrated the most promise in short and long-term gains in preventing marital distress and increasing marital satisfaction. A common component of couple-based interventions is the focus on

Summary

Collaborative communication enables individuals to move from being in opposition to working collaboratively to resolve a mutual problem. To accomplish this, each side has to be able to accurately perceive the other point of view, compassionately reflect what is heard, develop an understanding of the other point of view, and then genuinely empathize with the other point of view. The solution is a hybrid of all sides involved, which requires an environment that supports novel solutions to conflict. Eight key steps to building collaborative communication and implications for its use are discussed.

Keywords

Collaborative Communication
Conflict Resolution
Couples

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developing communication skills.

Communication that is collaborative is more likely to result in negotiations that are mutually beneficial (Lovelace, Shapiro, & Wengart, 2001). Therefore, couples who use language and create a tone that is conducive to collaborative communication would likely decrease marital conflict. However, most clinical programs do not train students to assist others in developing collaborative communication skills. To fill this gap, we describe eight key steps in building collaborative skills that enhance a concept we call *relational aptitude* or *relational intelligence*. Relational aptitude is one's ability to accurately perceive, understand, reason, problem-solve, empathize, and communicate within a relationship in a manner that requires cognitive flexibility to learn how to relate to the other person in the

moment and over time. It is our belief that just like intelligence and other types of aptitude some individuals are more gifted than others. However, we believe most individuals can enhance their capacity to increase their relational aptitude. To do this, we turn to Social Cognitive Theory and the concept of self-efficacy which proposes that the successful achievement of any behavior requires a level of confidence to carry out the target behavior (Bandura, 1994). The best way to build self-efficacy is through practice followed by positive reinforcement or outcomes (Bandura, 1994).

In this article, we will describe the process of facilitating eight key steps to developing collaborative communication with couples. However, these steps can be used with anyone who wishes to improve their communication skills and improve their relationships with others, particularly in circumstances where there are opposing points of view.

Getting Started

Before starting the eight steps to collaborative communication with a couple, it is important to explain to the couple what the couple will be trying to obtain and why (e.g., psychoeducation). We explain that the goal of communicating collaboratively is to provide an opportunity for each person to tell their partner how they feel about a particular issue and to feel heard, understood, and cared for. We emphasize that this exchange can help clear up misunderstandings and help partners feel closer to each other. This is important because clarity and closeness serve as the basis for brainstorming solutions to conflicts in a non-defensive, collaborative stance.

The shift we are trying to achieve in a couple is a reciprocal communication process that is the result of each individual understanding one another and having the shared experience that each person has been heard in a respectful way. We take the time to work with individuals on the concept that there can be more than one legitimate view. We are not embarking on a win-loss scenario. Instead, couples have to agree that despite having differences, they want to try to find a collaborative solution. The move from being in opposition on two sides of an issue to being a caring partner working as a team to resolve a mutual problem, hinges on the couple's ability to develop real compassion for each other. For this to happen, each individual has to be able to hear,

understand, and demonstrate genuine empathy for their partner's feelings. Getting a couple to this step may take a few sessions. For many couples this is a fundamental shift in cognitive belief structures, moving from a zero-sum game approach where each person loses and wins the exact amount to one that involves giving up or letting go of something so that a mutual solution can occur. Once a couple shifts to a reciprocal communication style, they can deepen their emotional attachment and bond to one another which creates a sense of being cared for. When individuals feel cared for, it creates an environment where disagreements can occur without the threat of breaking the relationship bond.

Setting up a Supportive Context

Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the importance of social context in influencing or facilitating behavior in conjunction with individual attributes (Bandura, 1994). This is an important aspect of collaborative communication such that the environment has to be structured in a manner that facilitates collaboration. Couples need to set a time and pick a setting that is quiet and private so that there are no interruptions. Knowing ahead of time that a collaborative conversation will occur enables each individual to bring their best intentions to having a constructive exchange.

In our work, we have found that it is helpful for couples to schedule conversations ahead of time so they can engage in collaborative conversations on a regular basis. Scheduling consistent times serves to encourage the couple to practice communication skills regularly. Moreover, discussing small issues frequently can prevent small irritations, misunderstandings, misperceptions, or miscommunications from building up (Gottman & Levenson, 2000), which often creates emotional distance or resentments. Frequent practice also builds skills that are useful for dealing with larger, more difficult issues that arise periodically. It engenders trust between the partners such that they are willing to hear and understand each other's point of view as well as to respect and care about each other enough to find a shared solution to difficult issues. Agreeing upon a regular time devoted to airing differences or concerns also takes the burden off of a particular person who otherwise can become enrolled as the "pursuer"-- the one who repeatedly initiates the discussions, which often comes with negative labels such as "complainer," "nagging," or "too negative."

Eight Steps to Building Collaborative Communication

The eight steps consist of four steps for the Speaker and four steps for the Listener. Each person takes on the role of Speaker and Listener. As Speaker, the goal is to express the Speaker's point of view on a problem in a manner that is considerate of their partner and focuses on the problem at hand. Maintaining a considerate stance with clear boundaries regarding the scope of the discussion will enlist the listener as an ally in resolving the issue. To accomplish this, the four steps for the Speaker are to:

- Know how you *perceive* the situation as well as what you think and feel about the issue.
- Express your experience, thoughts and feelings in a clear, direct and *calm* way that you believe your partner could hear.
- Make it clear that you are stating your point of view and that you are *aware* there is another perspective.
- Open a *dialogue* that will eventually lead to a collaborative solution.

As Listener, the goal is to expand the Listener's understanding of a problem by empathically understanding another point of view to find a collaborative solution. The four steps for the Listener's are to:

- *Listen* respectfully and attentively.
- Mirror the *content* of the message.
- Identify *feelings* associated with the message.
- *Join* empathically with the Speaker.

Each person takes a turn at being the Speaker and the Listener. The success of an individual in each of these roles rests on the ability of each individual to tolerate the differences expressed by their partner. This is why couples have to spend time in a preparatory phase to build cognitive flexibility or a willingness to believe that a different perspective can exist. We discuss some ways to approach this phase in the next section.

Getting Started

Readiness of the Speaker

It is important to make sure the Speaker is ready to engage in a collaborative exchange. To do this, the following instructions are given to the Speaker:

“The speaker's responsibility is to set the tone for a collaborative exchange. You are trying to express your experience in a way that also communicates to your partner that you care about them and that you know they may have a very different experience of the situation. In preparing to be the Speaker, you have two goals. First, to expand your own understanding of a problem so that you can express it to your partner accurately and in a way that helps you feel heard and understood. Second, to help your partner feel you are an ally, not an adversary in reaching a collaborative solution. If you have difficulty being objective and compassionate, remember that you will soon be the Listener and will want your partner to feel willing to give their message in a kind and respectful way.”

Speakers need to understand that there is one caveat that must be understood before embarking on the Speaker role: *Each person can have very different perspectives, thoughts, and feelings.* The Speaker's job is to express their point of view and the partner's job is to put their own perspective on hold long enough to really hear the Speaker in a kind and considerate way. This is a difficult task because no matter how hard the Listener tries to understand what the Speaker is feeling and saying, the Listener may find it difficult, at times, to listen in an objective and compassionate way without getting upset or defensive. With practice and positive outcomes, the Speaker and the Listener will build self-efficacy for engaging in collaborative communication. However until individuals get comfortable engaging in this type of communication, it is important that each speak to one another in a respectful tone that has clear boundaries such that each individual makes it clear that what is being said is their own point of view. Even if an individual feels hurt, angry, or humiliated by something a partner may have done, they need to give the message in a way that acknowledges that the partner could have a completely different experience and may be feeling very misunderstood. Doing a good job as Speaker, enables individuals to get their point of view

heard which increases the likelihood that the Listener will consider the Speaker's point of view and reciprocate with kindness.

Emotional Regulation

Speakers and listeners will need to learn to manage intense emotional reactions. Managing one's response to a significant emotional hurt that occurs within the context of a relationship can be challenging. Couples are often challenged with how to express their own perspective in an emotionally congruent way and still be kind to the person who is upsetting them. The first thing to remind couples is that their partner didn't "make" them upset. The individual became upset when a specific meaning was put on what happened. There is an important cognitive difference in these two points of view. The first assumes other people cause feelings, the second states that feelings result from how situations are interpreted. The latter enables individuals to be in charge of what they feel and allows them to choose to keep calmer as they speak to their partner. For example, an individual might feel angry and be sure that their partner was willfully mean-spirited, but it is also possible that there was a miscommunication or a misunderstanding and once it is cleared up there will not be as much anger and hurt. It is important for an individual to express their feelings, and to give their point of view on the situation. This knowledge can assist the partner in acknowledging the other individual's experience and show empathy, even if the partner saw the situation very differently.

We are seldom taught to pay attention to emotional cues or to learn to label them, but they are very influential in motivating behavior. If an individual knows how they feel, they can choose to express it in a constructive manner. If emotions are not brought into one's awareness, the corresponding behavior tends to be reactive or impulsive which can result in hurtful statements that undermine support from one's partner. As the Speaker becomes more skilled in becoming aware of physical sensations that are associated with experiences, it will become easier to regulate emotional reactivity to stressful stimuli. In addition to identifying feelings, there are cultural and gender-based socialization differences that may make it difficult for individuals to feel comfortable admitting specific emotions. For instance, men may be more likely to report anger when they are sad or feel guilty. Conversely women may report feeling sad or guilt when they are angry. Additionally, there is empirical evidence that indicates when women or their partners are dissatisfied, women tend to try harder to affiliate or get close to their partner. When men or their partners are not satisfied with the relationship, they tend to become coercive in order to distance from their partner to avoid further distressing conflict (White, 1989). In addition to gender, the family and culture that individuals grew up in exerts a strong influence on what individuals feel and how they behave. Moreover, these socio-cultural influences dictate what feelings individuals are willing or able to share with others and how they react to conflict.

Helping a Speaker with the Four Speaking Steps

Step One: Know How you Perceive the Situation and What you Think and Feel about the Issue

"Before beginning your message, think about what you are going to tell your partner. Be sure you know what you heard and saw and thought about the situation and what you feel about the issue. First, try to recall what happened. As you go through this thought process, try to be as objective as you can be. Ask yourself: *What assumptions did I make?* or *Was there any way I contributed to having a negative experience?* Once you have recalled how you perceive the situation, ask yourself: *What did I think and feel*

when this happened? If your thoughts are not clear, take a while to think about the issues and maybe even write about it so your message is useful and not confusing to your partner. If you don't know how you feel about the issue, give yourself time to reflect on what you think happened and try to recall your emotional reactions."

Step Two: Express your Perceptions, Thoughts and Feelings in a Way your Partner can Hear

"Having clarified your own thoughts and feelings, think about how your partner may receive this message. Remember, your partner is likely to be surprised at how differently you two see this issue. They might feel misunderstood and be angry or hurt. What you are aiming for is to express how you experience the problem without triggering your partner to become defensive. Part of your job as a speaker is to help your partner to be able to be a compassionate listener and therefore able to be more collaborative with you."

"There are some specific ways to give your message that will help your partner hear you. First, try not to use 'you' statements such as: *You made me feel ashamed. You were so mean! You jerk! What were you thinking!* These types of statements are accusatory and blaming and convey the message that there is only one right point of view. Instead start your sentence with an 'I' statement. You could say: *I felt humiliated and thought you were really being mean, when you raised your voice in front of our friends.* When you frame your comments in this way you make it clear that your emotional experience is shaped by your own interpretation. Second, if you know you are addressing an issue your partner is very sensitive about, put the comment in context. Sandwich the comment between supportive messages. For example, *I appreciate that you have made an effort lately to include me in financial decisions, but when you bought the car without discussing it with me, I felt dismissed and ignored.* Finally, be careful not to use language that escalates conflict such as labels, or character assassinations, or hyperbole (e.g., never, always)."

If an individual is too upset to be respectful to their partner, then the message is likely to be hurtful and therefore ineffective and even destructive. Speakers can use time to their advantage by waiting until the Speaker calms down to have a discussion. If the message is given in a volatile, disrespectful, abusive, or blaming way, not only will the Listener have a hard time hearing the message, but when it is the Listener's turn to be the Speaker the abusive tone is likely to be reciprocated.

Many couples who experience strong emotions feel compelled to ventilate – to dump raw feelings. Ventilation has no place in a constructive exchange. If a person needs to ventilate, then it is best to do it away from the Listener such as with a therapist, a friend, or support group. In addition to talking with someone else, individuals might find relief from journaling, meditating, crying, or taking a walk. Breathing deeply (diaphragmatic breathing) is also helpful in regulating emotional reactivity to stress and can enable an individual to obtain an objective perspective. Individuals might find it helpful to remind themselves that: *This is only my current point of view, maybe I have misunderstood something, maybe my partner didn't intend for me to take their behavior in the way that I did.*

Step Three: State your Personal Point of View as only One Perspective

“When you are ready to give your message, be sure to speak personally by using statements such as *I feel... My recollection is... The way I see it...* Your partner will be better able to hear you if you make it clear that this is your own perception, your interpretation, inference, and emotional reaction to your own experience. This will help your partner to stay calm and objective and open to hearing your side of the story. As you say what you are thinking and feeling on this subject, try to be direct and open so that your message reveals your thoughts and feelings, but kind and respectful of the fact that your partner may not see it that way. By communicating that this is your point of view, you leave room for another perspective. Remember in a few minutes you will be the Listener.”

Step Four: Open a Dialog that can lead to a Collaborative Solution

“Try not to be concerned yet with the solution you want. Focus on developing an understanding between you and partner. Remember that what you want to achieve is a dialogue that helps each of you feel understood and cared for. You also want the two of you to feel closer and thus more motivated to find a solution that will please you both. If you focus in the beginning on your solution, the message can become a rationale or argument that supports your solution which often creates a rigid individual position and by definition creates a debate between you and your partner. Debates may bring out facts, data, positions, and arguments but ultimately they are, by nature, oppositional. Remember, what we are looking for is a balanced dialogue that will result in collaboration.”

Readiness of the Listener

Similar to the Speaker, the Listener has to be “ready” to assume the listening role. The Listener’s role is transformative. The responsibility of the Listener is to hear the message with enough caring and objectivity that it enables the partner to explore their experience in a way that creates an environment that allows the partner to change their perspective and feelings. The Listener has two goals. First, the Listener has to expand their understanding of the problem so that a resolution to the problem can occur. Second, the Listener has to help their partner believe that the Listener is an ally not an adversary in reaching a collaborative solution.

Importantly, the Listener will experience feelings that make it difficult to listen. It is important for the Listener to understand that no matter how good the Speaker is at conveying feelings in a thoughtful and respectful way, the Listener may find it difficult, at times, to listen in an objective, compassionate way. With practice, individuals tend to get better at listening, but it is a skill. Therapists who normalize negative feelings and validate the Listener’s experience in how difficult active, compassionate listening can be will assist the Listener in anticipating these experiences and be better able to place their negative reaction into a normative perspective. The Listener has to understand that their job is to make sure the Speaker’s point of view is fully expressed and heard.

If the Listener gets hurt and responds defensively, then oppositional communication tactics like cutting off the Speaker or becoming argumentative are more likely to occur. An alternative to oppositional communication is to adopt a collaborative style. To do this, the Listener allows the Speaker to express angry feelings. The Listener’s job, in this instance, is to let the Speaker know they are heard and that the Listener genuinely feels bad that the Speaker is angry or upset. This

creates an environment that will enable the Speaker to engage in compassionate listening later when the Listener assumes the Speaker position.

Helping a Listener with the Four Listening Steps

Step Five: Listen Respectfully and Attentively

“Your first job as Listener is to put your own perspective on hold and be open to hearing another point of view. If you can’t do this, you won’t be successful. As you prepare to listen to your partner, think about what you will hear. Most likely, you will be hearing a point of view different from your own. In fact, you may feel your partner is just absolutely wrong. From your point of view, your partner may be misperceiving the situation, hearing only part of your messages, misunderstanding you, or distorting the whole issue and feeling very angry or hurt about it. As you listen, you may feel offended by what is being said or inferred about you. It is really important not to take offense and become defensive. Try to withhold judgment and just take in your partner’s experience. You may feel irritated, guilty, hurt or worried. You might want to interrupt and correct your partner. You might want to cut off the message that is bringing up such uncomfortable feelings so you can stop feeling anxious or defensive. But if you do, you won’t really hear your partner’s whole message, and your partner is not going to want to listen to you when it is your turn. Remember, right now your job is to listen. Later you’ll have your chance to speak, for now, try to be open to hearing another perspective.”

“The easiest way to do this is to be curious: *I wonder how they could have come to that conclusion?* Curious is the opposite of defensive. Ultimately, though, being interested, curious, and open to hearing the other point of view is the best defense as it helps you understand why your partner sees you as the opponent in this issue so you can better defuse and resolve the conflict.”

“As you learn to listen, with sincere interest, you will begin to telegraph to your partner behavioral signals that let them know you are open, present, and really trying to understand their point of view. You will listen respectfully and attentively, making eye contact with your body positioned towards them in a relaxed open way, breathing calmly. Try not to narrow your eyes, furrow your brow, raise your eyebrows, roll your eyes, toss your head, turn away, shrug, shake your head, smirk, grunt, laugh, or give other signals that you feel irritated, disgusted, infuriated, or contemptuous. These are signals that will prevent your partner from feeling heard by you.”

“If you are really having a hard time staying open, you could let your partner know: *This is hard for me to hear, could you sandwich what you are saying between positive messages?* Remember, although you have a commitment to be a good listener, your partner also has a commitment to give the message in a way that you can hear it. If the two of you are unable to do that, you can always suggest that you two take a break, calm down, and consider if you can find a better way to give the message.”

Once the message is heard by the Listener, the next step is to let the Speaker know that the message was heard and that the Listener understands the Speaker’s point of view.

Step Six: Mirror the Content of the Message

“Your next task as Listener is to let your partner know that you heard the message by mirroring it back to them as they stated it. Mirroring your partner’s message requires that you suspend your own opinion and feelings while letting them know you were able to understand their point of view. In the role of listener, you reflect the information they gave you about their interpretation, the inferences they made, and their feelings. You may disagree with your partner, and you will be able to tell them so, but not right now. You may believe what they experienced, or how they interpreted it is a distortion perhaps a projection on you, maybe from incidents in your shared past or from their childhood. You may indeed be right, but this is not the time to bring that up. It won’t be received well right now. Remember this is a collaborative dialogue you are under no time pressure to prove your point of view.”

“This is the time to let your partner think through their experience and express their point of view. This is your partner’s narrative. It is true for your partner and maybe not for you. Try to remember that the view they are expressing is only their initial take on a situation. In fact, after they hear your point of view, it may no longer be true for them, but right now, this is all they know. Or at least, it is all they are able to let in right now. So, let them have and express their experience, and they, in turn, will be better able to hear you later. If your partner feels that you really honor both their experience and their right to be heard, perhaps later they can stop defending it. The less defensive they are, the easier it will be to become curious themselves, reflect on their own process, develop a new perspective, and perhaps adopt a new position faster.”

“Remember, it is the Speaker’s job as well as yours to understand that there is more than one perspective and that they are only giving their own point of view. They are supposed to make their message palatable to you, the Listener. If the Speaker does their job well, then it will be easier for the Listener to reflect the Speaker’s message back to them. Remember, your job, as Listener, is to repeat back what was said. The better job the Speaker did, the easier it will be not only for you to repeat, but also for the Speaker to hear.”

Having heard and reflected the Speaker’s message, the Listener is challenged to contain their feelings and reassure the Speaker that the message was understood along with expressing concern for the Speaker’s experience -- even if the Listener disagrees with the Speaker’s message.

Step Seven: Identify Feelings Associated with the Message

“After you reflect the content of your partner’s message, your next step is to help them feel understood by identifying the feelings they have about the issue. Then, mirror the feelings back to your partner. Your partner may have identified their emotions and stated them to you, but, often, the feelings are subtle, complex, layered or only implied, and so, it can be difficult for you or your partner to identify the feelings. Your job, as Listener, is often to help the Speaker identify their feelings. For example, your partner may have said they were upset but it was not clear if this meant they were sad, angry, or both. Your job is to help the Speaker get in touch with their feelings and express them

to you. If your partner is not aware of their feelings, you are going to have a hard time empathizing. So as Listener you have to make sure that both of you know what emotions surround the issue.”

“Identifying your partner’s feelings is more than just mirroring the emotions that were stated. Ideally, it involves a considerate exchange in which you increase your understanding of and sensitivity to your partner’s emotional experience. If your partner is given time to explore the sources of their feelings, they will begin to feel connected to you through your concern for them, which will lead to less defensiveness. This makes the Listener’s role both difficult and extremely important.”

A sensitive, caring exchange sets the stage for the final step in the communication process : joining. If the Listener arrives at the joining step and finds that they are unable to express compassion for their partner’s experience, chances are the Listener skipped too quickly through the earlier step of identifying feelings. This may be due to couples feeling that time is urgent when discussing difficult topics or situations.

Step Eight: Join Empathically with the Speaker

Joining is the culmination of the communication process. This is the point where the Speaker and the Listener experience an emotional bond or a feeling of closeness that provides the motivation to find a shared solution to the problem they are having with each other. When joining is accomplished successfully, both sides feel a sense of calm and resolution. Joining is very simple, but very profound. If the individuals have worked through all the steps leading up to joining, this step can generally be accomplished in a very brief amount of time.

“Once you are clear that you understand what your partner experienced, how they made sense of what happened, and the feelings they experienced, the next step is to show them you care about them, i.e., you ‘feel’ for them. You do this by expressing in a compassionate, emotionally connected way that you are ‘moved’ by their pain. Joining is not an intellectual exercise. You can only do this if you actually ‘feel’ something. You might, for example, feel warm feelings in your chest, or sadness around your eyes. However you experience it, what is happening is that you are really letting in at an emotional level how your partner felt about this situation. For a moment, you are able to put your own judgment and feelings on hold and experience it from their point of view. When that happens, you develop empathy for their experience, you ‘feel’ for them, and then you know you are ready to speak to them.”

“It is really important to wait until you have real feelings of caring, concern, sympathy, or empathy before you speak. Once you feel these feelings you need to let your partner know. You don’t need to say much. You could simply say: *you feel very angry* or *you were really hurt by what happened*. If you are sincerely moved by their experience they will feel it. They can see it in your eyes, hear it in your voice, read it in your body posture, or feel it in the gentle touch of your hand as you reach out to them.”

“In that moment, they no longer have to convince you they are right and you were wrong. They know you care and you understand their experience, regardless of whether or not they read the situation correctly or interpreted it accurately. They experienced

those feelings and it means a lot to them that you care. Although you may disagree with the facts, feel they misunderstood your intentions, or misread the situation, or that they are taking something too personally, your job is to let them know that you understand how upset they are and how painful that experience was for them.”

Before the Speaker and Listener switch roles, it is important for the new Listener to have adequate time to transition from their position of being of service to the Speaker to the position of actively recalling their point of view and feelings. It is very likely, that the Listener’s point of view has changed based on what they heard or what they experienced.

Therapist Role and Stance

As individuals are first learning listening and speaking skills, therapists may need to actively assist couples to understand that it may take time to understand one another, which requires the Listener and the Speaker to be patient as they engage in collaborative communication. Moreover, assisting couples to celebrate small achievements as they work through the steps will keep them motivated to trying the new skills they are learning and will build self-efficacy so that they can continue to practice on their own.

The first time a therapist facilitates a couple through the eight steps, the therapist models the Listener role. The therapist provides coaching to make sure that the Speaker’s message is given in a balanced and kind way. The therapist then reflects the content, identifies feelings, and demonstrates accurate empathy. It is important to note that if the therapist simply said, “you’re sad” as opposed to empathically experiencing the client’s emotions, the client would not have an emotional feeling of bond. If this is done well, the Speaker feels understood and relaxes. There is a neurobiological response that occurs when there is a shared feeling of rapport (Goleman, 2006), which is essential for creating an emotional bond.

Once the therapist demonstrates the process, the second time through the therapist assumes a coaching role. The first time a couple is coached through the process, it is important to make sure that they have chosen a relatively low conflict topic so they can focus on learning the process. Once they have grasped the concepts and developed communication skills, they can work up to more difficult issues. Once the couple has successfully practiced the eight steps with the therapist, they select low threat topics to resolve as homework. The homework enables the couple to generalize collaborative communication to their home setting and eventually into other areas of their lives.

Facilitating collaborative communication requires a compassionate, non-judgmental stance. Therapists will find themselves actively listening for cues that indicate perception, calmness, awareness, and dialogue on the part of the Speaker. When these cues are found, the therapist should provide positive reinforcement such as: *I really liked the way you stated your feelings* or *I could see you worked hard to figure out what you felt*. Similarly, the therapist is actively observing the Listener for cues of respectful listening, mirroring what is heard, understanding what is heard, and demonstrating empathy. Again, when these cues are demonstrated the therapist should provide positive reinforcement such as: *I thought you really captured what you heard in a respectful way*, or *I know it was hard for you to stay calm at a couple of points, but you kept breathing and focusing on your partner’s experience in a very caring way*. These therapist reinforcements serve to build confidence and self-efficacy as individuals are learning the skills to develop and maintain collaborative communication.

Limitations

Sometimes, it is just too hard for the Listener to feel what the Speaker is feeling. This usually happens if the Listener has some special difficulty either holding on to their point of view or difficulty in feeling empathy. In these cases, there is typically a long-standing mental health issue in which reality is distorted (e.g., psychosis), relational aptitude is challenged (e.g., autism spectrum disorders), previous trauma, or an organic cause (e.g., brain injury). A therapist who is working with a couple may want to make a referral to an individual therapist who can work on these issues in tandem to the collaborative communication process.

Implications

While we presented collaborative communication as a strategy to use with couples, this can be done with individuals, families, communities, and governments. If both sides of an opposition are able to complete the series of eight steps, both sides will discover that they have a different cognitive understanding and emotional response to the issue or issues than what they experienced at the outset of the communication process. This enables both sides to create an environment that is supportive of mutually beneficial negotiations that result in a unique and satisfying solution to all parties.

Collaborative communication is inclusive. It assumes that each of us has a unique point of view that might differ from all others. This does not make the point of view wrong, which would be an oppositional stance. Instead, the difference is “interesting,” which invites a dialogue. When individuals take a collaborative stance, conflict is readily resolved, peaceful negotiations occur, and the focus of individuals within the community can turn toward generative activity that is beneficial to everyone.

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