

“Dialoguing” for Couples

The model that I recommend for couples to use to enhance the bond between them is styled after that of the Marriage Encounter (M.E.) movement that was popular back in the late seventies and early eighties. So if you can get your hands on any M.E. materials and/or join an M.E. group it would probably be helpful. It is my understanding that the M.E. program was developed as a result of a research project. The researchers wanted to know what made the difference between successful and unsuccessful marriages. Several variables were studied and the results showed that those marriages were successful in which the couples communicated with each other every day about their relationship. “How are we doing?” “What’s working?” “What’s not working?” “What would we like each other to do more (or less) of?” “What would we like each other to do differently?” These are the important kinds of questions to be addressing to make a relationship successful. Unfortunately, people often feel like it’s not okay to ask such questions. They feel that in a good relationship these kinds of questions don’t need to be asked, that if the relationship is good everything is just automatically working. The reality is that if the relationship is good, these kinds of questions are being asked and answered and this is making the relationship better and better all the time.

The procedure I recommend is as follows. You select a topic. You each write about the topic for ten minutes. You read what each other has written. And you discuss the topic for ten minutes. The steps involved in establishing this daily dialogue are as follows. First you need to set up meeting times. These can be from 10 or 25 minutes depending on whether or not you decide to do your writing and reading in advance or at the time of the meeting. Writing at the time of the meeting has the advantage of having what you wrote fresh in your mind. Writing and reading in advance has the advantage of giving you time to think about and further process what you and your partner have written. Either way is fine and a matter of personal preference. The meetings do not need to be at the same time of day each time. They do need to be at times when you are unlikely to be interrupted. The phone can go to voice mail. The kids are settled one way or another, etc.

I recommend dialoguing a minimum of three times a week. Just as we need to do physical exercise at least three times a week to keep our bodies healthy, we need to dialogue at least three times a week to keep our relationships healthy. I recommend selecting topics by alternating between partners. This way you each get equal opportunity to have your agendas addressed. You can flip a coin for who selects the first topic or you can make the first topic, “What do I think and feel about how we communicate and how can we make it better?” A list of suggested dialogue topics follows this introduction. You can and should of course develop your own question as well. These topics should be written in the form of questions, should be as specific as possible and most importantly should be stated in a positive way. As you dialogue over a period of time more specific topics will naturally occur to you.

When you do your writing on the selected topic, use a greeting and closing as you would for a love letter. After all you are engaging in this process because you love each other and want to make this relationship work better. This love letter format helps create a positive tone to this activity. If you talk about your own or each other’s emotional reactions to things, do so in as non-judgmental a fashion as you can. Don’t think of these reactions as flaws but rather as “interesting psychological phenomena” as in *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Do your writing as rapidly as possible using what M.E. calls the “hot pen” technique. In other words, don’t stop to compose or to censor what you are writing. Write for approximately ten minutes. In your writing address both your thoughts and your feelings in response to the question you are addressing. Communication is not clear without both thoughts and feelings. Toward the end of the writing period, address how you feel about the responses that you have written.

Exchange your letters and read them and then discuss them for ten minutes. Some times you may want to take more time for your discussion, e.g. twenty or even thirty minutes. The important thing is to set a limit in advance and stick to it. It is important to have an ending point that you both know you can rely on. We need to communicate, but we also need time to process. I recommend setting a timer and stopping the discussion as soon as you can after the timer goes off. The purpose of this exercise is not necessarily to resolve or decide anything. It is to clarify and to share your feelings with each other on the given topic. In your discussion it is recommended that you address those aspect of your respective responses that either of you feels the most strongly about. Your focus should be to better clarify and understand yourselves and each other.

Note that this dialogue is not in lieu of quality fun time together. I recommend that couples make a point of scheduling fun activities as a separate entity and that they have such “dates” at least once a week. Further, I recommend that if a topic of concern between you comes up during a date, you not discuss it then and there, but rather write it up as a topic for a later dialogue. I also recommend that you build-in some sort of fail-safe to get you dialoguing again as soon as you notice that you’ve gotten off track.

Couples Communication – Suggested Topics

Here is a list of topics to get you started. As you go along you will of course develop your own topics which will include variations on these themes as well as ones that are not included here. Obviously this list is far from exhaustive. However, you may already find it a bit overwhelming. You may prefer the topic hat or jar idea so that you don’t have to look at the whole big list all the time. Just put all of the topics on separate pieces of paper in a hat or jar and draw topics until you find one you like. My bet is that if you would write down topics whenever you think of them on whatever scrap of paper is handy, you would have an awesome list that would just keep expanding out ahead of you.

- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we communicate? How could we make it better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the ways we try to show our love to one another? How could we do this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we apologize to one another? How could we do this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we ask for what we want? How could we do this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our social life? How could we make it better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our relationships with our friends? How could we make them better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of time that we spend with our friends? What do I feel would be an improvement? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about where we go to socialize? What would be a better place? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our relationships with in-laws? How could we make them better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of time that we spend with our in-laws? What do I feel would be a better allocation of time? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?

- ❑ What do I think and feel about where we go to socialize with our in-laws? What would be a better place? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our choice of activities to do with our in-laws? What would be a better choice? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the matter of housework? How could we handle it better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ Do I feel there is a better way to assign housework? What would that be? How would it work? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ Do I feel like we do too much or too little housework? What would be an improvement? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how tasks are assigned? How could we do this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our use of leisure time? What would be an improvement here? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of time we spend on leisure activities? What would be a more reasonable allocation of time? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our choice of leisure activities? What better choices could we make? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of time we spend together vs. time apart on leisure activities? What would suit me better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our use of vacation time? What would be an improvement here? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of time we spend on vacation? What would be a more reasonable allocation of time? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our choice of vacation activities? What better choices could we make? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of time we spend together vs. time apart on our vacations? What would suit me better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we do birthdays and holidays? What would be an improvement here? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we spend our time on birthdays and holidays? What would be a more reasonable allocation of time? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our choice of activities on birthdays and holidays? What better choices could we make? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of time we spend together vs. time apart on birthdays and holidays? What would suit me better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about your and my employment? What would I like better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of time that each of us works? What would be a better allocation of time? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?

- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of stress that each of us has on the job? What could we do to make this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of money that each of us makes? How could we realistically improve on this? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the way we handle our money? How could we handle it better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the way we pay our bills? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our use of discretionary funds? How could we use them more wisely? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the way we prioritize our expenditures? How could we prioritize better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the affection between us? How could we improve on this? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the amount of affection between us? What would I like better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the ways in which affection is expressed between us? What would I like better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the surroundings in which we show affection? What would I like better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about our sex life? How could we make it better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the frequency of our lovemaking? What would I like better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the duration of our lovemaking? What would I like better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What would make our lovemaking more enjoyable for both of us? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the parenting of our children? How could we handle it better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the roles each of us has taken on as parents? How could we do this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle discipline? How could we handle it better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the way in which we allow our children privileges? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of money with the children? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle illness? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of underwear? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of non-fat milk? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how I take care of myself? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?

- ❑ What do I think and feel about how I take care of my health? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue exercise? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of diet? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of driving? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of spirituality? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of order vs. clutter? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the giving and receiving of compliments? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the showing and receiving appreciation? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of chores? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of chores with the children? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we behave in public? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how much attention we give the children? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the giving and receiving of gifts? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about chivalry? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of planning vs. spontaneity? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about having children with you? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about gardening with you? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about cooking with you? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about house cleaning with you? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about going for walks with you? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about going out to dinner with you? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ How can we add more meaning to our lives? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of the children's homework? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?

- ❑ What do I think and feel about how we handle the issue of spirituality? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about doing household projects with you? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What problems do I think that I bring to our relationship? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What can I do to lessen the impact of my problems on our relationship? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think you could do to help me lessen the impact of my problems on our relationship? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about using profanity in front of the children? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What do I think and feel about the use of profanity? How could we handle this better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What can we do to make better decisions when we don't agree? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ How can I best let you know when you are doing something I don't like? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ How can I best let you know when I feel you are being inconsiderate? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ What activities could we do together to create mere quality fun time together? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?
- ❑ How do I feel about the dialoguing that we have been doing? How can we make it better? What do I think and feel about my response to this question?