

Tools for Mindfulness of Impact in Dialogue

LaShelle Lowe-Charde

Intention and Effect

As you share something with your partner, you hope to have some need of yours met. Maybe you want to connect, be heard, contribute to your partner, etc. If you are reading this article, you have likely worked hard at becoming aware of your feelings and needs and being skillful in expressing yourself. A big part of that skill is assessing the effect you are having on your listener moment by moment.

You already continuously assess your effect on others and respond at various levels of conscious awareness. Better communication means making this a much more conscious process.

Here is an example I have seen many times in work with couples. Lupe shares something she thinks would be a good idea for Aziz to do. She is excited about her idea and insight. Aziz is quiet and looking down. There is silence for a moment, then Lupe continues to talk about her idea. She isn't tracking the effects of her communication on Aziz. She may unconsciously interpret his quietness as an indication that he hasn't heard her or that he disagrees so she keeps talking, either trying to be heard or convince Aziz of what a good idea it is.

I ask Lupe to pause, and I check in with Aziz by asking, "What comes up for you when Lupe shares this idea?" Aziz says he hears criticism and imagines that Lupe thinks he isn't working hard enough. From this point Lupe can offer empathy to Aziz, or he can ask Lupe to express her feelings and needs behind her idea.

Staying conscious about how you are affecting your listener, and remembering to check in about that, helps you create and maintain connection. Here are some simple mindfulness tasks that can help you track the effect you are having on your listener:

Maintain eye contact or at least visual contact with your listener. I am surprised at how often partners look away from each other when they are speaking. It may be that you need some self-empathy for nervousness around being heard and accepted. I am guessing it is hard to look up if you imagine your partner will reject you or your ideas.

Track your listener's body. Do they lean forward or back, look down or away or maintain eye contact? Do they clench hands, pull the shoulders up, or tighten muscles in the face? Clarify your interpretations of what you notice in their body.

Notice if you want to be "right" or connected. If you notice you want to be right, then pause and give yourself empathy. Behind the impulse to be right are important needs that some part of you imagines won't be met unless you over power your listener by convincing them how right you are.

Share just a few sentences at a time and then check for effect. Less words often means more connection. You may have the strategy of holding the floor with your voice or processing out loud to find clarity. If your partner listens silently, they may be experiencing reactivity or connecting with you as you talk. Pause frequently and find out which is true.

Create the listening you want. Before you share something, ask if your partner is up for hearing it. If it is something vulnerable, let them know this and make a request for the kind of presence that will be supportive. You may want empathy, advice, perspective, or just to know how what you say lands for your partner. You might find it difficult to overcome the habit of being silent or indirect when noticing how someone responds to you. In your commitment to honesty and connection, you may often find that it's essential to leave behind ideas about social etiquette. As you become more able to consciously track your effect on others, your next step is to say what you notice. For example, "As I'm talking, I notice you are turning towards the window. I'm wondering what's coming up for you?"

In an intimate relationship, you have a powerful effect on your partner. This doesn't make you responsible for their reactivity or feelings, but rather hopefully inspires a keen attentiveness and self-responsibility.

Practice

In conversations with your partner this week, check in at least once a day about what happens for your partner as they hear you express something.