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## **The Weekly Dialogue**

Talking and not talking are both aspects of good dialogue. Simply not talking about the difficulties that arise between you is as much a recipe for disaster as is always talking about difficulties. Recall that the difference between relationships in trouble and relationships that are thriving is the ability to turn problems into learning. Much of this learning happens in dialogue. The ability to talk well about your relationship is at the heart of building strong, loving bonds.

I hope to convince you to schedule one hour a week for intentional, consensual dialogue about your relationship. I also recommend that you have a regular time for it every week. We've talked about requesting a conversation, and at times you will need to ask for an ad hoc dialogue. But by having a time set aside regularly, you establish the routineness of this kind of talk, you decrease the anxiety associated with it, and you develop the skills that lead to dialogues that are less painful and more rewarding. You get good at it.

If having a talk about hard things is not a usual part of what you do, then by definition, you do it only when things are bad. This results in increasing your anticipatory anxiety. You tend then to want to avoid these talks. You may end up asking yourself, "How bad do things need to be to require such a talk?" Talks about hard things do not get better or easier by the delays that happen when you are dreading them. Having an established time set aside will make it easier for each of you to bring up difficulties as they arise.

It will also result, sometimes, in having time for dialogues that are not necessarily about a 'problem.' If you make a practice of weekly dialogues you will likely find that, though sometimes there is a problem that needs attention, at other times things are going well, there is not particular problem, and you have the leisure of exploring the relationship in ways that are not about conflict. You may return to the kind of talk that is often a part of courtship, where couples spend long hours pleasurably learning about each other and themselves. In other words, some relationship talks are about repairing and some are about building. Don't wait for something to get broken; learn the pleasures of heart-to-heart dialogue.

## **Setting the Agenda**

Taking care of your relationship means that each of you is keeping an eye on what may need attention. It's a bit like taking care of your house or your car. Most of the time you are enjoying living in it or driving around. But also, you are aware that it needs regular maintenance and that sometimes things get broken and need special attention. Attending to the needs of the relationship means that each of you is keeping an eye on what needs attention. What do we need a bit more of? a bit less of? What do we need to understand better? What injuries may need repair? In strong relationships both partners carry this as a part of their ongoing awareness.

Remember that in learning about not bringing up negative commentary in the moment you are staying aware of what is troublesome, noting it, and sorting through what moments of pique

deserve a talk, and which ones were truly trivial or the product of fatigue etc. As you approach the weekly dialogue, consider what went on the list that might signal a need for dialogue.

For your weekly dialogue, allow about an hour. This should be an hour when you will have privacy and no interruptions. At the beginning of your talk, each of you should say what it is that you want to use the time for. Avoid passing on this opportunity. Saying how you would suggest using the time will help each of you to establish the on-going habit of paying attention to what is needed in the relationship. After each of you has spoken about your suggested agenda, you then decide together how to use the time. You may find that you agree that one topic is more important or more urgent than another. Sometimes you may decide to try to talk about both topics. At other times, you may not agree and will have to talk a bit to figure out how to proceed. You then proceed with your chosen topic practicing the aperture and dialogue skills you have already been experimenting with as well as those in the next section, "Difficulties Will Arise."

### **Exercise: The Weekly Dialogue**

Below are the guidelines for your ongoing weekly dialogues.

1. Agree on the time for your weekly dialogue, a time when you will have an hour of privacy with no interruptions.
2. In advance, each of you give some thought to what you think the two of you should use the time for.
3. When you sit down, each of you offer your suggestions, then decide on how you will use the time.
4. Pay attention to the skills discussed for starting, especially framing
5. Dialogue for about an hour.
6. Pay attention to ending well.
7. Reflect and write.
8. Discuss. Take a few minutes to discuss your thought about how it went, being careful not to return to the main topic, but to simply share what the experience was like for you.