

## **A Focused, Caring Conversation**

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One of the most repeated complaints a marriage counsellor will hear from couples who are struggling in their relationship is;

“I don’t feel heard”

“She (He) never hears anything I say”

“I never feel listened to, or understood”

or similar statements.

We all have a need to be acknowledged, understood, cared for and respected. Here is a tool that anyone can learn to use to overcome the trap we can get into by not hearing, understanding and responding to what the other person is really trying to say. When this happens repeatedly in a relationship, closeness leaves, walls go up, and many times the relationship doesn’t survive. Anyone can learn to have a

### Focused, Caring Conversation (Heart to Heart)

This can be a really helpful conversation to have when there are things between you as husband and wife or a conversation you want to have about something you are struggling with apart from your relationship. You can walk away from this conversation feeling mutually acknowledged, understood, cared for and respected.

This is not a normal conversation that you would have with people that are around us every day in our work-a-day world including with your spouse. This is something you are going to use when you need a Heart to Heart with your spouse, but this is also something you can use with a friend, your child or anyone who needs to be cared for.

Let’s focus on the husband, wife relationship.

Before you have a Focused Caring, Heart to Heart Conversation you need to get permission from your spouse. Getting permission is a good thing because it demonstrates love and respect. They may not be in a position to have a Heart to Heart because of a current time restraint or maybe they are not in a place emotionally to do that right now.

Also, in asking for a Heart to Heart, you want to let them know what the conversation is about. If your spouse senses it’s an issue between you and they don’t know what it is, it can feel like they are hearing, “We need to talk!!”. That can leave an atmosphere that feels that this conversation probably won’t start well and most likely will end worse. They’re coming feeling like a deer in the headlights. Knowing what the conversation is about can alleviate a lot of that.

To get their permission, you could say something like this:

“Is now a good time to have a Heart to Heart (Focused Caring Conversation) about the misunderstanding we had last night?”

So, you are asking their permission and letting them know what the conversation is about.

If the answer is “No, it is not a good time”, then the one asked needs to propose another time that would be suitable for both parties.

This is going to be a structured conversation where you both have separate roles. Too many times important conversations end in conflict because there is no structure, and it becomes easy to talk over each other and get loud or just simply shut down. The structure can keep both parties feeling emotionally safe. In this structured conversation there are only two roles – the person *speaking* and the person *listening*. The person who brought up the issue will usually be the person speaking first. The person listening will speak also but only to mirror back, validate and empathize with the person that’s speaking.

So, let’s say your spouse has an issue that they want to bring to you. In this case you would be the listener.

## Step #1

Once permission is granted, the first step in a Heart to Heart is to have your spouse share with you a concern that they have. Then you would *repeat back* in your own words what you heard your spouse say. You are going to respond by mirroring back your understanding of what they are trying to convey to you.

You want to truly listen without adding anything, taking away anything, or offering an opinion on what was said.

Your spouse will only share for a *minute* or so, so that you the listener can mirror back what was said. The reason for only one minute is that you the listener will not be able to repeat back five or seven minutes of listening. This has to be done in bite size chunks. But you want to hear all of it.

Then you would say something like, “If I heard you accurately, what you are saying is .....””. Then when you done, you will ask, “Did I hear it correctly?”

If the answer is “no” then your spouse needs to repeat it and you need to mirror again and ask, “Do I understand it now?”

If the answer is “yes”, then you need to say, “Is there more?”

You repeat this process until there is no more.

When you acknowledge that you understand what they are saying in this fashion, you will be communicating, “I’m really listening to what you are saying because it is important to me”. Your spouse will start to feel accepted and heard and cared for.

## Step #2

The second step in a Focused Caring Conversation is to give some *validation* behind the logic in what your spouse is trying to say. Validating simply means that you are letting them know that that you don’t think their logic is crazy. You are putting yourself in their shoes, how they are thinking, and how they are processing what has gone on. You are seeing their logic from their perspective. You don’t necessarily have to agree with them on everything, but you can understand them on the issue, enough to see their logic and validate it.

Then you want to ask, “Do you feel like you are being validated?”

## Step #3

The third step is to empathize with your spouse’s feelings. You are putting yourself in their shoes and asking yourself, “What would I feel like in that situation?”. You want to be able to feel what they are feeling and sympathize with them. You can say, “I can imagine this must have made you feel...” Then you want to ask, “Am I understanding what you are feeling?”

If you do not know what they are feeling and they haven’t told you, you can ask them.

A few notes:

\*\*\*This three step structured process can feel unnatural and awkward at first. After you become familiar with it, it will become more comfortable and not feel structured but normal.

\*\*\*When you are speaking to the listener, avoid saying things in a way that puts your spouse down or blames them. Avoid phrases like, “You always...” “You never...”. You want to be honest with your feelings without attacking.

\*\*\*If you need to make something right with your spouse a sincere apology is in order. From your heart communicate:

“I was wrong in...”(state clearly the words, attitude etc. that was offensive)

“I am sorry.....”

“Would you choose to forgive me?”