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Feeling Understood in Conflict (Speaker/Listener Technique)

This activity is meant to slow down and prioritize understanding when talking through a sensitive conversation that can get heated.

For some relationships when disagreements happen we spend a lot of time thinking. That may include problem solving, sharing our thoughts and/or disproving what was said. This leads us to not being present and hearing what the other person is saying or needing. This technique guides the conversation to be both clear (truly understanding what your partner is saying) and safe (better maintaining the relationship connection).

As an overview of the process, you will be taking turns as speaker and listener roles with the goal of discussing a topic where you can both feel understood by each other.

1. The speaker will share their position without throwing blame or criticism their feelings using "I" statements along with what you might want or need.
2. The listener will be actively listening (taking notes) about the speaker's perspective.
 - Their job is to ask the speaker about their position (clarifying), summarizing and validating their position. Remember the goal of this is to ensure both people feel fully understood, safe, and connected. You are not persuading or sharing your thoughts.
3. Once the listener has reflected back what the speaker has said to their satisfaction. "Am I understanding everything correctly?"
 - If yes, switch roles. If not, ask "What do I need to know to better understand your perspective?" Return to step 2.

****This can feel clunky at first, but through consistent practice you can make it your own while staying true to the essence of this activity which is to *slow down and give each other space to fully understand one another with compassion and empathy before anything else.*****

Helpful Guidelines and Tips for Both People:

- It helps to take notes as the listener to assist accurately reflecting back your understanding.
- *The assumption of similarity:* if you find yourself attributing a positive trait to yourself, try to see some of that trait in your partner. If you find yourself attributing a negative trait to your partner try to see some of that trait in yourself as well.
- Break it up into smaller chunks if you begin to get lost in what the speaker is saying; ask if you can reflect back some first before continuing.
- Speak about one specific topic at a time.
- Switch roles frequently to allow both people to feel understood. You will develop a balance.
- Take it slow, pause to think, and don't problem solve!

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Rules for the speaker:

Task: Speak honestly about your feelings and beliefs about your position on the topic. Take it slow, catch yourself, take accountability, and rephrase if you fall into any of the traps below.

- No blaming, criticism, or contempt.
- No “you” statements.
- Use “I” statement only about the specific situation.
- Speak for yourself and your feelings
- State a positive need with a gentle start-up. This principle is that within every complaint there is a longing or wanting for something. Expressing what you would like more of in a situation and how it might be fulfilled can lead to better understanding.
 - Avoid the use of negative need statements which are critical statements of what you don’t want.
- Let the listener paraphrase and if they are not accurately reflecting, politely restate what was misunderstood.

Rules for the listener:

Task: Building love, trust, and understanding by really listening to the speaker. Your job is to listen and ask questions that help this goal, not argue your point of view.

- Prepare to listen
 - Connect with the goal of postponing sharing your opinions and experiences for the sake of understanding your partner. Tuning into their pain, even if you don’t agree with the details.
 - Try to understand your partner’s world from their perspective.
- Attune to your partner’s feelings and be present with them.
 - **Do:** Ask open-ended questions and clarify to deepen your understanding of other’s world and needs.
 - **Don’t:** be critical, judgemental, or defensive. Don’t engage in put downs or approach the situation from a place of superiority. Don’t Minimize your partner’s feelings. Don’t take responsibility for your partner’s feelings as to try to make them feel better or cheer them up.
 - Take it slow, catch yourself, take accountability, and rephrase if you fall into any of the traps.
- Use your own words to summarize and reflect back to the other person’s satisfaction.
- Validate, communicate your understanding and empathy.
 - Connect with the feelings and meaning and not just the content.
 - Validation doesn’t mean agreement, but that you understand their experience.