

After you manage to bring both partners “in touch” with both their need for attachment and assertiveness (this is what we call “standing on both legs”) you can support the direct communication between them.

1. Let them start talking to each other.

They can discuss e.g. one of their latest conflicts or issues.

2. Interrupt the dominant (externalizing) partner and offer your help as a “coach”

If one of them shows difficulties to moderate his or her speech and talk in a balanced way you can ask both to stand up with you shifting into the observer position. Therapist (standing side by side with Betty looking down on Tom’s empty chair below): *“Betty, could you please try to tell Tom how you felt last night when he was running late and didn’t call?”* You are the “reference point” feeling how the message will reach Tom. If she is still too aggressive (dominant) then just interrupt her friendly. *“Sorry Betty for interrupting you. Are you aware how you are talking right now? I am afraid if you talk to Tom this way he might get the feeling you are mainly accusing him. Could you please try to speak a bit more from your vulnerable side.....Yes, that sounds much better!”* Don’t hesitate tying in with suggestions like *“How about: Tom, it makes me feel lonely if I don’t know when you will come. It reminds me too much of how I felt when I was left alone as a child... How does that sound? ... Does it sound right to you?... Can you try to say this in your own words? ... How does that feel? ... Do you feel more balanced now?”*

3. Enhancing empathy and mentalization by “stepping into the partner’s shoes”

If clients show difficulties to shift into the partner’s stance there are two ways to help them:

- (1) The **softer** way is to go into an observer mode and ask for a description of her behavior first (Mode Awareness): *“Betty, let’s put the Betty talking right now down there on her chair and try to look at her as if she is an actress in a movie. Can you hear her talking, how her voice sounds, her gestures are?”* Then place yourself and Betty standing behind Tom’s chair while Tom remains in the observer position. *“Betty, how does it make you feel in your body when you hear Betty talking this way (while you repeat Betty’s words)?.....How are you inclined to react?.....Is that what you intend?.....What could Betty do to open Tom up more connecting with her?”*
- (2) In the more **activating** path is to ask Betty to sit down on Tom’s chair, while Tom takes a seat beside her and you sitting between them. All three close eyes finding themselves now in Tom’s position. Then you repeat Betty’s words, describe her voice tone, her gestures, the look in her eyes asking, how that makes her feel in her chest and belly, eventually offering polar options (like outlined in Module 5). Then ask for the impulse to react and what she would need from the Betty over there to stay in touch with her. The questions are the same, but we try to create a vivid image of Betty in front of Betty’s (closed) eyes to increase body reactions and feelings to make her empathize with Tom and soften her up.
- (3) Once Betty is sufficiently balanced, all three return to the centered standing up observer position again.

4. Let the healthy adult try the new strategy out

“Shifting the gear in again” from the observer level takes 2 steps:

(1) Ask Betty to talk to the empty Tom chair below now as balanced as she can. Ask Tom how that makes him feel. Once more, you might model and shape a bit remembering her about her vulnerable and empathic (blue) side.

(2) Once they feel comfortable with their speech go and place the former dominant chair beside the two child mode chairs and ask Betty to sit down on this chair. You take a seat slightly behind her. Tom takes a seat on his chair. Therapist: *“Ok, now try to say what you said in the standing up position to Tom on eye level, please... How does that feel?.... If you feel ok please hold this feeling for a moment.”* The therapist moves beside Tom asking: *“Tom, how does it make you feel if Betty talks to you this way now?.....Is there something that you don’t like?.....How are you inclined to react?”* If Tom makes adequate suggestions go back to Betty and try to support her to meet Tom’s needs of e.g. being respected or seen. Try to help the couple to find a functional solution for the problem they addressed in the beginning of the session.

The exercise works both ways and you might support Tom in the standing up position to strengthen his assertive leg instead of avoiding taking a clear stance. Stepping into Betty’s shoes may increase his understanding how she feels left alone and disconnected when he checks out into an avoidant coping mode. If Tom lacks ideas how he wants Betty to behave you might ask for a “best day”-image (like in module 4 or 8) and do some shaping and modelling. You always end the exercise with both partners sitting on eye level. However it makes quite a difference to talk from “above” compared to talking on eye level. Once both partners are sufficiently trained to talk in a self-reflective, balanced and good-willing way you can proceed to the connection dialogue exercise in module 11.

Possible Homework assignment: Ask the couple to shift over to the blue leg as much as they can. The willingness to connect in an understanding, cooperative and caring way lays the tracks for effective problem solving and a peaceful and functional relationship.