

Once the couple manages to stop mode cycles and are generally able to talk to each other in a balanced way you can proceed to use connection dialogue to help them work on difficult problems and deal with conflicts. It consists of several steps. Beside the steps described below there are some formal things to consider:

- Make your connection dialogue training a fixed appointment, like an appointment with a friend. If one partner cannot keep the appointment, he or she is in charge to offer a replacement.
- It works best if the couple meets twice a week for about 30 minutes. They do not have to accomplish all steps. In the beginning they will only manage to echo-listen and reach the step to accept the partner's position. This is a very important step. It is more important to get accustomed to the altitude than to reach a result.
- Use a token to define who has the right to speak.
- No interruptions, no alcohol, sit face to face or take a walk.
- At the beginning, it might make sense to give both partners time to express their feelings without time limit and without repetition by the partner, more like a kind of "cathartic talk" rather than a connection dialogue.
- Later it makes sense not to let the partners talk for too long in order to allow the other partner to repeat the essence of one's message.

The steps of a connection dialogue are:

1. *Decide* what you want to talk about. Find a precise focus. Start describing the situation first, but don't talk about feelings or assumptions. At best, start with a recent issue that you're aware of. Avoid over-generalizations like "you...always"

2. *Talk* about your personal experience, especially your feelings. The first partner expresses his or her view and associated emotions on the issue and nothing else. Don't say more than two or three sentences. Your partner is encouraged to listen empathically. At the beginning, it's OK if your perspectives differ.

3. *Repeat*. Your partner repeats what they heard. They shouldn't repeat your words mechanically but try to grasp your meaning and put it into their own words. You have the chance to correct the message until it reaches your partner accurately, but don't fall back into discussion. If needed, pass the token back to the correcting partner. You'll both find that this "echo-listening" will feel painful in the beginning, but it slows the pace down. And over time it creates a feeling of being heard and by that a basic sense of connection. Soon an atmosphere of acceptance will be the new normal in your relationship. This is a crucial turning point in your conflict culture.

4. *Reverse roles*. Switch roles, so that your partner expresses a view and you do the echo-listening. This process often involves extensive clarification until you both understand more deeply what the other means by their words. Listen carefully as you exchange your perspectives on the issue and arrive at a common understanding. This movement is like dancing the tango. Dancing creates connection! But don't move too fast or you'll get out of step. It might take several turns until you're really able to put yourself into your partner's shoes, but this is what it takes to find solid ground for a well-working solution. Showing your vulnerable side activates the caretaking system and opens the partner up to your needs and wishes.

5. *Wishes*. You then make a wish. Your partner repeats the wish and adds their own one. Don't comment on each other's. Let them stand side by side in the middle of the space between you. There

doesn't have to be an agreement at this point. Diplomacy takes time! Try keeping up an atmosphere of understanding, acceptance, and goodwill.

6. *Suggestion*. Based on your different wishes, try to find out how you can take a step toward your partner. Take little steps, keeping the balance between your attachment and assertiveness needs. Don't surrender for the sake of a quick solution, but don't fight too hard. Go back and forth several times. You both need patience and a lot of goodwill at this point.

7. *Agreement*. Once you see a way forward, try to arrive at a solution to your problem. The agreement includes a precise description of the desired behaviour of both partners. If your talk has been about an important issue, you might write out a contract. Looking at violations of the agreement can provide a starting point for your next connect talk. Remember: It's a good sign when you and your partner both feel you have offered too much, as a good compromise is painful for both parties. If one party feels good, the solution is probably not well balanced.

Homework assignment: Ask the couple to practice twice a week for 30 min.