



Cultivating Connection Between Couples

Behind every disappointment, frustration or complaint between couples, there is an unmet desire. Even though those desires are not wrong or sinful, when they become inordinate desires and evolve into a demand, it leads to judgements against each other and conflicts erupt. That reveals the heart's striving to avoid past pain that reinforces the deeply embedded beliefs about the self.

Case Study

A wife growing up with preoccupied, unavailable parents may have repeatedly experienced feeling discarded and invisible, reinforcing a deep sense that she is unimportant. As a result, her desire to secure a way to affirm that she matters becomes overly important to her. So, she enters the marriage with expectations that she will be her husband's first priority, that he will anticipate her needs and meet them. When her husband shows up late to their anniversary dinner, her past wounds of feeling discarded and invisible are triggered, reinforcing the belief that she does not matter. She rejects his gifts and spends the evening giving him the silent treatment. Her reactions then triggers her husband's past hurts of feeling rejected reinforcing the message that he is inadequate. For him, growing up with a highly successful, but a critical dad, his desire for approval was very important to him. So in this conflict, his desire for assurance that he is good enough evolves into a demand.

As a prerequisite to making requests, counselors should take enough time to help couples understand their heart's inclination toward inordinate desires. They should facilitate a process to help each of them receive comfort from God for their personal wounds and be more assured of who they are in Christ. Then it is more likely that their requests are not about getting their own way or a way to control or test the other. Rather, the requests become opportunities for each of them to vulnerably share of themselves and to intentionally serve and minister by engaging with the partner's requests in turn. In that way, partners can grow in sacrificial love and become an agent of God's healing in the other.

After becoming aware of their inclination and the reason behind it, help the couple take the following steps to practice making requests.

Practice Making Requests

Help the couple notice their disappointments, frustrations or complaints and name them.

They may notice a common internal voice, a thought or a feeling, that usually accuses or criticizes their spouse. For example, they may say the following to themselves:

- He/she always does/say...
- He/she never does/say...
- He/she is always/never...

Help the couple identify the desire behind their disappointments, frustrations, or complaints.

Often, their internal voice expresses their desires in “should” statements:

- He/she should do/say...
- He/she should be...
- I should be able to...
- I should be treated...

Help the couple turn their desires into requests.

Once the frustration and the desire becomes clearer to the couple, having them write out their request may help to carefully choose their words as they prepare to make their request. Using the case study above:

- Wife’s frustration may say, “He is always late to meet me when we make plans.”
- The desire behind that frustration may say, “He should be on time to meet me. I should be treated with respect.”
- Ask the couple to own their desires and think about why their desire is important to them. Then assign this step to turn their desire into a request using “I” statements for homework.

Have the couple make their requests to each other.

As you create this enactment, remind them of the following and guide their process:

- Start with a positive posture paying attention to tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language.

- Use “I” statements and elaborate on the meaning of the request when making them.
- Using the case study above, the wife, who reacted to her husband’s lateness, can request, “I would really appreciate it if you would let me know if you are going to be late to meet me. This will let me know that I was on your mind, that you didn’t forget about me.” She can further elaborate on the meaning by sharing a memory of her past hurt that will help him understand why she needs assurance that she is seen and important. She can also share a memory of when her husband was on time and how that made her feel like she mattered to him.
- Check in with each other to make sure they each understand the expectation of the other. The husband in the above example can respond, “I understand that you want me to let you know when I am running late to meet you because that would let you know that you are on my mind and I didn’t forget about you.”

Help the couple process how they may feel or react if their spouse does not follow through with their request.

This process will help them check themselves to be sure they are not using their requests to get their way, to control or test the other. You can ask:

- How do you imagine you would feel if he/she didn’t follow through with your request?
- How do you imagine you would respond to your feeling?

Any feelings of contempt or judgment would indicate inordinate desire. In that case, help them revisit the heart’s inclination toward inordinate desires and submit them to God. Help them also understand that they should be willing to clarify and make the request again. Responding to a request that is being asked is not something that comes naturally for the partner, so it might take some patience if the partner doesn’t follow through right away. Learning new interactions requires intentional effort and time to grow.

Instruct the couple to notice when their requests are granted and express their appreciation and gratitude.

In following sessions, it is good practice to begin the sessions asking the couple to express their appreciation and gratitude to one another. Then the counselor can reinforce the positive bonding experience by asking the couple to share how they experienced this exchange. The counselor can further reinforce their experience of connection by offering observations of their tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. This bonding experience will allow them to be more receptive and less reactive to each other when engaging in harder conversations.