



Dialogue Therapy: Helping Couples Move from Disillusionment to Intimacy

Dialogue Therapy is a time-limited couples therapy, usually done by co-therapists (two therapists in the room), that is designed to help married or co-habiting couples who experience repetitive, and sometimes aggressive or troubling, difficulties in handling their conflicts with respect. Developed originally by Polly Young-Eisendrath and Ed Epstein in 1982, Dialogue Therapy has been practiced, taught, and supervised by Polly since the early 1990's. Polly has written two books about it: *Hags and Heroes* (1984) and *You're Not What I Expected* (1993).

After the initial romance has ended, all couples enter into power struggles in which the partners play out emotional scenarios that are unconsciously generated from their original family life in childhood. There may be other problems, as well, such as an inability to commit to each other and parenting or step-parenting issues. Disillusionment with the partner and the relationship follows. Disillusionment is natural and the first opportunity for a true and enduring love and intimacy to develop. But if power struggles are not handled with skill and mindfulness, a couple is at risk for separating or destroying the foundation of trust on which true love rests. Many married couples even remain in a “cold war” of emotional deadness, repetitive power struggles, and little intimacy over years and decades – a situation that can be deleterious for mental and physical health.

Dialogue Therapy is a program of just six therapeutic sessions that extend over a year's time in which a couple is evaluated and then showed how to relate in conflict without entering into active or passive aggression. After the emotional landscape of underlying patterns is clarified, the couple is taught skills of mindfulness and dialogue. Dialogue Therapy addresses more than “communication problems,” however. Combining psychoanalytic methods and theory, with aspects of psychodrama and mindfulness, Dialogue Therapy addresses the fact that, in times of confusion and conflicts, partners tend to perceive each other as an “intimate enemy” with the consequence of casting the relationship into a chronic pattern of “victim” and “victimizer” that has to be broken open before communication problems can be solved.

Couples therapy is notorious for failing because the couple comes to depend on a therapist to help them solve conflicts safely and learn communication skills. And so, the members of the couple do not become responsible for seeing into their own individual emotional patterns or using the “rules” of conflict resolution outside of the therapist's office. Even from the first session, Dialogue Therapy is a method of partners developing skills of their own that are not dependent on either of the co-therapists, but are coached and encouraged within a framework of safety and learning.

Course of Dialogue Therapy

Session #1: Evaluation (3 – 4 hours). The initial assessment is a structured meeting with the co-therapists to evaluate a couple's emotional power struggles and relationship patterns. The co-therapists observe the couple speaking with each other, give a brief pencil and paper assessment, and conduct a “Relationship History” (that covers all major relationships, moving backwards in time to include relationships with parents and siblings).

The co-therapists also act as a “reflecting team,” speaking with each other about what they see in the couple. All activities typically take place within the foursome, encouraging trust and openness. At the end of the meeting, the partners receive feedback and are told whether or not they are suitable for Dialogue Therapy. If not, they are referred for other forms of therapy.

Session #2: First Session of Dialogue Therapy (2 hours): Working on a Conflict

Session #3: Second Session (2 hours): Practicing Skills

Session #4: Building Empathy for Your Partner (2 hours): Practicing “Role Reversal”

Session #5: Using the Skills of Dialogue Therapy and Empathy to Repair Trust (2 hours)

Session #6: Follow-up (2 – 3 hours), Occurring Six Months after Session #5 – Evaluation

Co-Therapists and Fees:

POLLY YOUNG-EISENDRATH, Ph.D., is a Jungian analyst, writer, psychologist and mindfulness teacher who has published 15 books including *The Self-Esteem Trap*, *The Cambridge Companion to Jung*, and *Women and Desire*. Her most recent book, *The Present Heart: A Memoir of Love, Loss and Discovery*, is a meditation on the healing power of love – based on her experience with her spouse who died from early onset Alzheimer’s disease -- that attempts to answer the question “What is love, anyway?” Polly maintains a full-time clinical and consulting practice in central Vermont. She is Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Vermont and Clinical Supervisor at Norwich University

TAMARA BISBEE, Psy.D., is a wife, a mother, a grandmother and a Clinical Psychologist with thirty years of experience in observing, thinking about and intervening with the life problems that attend relationships between people. She maintains a full-time clinical and consulting practice in central Vermont and is a Clinical Supervisor at Norwich University.

Fee for Dialogue Therapy (Two Co-Therapists): \$300 per hour

Fee for Supervision on Dialogue Therapy (One Supervisor): \$200 per hour

Intensive Weekends of Dialogue Therapy for Out-of-town Couples

are occasionally available: Total fee is negotiated individually
(half of the payment is due to reserve the weekend)

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