

Dealing with strong emotions or hurting

There are many incidences that might release **strong or overwhelming emotions** in one of the partners: Discovery of an affair or another serious betrayal, a decision about an abortion, an accident of a child caused by a lack of attention from one partner and for some a serious loss of money at the stock exchange. Besides that, there might be **hurting from the past** in terms of “unfinished businesses” that work as road-blocks on the way to a better relationship (especially with more Cluster-C like clients). Then perspective change is not easy and might require expressing these strong emotions first. We are not only talking about anger, but also about deep grief. Therefore, we now describe a **variation of connection dialogues** (Module 11).

1. The therapist and the couple **line up as three on one side** – the therapist in the middle position facing an empty chair in front of them (see figure below). All three close eyes to better connect with the world inside we are now working in. The person wanting to **express his or her feelings** now talks in direct speech **to the empty chair**. The partner just listens and must not interrupt. In any case, the therapist needs to moderate the process. Either we encourage the (inhibited) Client to speak more frankly by asking *„is there something else you want to say?...Did you put everything on the table now?“* Or we need to limit overshooting outbursts by saying: *“I fully understand your anger and I feel there is much more to say and we will come back to that later, but I first would like to check how Tom feels about what you said so far.”* Basically, everything can (and should) be put on the table, but we need to care whether the listening partner is able to “digest” the bit of given information and avoid tipping him or her over to the “red” leg justifying him- or herself.
2. We ask the listening person: *„What do you feel in your body now listening to Betty?“* We gently guide the person away from their cognitive and coping mode reaction towards the feelings in their body to hopefully connect with the vulnerable and compassionate side. If anger comes up, we label and validate it, but encourage the client to put it on an (imagery) chair aside and offer polar body feelings (like described in module X) trying to **connect with the vulnerable side**, since emotional reconnection is based on the vulnerable sides of both partners.

Since this process is very variable we need to decide, if we want to give Tom the chance to add „his side of the smartphone“ first to keep the situation balanced or if we return to Betty giving her the chance „to put something more on the table“. In any case we are in charge to tweak the process into a positive and **solution-directed way**. In case clients (e.g. Cluster-C type people) tend to get stuck in the „problem network“ of their brain we might ask: *„I feel your pain and understand your anger, but what could Tom do NOW to make the situation better?“* A metaphor you might use is: *„If we try to start a new chapter of a book we need to turn the page over and start writing on an empty page. If we carry over content from the pages before there will be no space for a new chapter.“* Eventually working with the following module dealing with persistent critic mode voices is needed before we can continue with couple work.

3. Finally, Tom gets the opportunity to share “his side of the smartphone”. The therapist needs to “catch bullets” whenever Tom becomes accusing or “crosses the fence” to Betty’s side. Like in connection dialogues (module 11), you might move back and forth a few times, until all emotions are laid out on the table. If the hurting is very deep, this procedure sometimes takes several sessions and requires a very active moderation from the therapist’s side.

The goal is to give space for the angry (“red leg”) emotions first. Once they are expressed, they become less urgent and give way to access the underlying vulnerable side. Like in connection dialogues, the stage is set to proceed to wishes and contributions for the next step to repair the rupture in the relationship. Since the impact of such deep hurting are somewhat traumatic, we need

to prepare the couple for ongoing **flashbacks**. The challenge for the hurting partner is to remain patient and centered letting the waves roll through. The hurt partner should try to defuse from the intruding thoughts and feelings, sort them out on an (imagery) extra chair and try to open up for the present moment and a better future as much as they can.

Finally, be aware to guide the process repetitively into a solution-directed way by asking: *“Ok, I see the hurting, but where do you want to go from here?”* The couple might find itself on a crossroad: Either there is enough good-will to grow together again or to work towards a well-arranged relationship (we call “living together apart”). Eventually, the hurting and the resulting rupture can be too deep to be healed. In this case we need to figure out if there is still a chance to guide the couple into a more disillusioned and accepting arranged relationship or we accompany them into a separation based on a mismatch in their visions about the future.