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THERAPY WORKSHEETS & SKILLS FOR COUPLES THERAPISTS

Using Sentence Stems to
Deepen Couples Therapy
and Provide Empathy



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Hendrix and Helen Lakelly Hunt,
Rebecca Sears, our amazing team
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Imago Relationships

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The Marriage Restoration Project

DEEPENING

Couples Therapy

Your job as a therapist is to help identify the client's feelings/thoughts/needs and provide an empathetic response that shows you understand and accept their feelings and point of view. Sentence stems help your clients access their feelings about a situation that they may or may not be consciously aware of.

Think about how you would feel

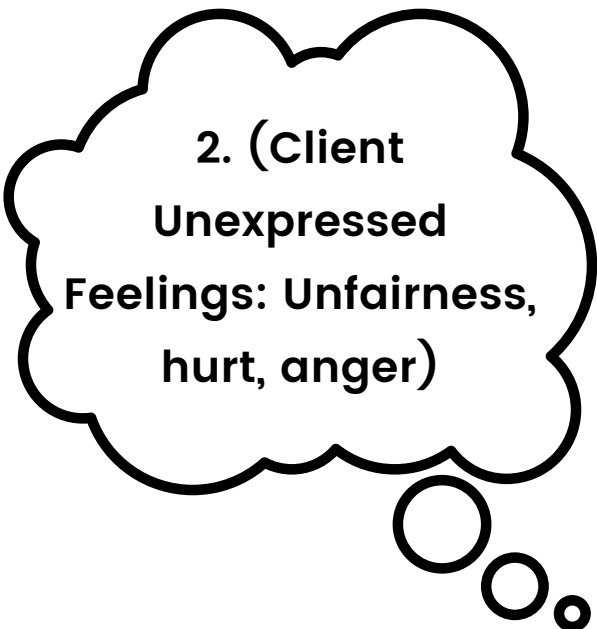
- How I would feel
- What I would wish
- What I would want to happen
- What I would be thinking about myself
- What I would be hoping for

DEEPENING *Couples Therapy*


Example:



1. Client: "She is always picking on me and I'm not doing anything wrong"



2. (Client Unexpressed Feelings: Unfairness, hurt, anger)



3. Empathetic response: "You think she is being unfair and that really makes you mad"

DEEPENING *Couples Therapy*

Instead of offering advice, asking questions, lecturing, saying "I understand", we invite you to start thinking about using empathizing language to deepen your work to help the client unearth answers within themselves.

SENTENCE STEMS

To Deepen Work

While your client is sharing, as long as you feel safe and your client is calm, when you are not pressed for time, and when there is not a serious misbehavior that must be addressed, use the following empathetic sentence stems to help your client identify their feelings.

When you need more information about what is being shared:

And what I mean by that is...

An example of that is...

A time you did that was...

What I'm referring to is...

A story I recall is...

What hurt me about that was...

Why that hurts me is...



**Going deeper to access
the wound: use any of the
following**

What I say to myself about this is...

What that reminds me of is...

The worst part about that is...

A time this happened to me was...

The person I felt this the most with was...

When that happened what I did was...

My fear is...

What scares me about this is...

If I tell you how I really feel I'm afraid you will...

What no one understood about me then was...

A story I remember is...

When this happened to me I felt...

What I'm curious about is...

The way this behavior kept me safe was...

The story I tell myself about this is...

The decision I made about this was...

What I do to hide my fear is...

How I feel about that is...



**Helping the client to see their role
and contribution to the situation
and avoid blame or shame of their
partner**

And when you do that I react by...

And that usually results in...

What I wish I had done differently is...

I now see that my actions were trying to say...

How it would help me if I can do _____ is...

And how that would help our relationship...

What scares me most about doing that is...

What holds me back is...

How I feel about that is...

When you do that I feel...

When you say that I feel...

What hurts me when you say that is...

And then the story I make up about why you do that is...

My interpretation of that was...

The actions that made me feel uncared about were...

Moving into What the Client Wants

And so what I want to do is...

What I want to feel is...

Something you could do that would help me begin to feel that is...

If I could feel that it would help me be more...

How you might help me with that is...

While feelings are always valid, it is essential to listen for any blaming statements or interpreting of a spouse's actions or words since that will undermine the session. Use sentence stems to redirect the speaker to express their triggers and assumptions about the other spouse. The goal is to help your couples become conscious of their feelings and interpretations and that those are not necessarily what the other partner intended.

SENTENCE STEMS

about MONEY (1)

Money is one of the most common fights couples have. Help your couples talk safely about their financial goals using the following sentence stems and lead lines about money.

The most important lesson(s) I learned from my parents about money is/are...

One important value I hold around money is...

Some of the things I don't mind spending money on are...

Some of the things I don't like spending money on are...

One financial goal I have for myself is...

(If relevant) Some of the things I would like to teach our children about money are...



SENTENCE STEMS

about MONEY (2)

What I think you and I are doing right as we manage our finances is...

What concerns me about how we are managing our money is...

One financial goal I have for us is...

The reason this is important to me is...

What we might have to change in order to achieve this goal is...

What might be hard for us about this is...

If we could accomplish this goal how I imagine I would feel would be _____...

And I realize you may feel differently about this than I do...



SENTENCE STEMS

about MONEY (3)

One way I would like to cut our costs/change our spending habits is

What I think might be hard about this is

The positive impact I think it would have

One reason we might not want to do this is

How we could support each other in doing so might be

In my childhood, money is . . . , rich people are . . . , wealth is . . . , poor people are . . . , etc.



SENTENCE STEMS

about JOB & CAREER (1)

A talk about changing jobs or a career can feel very triggering or scary for one partner. Use the following sentence stems to help deepen the conversation while maintaining neutrality.

What I like about my current job/situation...

What I don't like about it...

The biggest challenge I am facing...

As I think about this the story I tell myself is...

And what I start to feel is...

If there was one thing I could change about how I'm handling things it would be...

The way you could support me in this is _____
and I realize this may not be possible...



SENTENCE STEMS

about JOB & CAREER (2)

Describe your ideal job. Include such things as:

- what you would be doing
- who you would be working with
- what the work environment would be like
- how many hours you would be working
- what the salary/benefits would be

What I would like about being in such a job...

The ways such a job might be a challenge for me...

What makes it hard for me to pursue this (or what blocks me from achieving such a job)...

Steps I could possibly take to move in this direction... Some possible ways you could help me with this if you felt like it...

SENTENCE STEMS

about RELIGIOUS ⁽¹⁾ DIFFERENCES

Religious differences can be extremely polarizing and can potentially end a relationship. With the right tools, you can help couples reconnect and be able to make space for different perspectives.

What is most important to me now about my spirituality or religious tradition/history is . . . (you could also substitute "spiritual practice", "religious community", etc.) is . . .

And the reason it is so important to me at this point in my life is . . .

OR "What it gives me in my life is . . .

And what it is like for me inside to have that is . . .

And I end up feeling . . .

What feels familiar or opposite about those feelings and what it gives me as I was growing up is ...



SENTENCE STEMS

about RELIGIOUS (2) DIFFERENCES

What that was like for me as a kid having/not having that in my life was . . .

My biggest fear about us having different beliefs/practices/ is

Given our similarities/differences, what is most important to me that I want us to pass on to our children is . . .

Having told you what is important to me, and hearing what is important to you, one way I think we could consciously honor each other's beliefs/practice is . . .

OR one way I think we could share our spirituality while honoring our differences is . . .



SENTENCE STEMS

about PARENTING

Couples may have different ideas of how they want to raise their kids and this can sometimes lead to friction. Here are some lead lines for helping couples deepen their conversation about parenting.

What I want for our kids...

When I do that (to the partner...) our child probably feels... and his/her way to protect himself is by.. .or /then s/he are.../the message I give him....or/ the way I want him to feel in that moment is... for that I need to

When you do that, our child feels...

My vision for how we parent together is...

SENTENCE STEMS

about BODY LANGUAGE

Sometimes one partner will use body language that triggers the other. Helping your couple clarify the other's body language can take the tension down a notch.

What I see you saying is ... That person then states what meaning they took from their partner's body language, followed by "Did I get it?" and "Is there more?"

What I make up that you were saying when you _____ (i.e. sneered, grimaced, rolled your eyes, etc.). Did I get you? If what I made up is not what you were feeling, would you please help me understand.



SENTENCE STEMS

about SEX & INTIMACY (1)

Often, both partners desire to have intimacy with great discrepancies in frequency. It helps to have a safe dialogue in which the couple can talk about what it is like in each of their "worlds".

"Sex". It can start out with you prompting the Receiver to start with a question such as...

"I'm Sex. What's it like having less of me in your life?" and then following wherever they go. You might weave in stems such as

My greatest joy with you (sex) has been...

What I miss the most about you (sex) is...

What I like most about having less of you (sex) in my life is...

My deepest hurt with you (sex) is...

What I do when I feel that hurt is...



SENTENCE STEMS

about SEX & INTIMACY (2)

Talking about Sex in this way removes the "other" as the problem and can help both partners to become clearer about what is underneath the protective behavior and therefore have more empathy and more willingness to grow into new possibilities than when they have to defend against feeling blamed for the problems.

What I desire most from you (Sex) that I'm not getting any more is...

One thing I could do differently in my relationship with you (Sex) is...

The support I would like from my partner around this is...



SENTENCE STEMS

about GOING TO COUNSELING

When a couple decides to end counseling, or when one partner is hesitant to continue, it can help to dialogue about this difference of opinion or to end therapy with closure.

An appreciation I have for you about our time in counseling...

What I see that I have changed in myself/my behaviors...

What I see that you have changed in yourself/your behaviors...

What I need to continue to address about my contributions to our conflicts...

What I want to remember to continue to do to increase our connection...

What might get in my way of using the tools we have learned...

What I can do about that...

In the future how we will know that we need help...

What my agreements are about getting help again...



SENTENCE STEMS

about AN AFFAIR ⁽¹⁾

Part of our amends process after an affair is that the spouse who was betrayed can ask what they need to ask about what went on. This may take many times until they feel they can trust again. The affairer needs to be very transparent about all of their actions in order to regain that trust and that can take a while. It's incumbent on the affairer to be fully open and patient with the repair process.

What scares me about that...

What hurts me the most about that...

What I really want to know...

The reason I want to know is...

What I keep thinking about is...

What I want you to know about me right now...

The hardest time of day for me is...

One thing you could do each day that would really help me...

When I tell you how I feel, what I'd like you to do is...

SENTENCE STEMS

about AN AFFAIR

(2)

You can help the spouse that had the affair safely share more about his/her feelings about what went on with the following lead lines. Obviously this can be very sensitive so use sensitively. **FOR THE BETRAYER TO SHARE**

What I want you to know...

When I see you hurting....

What scares me about all this...

What I want for us...

What I want you to know about me...

When you ask me questions about the affair....

Sometimes when I think about all this,
The part of me who doesn't want to
stay and work through or issues..... and
the part of me that does"

SENTENCE STEMS

about EXTENDED FAMILY (1)

Whether family is visiting or the couple is traveling to extended family, there can often be fear about family interactions. The couple can discuss this prior to interactions in order to get on the same page.

Some potentially challenging interactions that might come up with my family this year are...

One thing I'm afraid of happening during our visit is...

Something that my mom/dad/sibling could do that would be really hard/triggering for me is...The hardest/scariest part about these interactions is...

SENTENCE STEMS

about EXTENDED FAMILY (2)

How I respond/react when I am in these situations is...

What I experience in my body is...

What this reminds me of from childhood is...

What I really needed back then was...

One way that having you by my side could be supportive to me is...

SENTENCE STEMS

about UNCOUPLING

When a couple decides to uncouple, you can help them do so in a conscious and connected way without becoming enemies, vital especially if they have children together and need to coparent.

If I never see you again, what I would want you to know is...

How I wish I had shown up in the relationship...

My heart's desire is for you...

SENTENCE STEMS

about SPENDING TIME TOGETHER (1)

What makes it hard for me to sit still/not be as busy are...

What comes up for me when I am not busy...

What I like about being busy is...

How I experienced busyness as a child was... (for example, were the parents always shuffling them around from activity to activity, or were they bored a lot with nothing to do)...

What makes it hard for me to say no to projects/invitations are...

SENTENCE STEMS

about SPENDING TIME TOGETHER (2)

How slowing down might
benefit me and our relationship
is

How slowing down would NOT
serve me well is...

When I take a moment to be
still right now I feel...

What scares me about slowing
down/being still is...



SENTENCE STEMS

about ANY TOPIC (1)

Deepen any conversation using some of these sentence stems.

When you did that/said that, I interpreted it to mean...

And then I felt...

What I am afraid of...

What hurts...

What that reminds me of...

How I protected myself in childhood was...

How that affects the way I behave today...

What I long for is...



SENTENCE STEMS

about ANY TOPIC (2)

How I imagine my behavior affects you is...

A new decision I might make given that I am no longer a child is...

And out of that decision, a new way I might behave is...

What makes it hard to take in your love is...

When I get scared, how I try to protect myself is...

Underneath my anger, what I am experiencing is...If I reclaim my (feeling, lost part, etc.), what I am afraid will happen is....



SENTENCE STEMS

about ANY TOPIC (3)

One unspeakable that I want to tell you about me is...

What I am experiencing in my body is...

What makes it hard for me to give you what you need is...

How giving you what you need will help me is...

The story I make up about your behavior is...

The image I put on your face that has me make up that story about you...

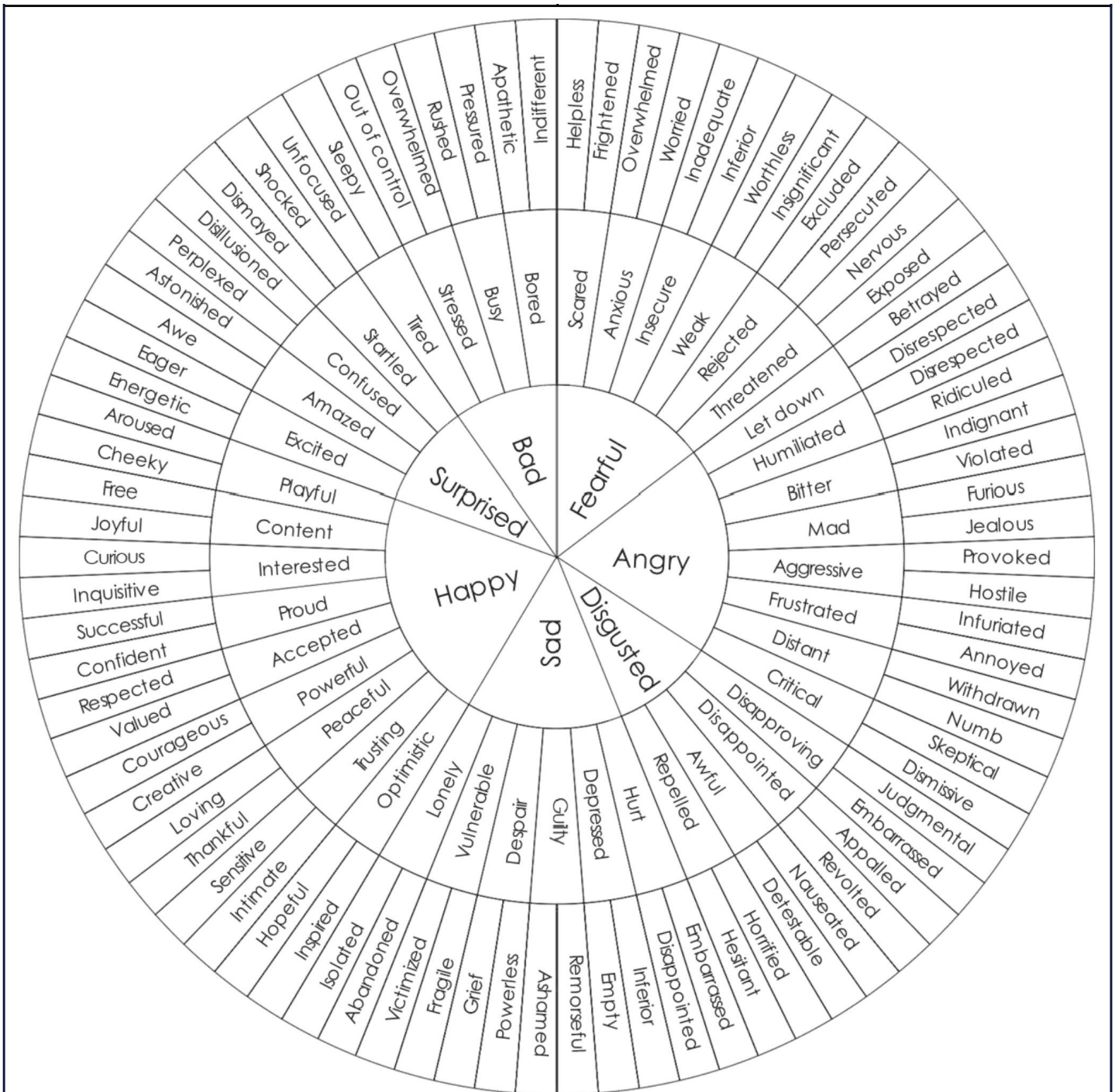
How that image keeps me safe is...

How it keeps me from getting what I want is...

A new image I could hold of you is...If I could hold that image, how I might respond differently is...



A Tool for Understanding and Regulating Emotions: The DBT Emotion Wheel



Using the above emotions wheel, choose the word(s) that describe your feeling(s) as closely as possible.

I feel...

Questions to think about:

What situations make you feel this way?

Questions to think about: (Continued)

Is this a positive or negative emotion for you?

What thoughts do you have when you feel this way?

What physical feelings tell you that you are having this emotion?

What is your behavior when you feel this way? i.e. what do you do?

Additional Notes

NEXT STEPS: DEEP LISTENING

using THE IMAGO DIALOGUE

Our focus until now has been on helping the person talking, i.e. the “sender” deepen their feelings and emotions.

Now we will focus on **Listening** to what was being shared.

At this point, the sender should be **1) Mirrored, 2) Validated, and 3) Empathized with.**

The practice of Mirroring allows the sender to feel heard and to get some help with unwrapping the complex layers to their emotions in a contained way.

Next, you (as the therapist in a session with an individual will validate or facilitate the listener in a couples session to do so) will Validate.

Validation looks like, “What you’re saying makes sense and you make sense.”



DEEP LISTENING

using THE IMAGO DIALOGUE

You can make validation your own by also adding why it makes sense, as long as you don't disagree or tell a whole new story that is from your paradigm, moving away from the sender's feelings.

Next comes Empathy.

Here's where you will "guess" 2 emotions that the sender is feeling about everything they shared.

You can say, "I imagine when x, y, z happens you might be feeling scared and sad. Is that what you're feeling?"

You as therapist can ask this or facilitate a couple to ask each other.

As the therapist at this point, you might want to invite the sender to share what this feeling reminds him/her of from childhood to deepen their story and see how it might go back to some attachment trauma. You'll mirror, validate, and empathize once again until the sender is finished.

For more help with attachment, you can check out our [Attachment Theory worksheets here using this link.](#)



AN EXAMPLE

using

THE IMAGO DIALOGUE

SET THE TIME: The **SPEAKER** asks for an appointment, giving an indication of the topic they want to share: “I would like to share with you how I’m feeling about the recent and ongoing tragedy. Is now a good time?”

BREATHE “WITH YOUR EYES”: Both the **SPEAKER** and **LISTENER** look into each other’s eyes and take three deep breaths in sync. This reduces anxiety and increases safety.

SHARE MINDFULLY: When the **SPEAKER** is ready, share what they are experiencing. Use “I” messages, keep the sentences succinct and stay on one topic.
I am terrified by what is happening right now.

MIRROR ACCURATELY: The **LISTENER** repeats what they heard by using the sentence stem, “If I got that....” It can be word-for-word or paraphrasing what the **LISTENER** heard.

“If I got that, you feel terrified by what is going on right now. Did I get that?”



AN EXAMPLE

using

THE IMAGO DIALOGUE

BE CURIOUS: After mirroring, the LISTENER invites the SPEAKER to continue sharing. This is crucial. Rather than dismissing someone, it allows the SPEAKER to unfold the full range of their experience. It tells the SPEAKER “You matter. I am listening to you.” Is there more about that?

The LISTENER continues mirroring until “there is no more.”

SUMMARIZE: After the SPEAKER indicates “there is no more” the LISTENER summarizes everything they heard.

“If I got all of that, you feel.... Is that a good summary?”

EXPRESS GRATITUDE: Both the SPEAKER and the LISTENER expresses gratitude for the time together. And if appropriate, ends with a 30-second hug.

REMEMBER: The goal is to create a safe container to unravel the deep emotions someone may be experiencing. It is not to “fix” or “agree on” anything. By leaning on each other, the emotional burden is a little easier to carry. (Harville & Helen, November, 2023)



We hope these sentence stems are helpful for you in deepening your work with clients!

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