

Building a Recovery and Wellness Community through Dialogue: A Summary

Background

When people connect as equal human beings – heart, mind, and spirit – they can come together with the shared purpose of co-creating a recovery-oriented, wellness-based community. Those who have gone through their own recovery are uniquely suited to inspire, connect, and encourage their peers to develop meaningful and fulfilling lives. Authentic sharing of heartfelt communication through dialogue is an important process in bringing these experiences to all stakeholders, as well as the means for creating a sense of community.

What Is Dialogue?

Dialogue has been described as the development of new meaning from joint participation of persons with diverse points of view. In this process we will ask everyone to step back as much as possible from their personal assumptions and listen very carefully to others. It means being aware of our assumptions and holding them up for examination. In order to enter into dialogue, all participants need to see each other as peers: “Dialogue can occur only when a group of people see each other as colleagues in mutual quest of deeper meaning (Senge).” Each person influences the development of meaning simply through participating.

Most everyday conversation where we seek to express our own ideas is a kind of ‘shared monologue.’ A ‘discussion’ starts when people both speak and listen, but we are still largely focused on persuading others to our own point of view. Dialogue is a form of communication that is very intentional. It requires investment of time and energy, and it needs heart and mind both to pay attention. A facilitator can assist the group to move out of shared monologues and discussion modes toward dialogue.

Discussion	Dialogue
Starts with speaking	Starts with listening
Is about speaking to	Is about speaking with
Focuses on differences	Focuses on insights
Is adversarial	Is collaborative
Generates conflicts	Generates ideas
Encourages quick thinking	Encourages reflection
Encourages lock-in	Encourages emergence

For many of us, it is no small feat to let our thoughts and feelings come out in communication. We have been inundated with numerous messages about how we ought to behave and what we ought to say in all the different circumstances of our lives. To discover what we genuinely think and feel, independent of these things, requires courage. This is true in part because our own true Voice is not a rehash of others’ words. So we are unlikely to find someone else speaking what we ourselves need to say. Sometimes what we want to say about our own experience feels angry and can lead to conflict. Some ground rules or principles for dialogue help us through these moments and they let us create breakthrough communication that results in learning on the part of the entire group – and we become community for one another.

Five Principles of Dialogue

(Isaacs and Fisher)

1. Use your authentic Voice

Before speaking, take a moment to take a deep breath and bring your awareness to your heart. This is where you will find your deepest truth and your most authentic voice. Speak what is true for you in this moment.

2. Listen together without resistance

Be willing to enter a neutral place where you suspend preconceived notions about the other participants, where you release any agenda or resistance. See if you can listen with your heart as well as your ears. See if you can be curious about the person who is speaking. What is being said beneath the words? What meaning is the person trying to convey?

3. Respect the whole person

Respecting the other. “Respect is not a passive act. The word comes from the Latin *respecere*, which means ‘to look again.’ It involves a sense of honoring or deferring to someone. Where once we saw one aspect of a person, we look again and realize how much of them we had missed. This second look can let us take in more fully the fact that here before me is a living, breathing being. When we respect someone, we accept that they have things to teach us. (Bohm)”

Respecting differences. “To enable a dialogue, a group of people must learn to do something different: to respect the polarizations that may arise without making any effort to ‘fix’ them. (Bohm).” Another word that describes respecting variation is *allophilia*, which means ‘love of difference.’ It is useful to hold an attitude of curiosity; to look for value in thoughts and behaviors different from our own.

Hold a space of good will. I do not have to agree with you to offer you good will.

4. Suspend certainty about our beliefs and views

When we listen to someone speak, we face a critical choice. If we begin to form an opinion we can do one of two things:

We can choose to defend our view, thereby resisting theirs. We can try to get the other person to understand and accept the “right” way to see things (ours!). We can look for evidence to support our view that they are mistaken, and discount evidence that may point to flaws in our own logic.

... OR ...

We can learn to suspend our opinion and the “certainty” that lies behind it. “Suspension” means that we neither suppress what we think nor advocate it with unilateral conviction. Rather, we display our thinking in a way that lets us and others see and understand it. We simply acknowledge and observe our thoughts and feelings as they arise without being compelled to act on them. This can release a tremendous amount of creative energy.

5. Be affected by each other's emotions

By allowing yourself to feel another person's emotions and show your own vulnerability, you are encouraging the flow of emotions. This flow unblocks thoughts that trap us in *monologue*, opening *emotional dialogue*, which enables each person to better tap into a deeper wisdom. Emotional dialogue also allows each of the participants to understand the deeper, heartfelt meaning another is trying to express, which may be the first step in shifting from monologue to dialogue.