

SESSION 5

FOSTERING COUPLE CONNECTION

OPENING PRAYER

(Recite together.)

Gracious Father,
even though you have created us out of love,
we often turn away from you
to seek our own selfish desires.
Yet, you never abandon us.
Rather, you sent your Son, Jesus,
to reconcile us to yourself.
Give us the wisdom
to imitate your unceasing love
in our marriage relationship,
which can move us
to turn toward our spouse in love
rather than turn away
in anger or indifference.
Strengthen the bond of love between us.
We ask this
through Jesus Christ, your Son.
Amen.

WARM-UP QUESTIONS

(Answer the following questions individually, then, share your answer with your partner.)

1. Recall an experience of feeling closely connected to your partner.

2. What do you think helped to create that feeling of connection?

VIDEO PRESENTATION SUMMARY

(Play the video presentation for Session 5, "Fostering Couple Connection." The following is a summary of the main points of the presentation that is meant to serve as a reference for you.)

- **Bids:**
 - Couples are continually making efforts to connect with each other. Those efforts to connect are referred to as "bids."
 - "Bids" can take the form of simple gestures, e.g. a comment, a question, a touch, a joke, a note, etc.
- **Responses:** What makes connection possible is how the receiving partner responds to the bid. There are generally three categories of responses to "bids."
 - *Turning Away:* the receiving partner ignores the bid, either intentionally or unintentionally.
 - *Turning-Against:* the receiving partner responds to the bid with some hostility or argument.
 - *Turning Toward:* the receiving partner responds positively to the bid by acknowledging the bid and showing some interest, empathy or support. Obviously, "turning toward" is the most effective response to a "bid" and is the only response that deepens the connection in the relationship.
- **Attention:**
 - In order to respond appropriately to your partner's bids you must be aware that a bid is being made. This requires *paying attention* to your partner's efforts to make a connection so that you can respond appropriately.
 - Research shows that happy couples are aware and respond to each other's bids almost every time a bid is made. Unhappy couples, however, only respond to each other's bids about half of the time.
- **Stress-reducing Conversation:**
 - One of the most important forms of connection in a relationship is the "stress-reducing conversation" which usually happens in response to the question, "how was your day."
 - This conversation is usually about some topic outside of the marriage and offers an opportunity for both parties to relieve some stress by sharing as well as increase the sense of connection since it allows the partners to deepen their knowledge of each other's world.
 - "Stress-reducing conversations" are opportunities for sharing and understanding, not usually for problem-solving.

TURNING TOWARD YOUR PARTNER'S BIDS FOR CONNECTION

Examples:

BID: My partner pours me a cup of coffee as I'm working at the computer.

Turning-away response: Silence. No acknowledgement.

Turning-against response: "Looks like you made it too weak again."

Turning-toward response: "Thanks, that's very thoughtful."

BID: My partner reads aloud a joke that he or she thinks is funny.

Turning-away response: "Have you seen my black shoes?"

Turning-against response: "I can't concentrate when you're reading like that."

Turning-toward response: "That's really funny."

Complete the responses below:

BID: My partner tells me some bit of news about a relative.

Turning-away response: _____

Turning-against response: _____

Turning-toward response: _____

BID: My partner mentions something that needs to be done in the yard.

Turning-away response: _____

Turning-against response: _____

Turning-toward response: _____

BID: My partner tells me we are out of laundry detergent.

Turning-away response: _____

Turning-against response: _____

Turning-toward response: _____

BID: My partner admires a neighbor's new car.

Turning-away response: _____

Turning-against response: _____

Turning-toward response: _____

BID: My partner touches me in an affectionate way.

Turning-away response: _____

Turning-against response: _____

Turning-toward response: _____

THE STRESS-REDUCING CONVERSATION

On a typical day, spend 20 to 30 minutes talking about whatever is on your mind outside of your marriage. This is not a time to discuss conflicts, but rather, an opportunity to support each other emotionally concerning other areas of your lives. The conversation involves “active listening” that is, to listen to your spouse with empathy and without judgment. The goal is twofold: to reduce stress in one another by sharing and to heighten the feeling of closeness between you. What follows are detailed instructions.

1. **Take Turns.** Each partner gets to be the complainer for 10-15 minutes.
2. **Don't give unsolicited advice.** Most of the time your spouse is not asking for a solution at all but is just looking for a good listener or a shoulder to cry on. Men, especially, think their role is to take care of the wife's problems. Wives usually just want to be heard and understood. If your partner asks for advice, then you may offer it, but remember, understanding must precede advice.
3. **Show genuine interest.** Don't let your mind or eyes wander. Stay focused on your spouse. Ask questions. Make eye contact. Nod, say “uh-huh” and so on.
4. **Communicate your understanding.** Let your spouse know that you understand and empathize. Act like a mirror and reflect back the feelings you hear between the lines, e.g. “You must be bummed out over that” or “Sounds like you felt humiliated” etc.
5. **Take your spouse's side.** This means being supportive even if you think your spouse's position is unreasonable. Don't side with the opposition because that will make your spouse feel resentful. The point is not about dishonesty, but about timing. This is not the time to disagree. Your spouse is looking for understanding, not advice or judgment.
6. **Express a “we against others” attitude.** If your mate is feeling all alone in facing some difficulty, express solidarity. Let him or her know that the two of you are in this together.
7. **Express affection.** Use both physical and verbal affection. Hold hands. Put an arm around his or her shoulder. Say, “ I love you.”
8. **Validate emotions.** Let your partner know that his or her feelings make sense to you. For example, say things like, “That would have worried me too” or “I can see why that would have annoyed you.”

INTEGRATIVE EXERCISE: STRESS-REDUCING CONVERSATION [15 minutes]

(Facilitator invites couples to engage in a "stress-reducing conversation" about the events of the previous day while employing some of the guidelines from the handout.)

- Each couple tries stress-reducing conversation about some topic outside the marriage. Each one takes a turn as the speaker and listener (5 minutes in each role).
- After each turn, share with your partner what he/she did as a listener that you found effective.

HOMEWORK

(The suggested homework assignment has two tasks:)

1. Answer the questions on the handout entitled: "Reflection on Connection," which can be found on the following page. Once each spouse has answered the questions individually, then plan some time to get together to share and discuss your answers.
2. Plan a "stress-reducing conversation" for 20 to 30 minutes, at least three times each week.

REFLECTION ON CONNECTION

“Turning Towards”

What are three things your partner does that make you feel connected to him or her?

What are three things that you do to try to connect with your partner?

What are three things that you would like to see happen in the future to feel more connected to your partner?

What one thing can you commit to do more of in the future to stay connected?

PRAYER RITUAL

(Close out the session using the following Prayer Ritual.)

1. Read: Mark 10: 17-22 (rich young man who turns away).
2. Commentary: Just as Jesus invited the rich young man to do more than the minimum in his relationship with God, so Christ is asking each of us to do more than the minimum in deepening the connection in our marriages. We can either accept that challenge or turn away. The marital relationship offers us a chance to stretch ourselves by turning toward our partners rather than turning away.
3. Ritual Action: *(Couples stand back to back and reflect on times when each has neglected the other. Then, turn around to face each other, join hands, and take turns reciting the "Turning Toward Promise," which can be found on the following page.)*

TURNING TOWARD PROMISE

I promise to turn toward you
In the little events of every day.

I pledge to make every effort
To never take you for granted.

Next to God,
You are the most important person
In my life.

With God's help,
I will look for opportunities
To connect with you,
To strengthen our marital friendship.

I will pay special attention
To the efforts you make
To reach out to me.
And I will strive to respond to you
With the same loving spirit.

I ask God,
Who is always faithful,
To keep me true
To this commitment.
And I make this prayer
In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.