

Staying Self-Connected in a Challenging Dialogue

With LaShelle Lowe-Charde

Challenging dialogue with others are inevitable. What you typically dread or fear about these interactions is not so much what the other person says, but rather how disconnected from your own center and sense of choice you might become. The ability to remain self-connected allows you to access compassion and wise action in the moment.

One gem reader, I will call her Carol, gave an example of her own struggle in a difficult interaction with her father-in-law. She writes:

"He launches into a 30 minute monologue about his back pain, and doesn't take any social cues that I'm not listening anymore, or that I'm hurt that he interrupted me, or that I'm disappointed that he doesn't show any interest in me, only in himself. I just don't have the courage to bust out at the dinner table with saying something like "You know Jon, I noticed that you interrupted me and then talked continuously for 30 min without noticing my boredom. I feel hurt and disconnected and would like to have a conversation that is shared equally, and would like for you to show some genuine interest. Would you be willing to listen to me too? "

The first thing for Carol to consider is how she wants to direct her life energy. If she rarely sees her father-in-law, maybe she will likely choose to avoid challenging the dynamic. If, however, he is regularly in her life, she may practice the skills and awareness that help her maintain self-connection in the face of his behavior.

When in the midst of any challenging interaction, begin with self-empathy. You may need to start by identifying judgments. In our example, Carol has judgments like, "He's so selfish. He just wants everything to be about him." "He's so oblivious to other's needs." It's essential for Carol to bring conscious awareness to these thoughts and direct her attention differently. These judgments prevent her from being connected to herself in this difficult interaction. When her attention is on her judgments, she is unable to access what she really cares about in a given moment and what she might do about that. Behind Carol's judgments are feelings of hurt and disconnect and her needs for mutuality and consideration.

Once you identify judgments and affirm to yourself that anything said or done from a place of judgment will only add to suffering on all sides, then you have attention available to focus on feelings and needs. Just naming what feelings and needs are alive for you will create some immediate self-connection and sense of internal space.

The next step is to grieve that your needs are not met in the current situation. Name for yourself that it is not turning out as you hoped it would. This helps you move into acceptance of the situation. It is difficult to create change in a positive direction if you are not willing to acknowledge and fully experience the reality of the present. I am guessing this is a hard one for our gem reader, Carol. Maybe she sees that Jon is competent in other areas and can't believe that he doesn't know how disconnecting his monologues are. She may also long for Jon to be a grandfather she can trust for her child and doesn't want to accept this possible loss.

Lastly, making some empathy guesses, either silently or aloud, will help you stay connected to your heart. Unfortunately people have some very ineffective strategies for meeting their needs. Monologues is one. When faced with behaviors that don't really meet needs, it's helpful to ask what needs that person could be trying to meet and how they could have arrived at such a behavior? The possible answers to these questions aren't nearly as important as asking them. Just getting curious

about someone helps you release judgment.

For example, to promote curiosity rather than judgment, Carol might take some time later when she is not with her father-in-law and make some guesses about his world in addition to guessing his feelings and needs. She might reflect on how Jon grew up. Perhaps he was in a family where he had to be the biggest and loudest to get his needs met. Maybe the ways he learned to communicate in his family are so ineffective that he chronically alienates others and thus his strategies for being seen and heard have become more extreme over time. The point here is not to analyze Jon, but rather to recognize that there is more to him than the monologue behavior. This helps Carol release reactivity so that she can discern wise action.

Going through this process several options may occur to her:

- She could take care of her needs up front by asking for his assurance that he really wants to listen. For example if Jon asks her how school is going, she could say something like: "Okay I would like to tell you three things about school, would you really like to hear them? Okay, let me say all three. One is . . ."
- She could frame Jon's talking as an opportunity to practice empathy by interrupting him frequently: "Jon, Jon, hang on I want to see if I am hearing you so far. It sounds like . . ."
- She could silently empathize with herself as he talks.

What's important here is to maintain enough self-connection in a difficult interaction to make a choice about what will work for you and the other person based on your sense of all the needs present in a given situation and the long term effects of your action. Your choice may not turn out "perfectly", but it is still considerably better than imagining you have no choice.

Practice

This week if you find yourself in a challenging dialogue with another, either in the moment or later in reflection, engage the steps named above. Here they are again in summary:

1. **Self-Empathy:** Ask and answer the following: What judgments am I having? What am I feeling? What is happening in my body? What do I care most about right now?"
2. **Grieve:** Name for yourself that the interaction is not going as you had hoped and allow yourself the space to feel grief or disappointment.
3. **Empathy:** Make empathy guesses for the other person either silently or aloud. Reflect on the broader context of their life. Remind yourself that everyone is doing the best they can in the moment.
4. **Requests / Action:** Make a request in the moment or make a plan for how you would like to stay self-connected in a future similar interaction.