

The Art of Conversation: Instructions for Therapists

INTRODUCTION

The Art of Conversation is a homework tool I developed for couples in my therapy practice. It's a powerful tool for deepening intimacy through conversation. On the surface, it resembles many other communication exercises. In practice, however, it goes far deeper. The tool not only structures conversation, it actually demonstrates the power of compassion and understanding to transform relationships.

I always teach couples how to use The Art of Conversation, or the "A-B process"—in their first or second session. I usually wait until things heat up and the couple starts arguing. Then I say something like, "I'd like to push 'Pause' for a moment and show you how you can talk about this in a new way." This interrupts the argument and quickly shifts the interaction out of defend and attack mode and into learning mode. I then explain the mechanics of The Art of Conversation and immediately role-play the A-B process with each partner for 6 or 7 minutes, one right after the other.

Below is a script you can adapt for your own use. In it, I describe the A-B process as if I were introducing it to a couple for the first time. I call my couple "Tom and Ella." I've changed their names and a few small details, but other than that, nothing's been changed. The dialogue immediately following the script is essentially the dialogue Tom and I actually had during our first A-B conversation. I haven't tried to spruce it up to make me sound brilliant, or edit it down to sound better than it actually did in real life.

THE SCRIPT

"I'd like to push 'Pause' for a moment and show you how you can talk about this in a new way. In the process, you're going to learn how to use your first homework tool, The Art of Conversation. This is going to be your homework assignment every week for as long as we're working together, so you'll get to know it really well. Eventually you'll be able to use it to talk about even the most difficult subjects without getting into an argument."

"Here's how it works: When you do the A-B process at home, you're going to take turns being either Person A—the person with the issue, or Person B—the person whose job it is to help Person A talk about the issue. Person A will get to talk for 20 minutes while Person B listens and asks questions designed to increase understanding. After 20 minutes, you'll stop, give each other feedback, and switch roles. Person A will become Person B, and so on."

"When we do the A-B process today, both of you will get a chance to be Person A, only instead of having 20 minutes to talk, you'll only have 6 or 7 minutes, just long enough to get a feel for how the process works. And instead of asking either of you to be Person B—which is the more challenging role and one that requires you to follow very specific rules you haven't learned yet—I'll be Person B for both of you. But here's the twist. I won't be playing myself as Person B, I'll be playing each of you. That way, when you're Person A, you'll get to experience how great it feels to have a good

Person B listening to you. And you'll get to imagine yourself being Person B, because I'm going to do my best to take what I've learned about you so far and weave it into the things I say to Person A."

"By the way, when you're the partner observing, don't be surprised if you find yourself wanting to interrupt and start arguing with something your partner has said. This happens all the time. Just notice your reactions and watch what I do instead of interrupting. Then notice your partner's response."

"Any questions?"

"Good. Tom, I'd like you to go first, which means you get to start by telling me what you wish I understood about you that you still feel I'm missing. Remember, I'm Ella now, so you're going to speak directly to me, not to her. Ella, your job is to simply eavesdrop on our conversation and notice what happens."

"But before we start, I want to say just a few things about the role of Person B, because that's the hardest role to master, and the one I want you to pay closest attention to, even while you're Person A. The handout I'll give you when you leave here describes both roles in great detail, and has lots of tips and examples to help you get started."

"What you'll notice—if I'm doing a good job—is that no matter what Tom says, I'm going to listen without interrupting, arguing, correcting him, defending my position, or rushing in to solve the problem. My #1 goal is to understand his point of view better, and to ask questions that show I'm really interested. When the topic is a hot

one—like the topic you two were arguing about earlier—this can be very challenging for Person B. That's why I call this process, 'The Art of Conversation.' Mastering the role of Person B is just that. It's an art. Even when you've been doing it every day for a year or more--as I have with my husband—it doesn't get a whole lot easier. You just get better at it, and because the results are so rewarding—as you'll see for yourself—you'll find that it's worth the effort."

"So Tom, here we go.. Remember: You're Person A and I'm Ella in the role of Person B. Why don't you tell me whatever it is you feel I don't understand about whatever we were fighting about when Betsy interrupted us. I'll do my best to listen with an open heart to whatever you have to say. Remember to talk directly to me, as if I am Ella, rather than to her."

ABOUT THE SCRIPT

I just timed myself reading this script. It took just under five minutes, which felt about right. Obviously, if your clients have questions, it will take longer to begin the role- playing. In any case, if you leave 45 minutes for the demonstration, you should have plenty of time to give your introduction and have both people experience the process. Because I see couples in my practice for a full 90 minutes, I'm able to spend more time with this. In addition, I regularly ask my couples to do an A-B process during subsequent sessions. This reinforces their learning and gives me an idea of how they're actually using the tool at home. By watching them use it in my office, I can coach them through any problems they may be having.

ABOUT THE ROLES

I want to say a few words about my decision to role-play Person A's partner as Person B, rather than simply playing myself. I'm not sure why I made this decision initially, but it's proven to be the most powerful aspect of the demonstration.

Here's why. If I had simply role-played myself as Person B, all I would have proven was that I'm a good listener. Hopefully, this should already have been obvious.

Instead, by role-playing Ella as a thoughtful, patient, and compassionate partner, both Tom and Ella got to imagine themselves having a different kind of conversation with each other. Through the process, Tom got to experience being heard, which automatically which opened him up. And at some level he attributed those good feelings to Ella, because I tried very hard to say things I really thought Ella might say if she were at her best. This in turn, gave her the experience of being heard—which opened her up.

Let me explain. In the example above, Tom and Ella were fighting because on Sunday, Ella agreed to watch the kids so Tom could visit his father in the hospital, only instead of visiting his father, he changed his mind without telling her, and went to a friend's to watch the football game. Here's an excerpt from that A-B conversation that illustrates my point. Remember, I'm playing Ella as Person B.

AN EXCERPT FROM AN ACTUAL A-B CONVERSATION

Me: So if I've got it right, you're saying that you feel unjustly accused because you never actually promised to visit your father, you only said that you wanted to. Is that right?

Tom: Yes, exactly. The truth is, I felt really good about getting back at noon, instead of being late like I usually am. You always complain about me being late, so I made a point of getting back on-time. And then you blasted me.

Me: Okay. So you came home actually expecting me to be happy to see you, because in your mind, you were doing something really nice by getting back on-time, instead coming home late.

Tom: Yes. But instead, I got kicked in the teeth. The funny thing is, I was feeling good about you all day, because I felt like you'd given me a gift by watching the kids. I had planned on offering to take you out for dinner but I never got a chance because you blasted me the second I walked through the door.

Me: I get it. It's almost like you walked in the door with a bouquet of flowers and before you had a chance to give them to me, I pushed you down. Does that feel close?

Tom: Yes, and not only that, but you never let me explain. I really thought you had given me an open-ended gift I could use any way I wanted. I just can't read your mind, Ella.

Me: That makes a lot of sense . . . I'm noticing that you look really sad, Tom. I think I do this to you a lot. I think I expect you to read my mind and then get mad when you guess wrong.

Tom: That pretty much sums up our relationship. I just feel like I'm working so hard to be there for you, and the kids, and my mom, and my dad. I'm just worn out.

Me: Do you feel like I'm understanding you better now?

Tom: Yes. Thanks. This was good.

THE DEBRIEFING

At the end of each exchange, I call time and ask each person to talk about what they noticed. Whoever was Person A usually reports feeling great about the interaction. Here's what Tom said, "I didn't even know I was feeling that way until you made the comment about being sad. It made me want to talk more, instead of shutting down." Ella's response was typical of the person observing. She said, "Boy, I can tell it's going to be hard for me to be Person B. I kept wanting to interrupt and correct what Tom was saying. At the same time, I noticed that he opened up to you in a way he almost never does with me anymore."

THE HOMEWORK

After both partners have experienced being Person A in your office, they're ready to practice on their own. I have all my clients sign a Counseling Agreement before starting therapy. In it, they agree to spend 3 hours between sessions working on their therapy goals. That way, when I ask them to have two A-B conversations each week as homework, they're not surprised. If they come to a session and haven't done their homework, I have them do it on the spot. It's a great way to reinforce the A-B process, and as I mentioned earlier, it gives me a chance to see how they're doing and coach them through any problems.

THE RESULT

As you can see from the example above, it doesn't take long for an A-B conversation get somewhere. If it's done well, by the end of the first exchange you'll find that both partners are much more relaxed and

connected, even though they haven't actually talked to each other yet. By the end of the second exchange, often one or both of them will have reached out to make some kind of physical contact with the other. In the case above, Tom had to leave the session early to pick up the kids. He made a point of leaning over to kiss Ella before he left.