



**COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES**  
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**IMAGO RELATIONSHIP THERAPY**

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Definition: Teaching couples structured dialogues to change their relationship from a power struggle to one of mature love with mutual commitment, awareness, safety and comfort.

Elements: *Dialogue*: The partners sit opposite and look at one another. One partner asks for a dialogue on a particular issue. The other listens and *mirrors* back (*reflects*) what was said e.g. 'I hear you saying.... Did I hear you? Am I with you?' When the sending partner says that's all on that issue the receiving partner summarizes, and then *validates* what was heard by expressing understanding (e.g. Oh, I get it, you... I see your point now, you ...') and empathy ('I guess what you feel regarding ... is sad and frustrated (each feeling one word). The receiver might now ask to switch roles and become the sender with the partner as receiver.

A couple might: convey frustration and ask the partner to change behavior in a specific positive way (e.g. 'every 2nd day from Monday for 2 weeks when I come home from work I want you to (behavior-change request) hug me for 10 seconds'); role-play a parent and child; express appreciation and feeling cared for; share a vision of their dream relationship; ask to make amends.

*Guided imagery*: The therapist guides the couple with their eyes closed to: imagine themselves in a safe place which need not be shared (e.g. in nature, from a good childhood memory); remember childhood experiences with parents; be in a dream relationship. The partners are also asked to open their eyes and share with each other their best relationship dream.

*Positive flooding*: The sender circles and warmly describes the seated partner's good physical, personal and behavioral characteristics.

*Cradling*: One partner cradles the other as they lie seated on the floor and asks what it was like and how it should have been at home as a child.

*Homework* between sessions: The couple is asked to: practice dialogue (mirroring, validating, empathizing); implement unconditionally whichever behavior change has been agreed; gift pleasant surprises; repeat caring behaviors.

*Relaxation*: Any method e.g. progressive muscle relaxation; meditation with gongs marking the start and end of meditation, imagining their inner centre and neutrally noticing present feelings.

*High energy fun*: e.g.: couples animatedly express positive and negative feelings in gibberish; talk with their lips covering their teeth; impersonate rock-stars, tigers and lovers - to try to have fun and laugh.

Related procedures: Active listening, communication training, couple/marital therapy, social skills training; gestalt therapy; guided imagery, homework; mirroring, reflection; psychodrama, role-play; relaxation; reinforcement, reward.

Application: With individual couples and in couples workshops.

1st Use? Hendrix, Harville (1988)

### References:

1. Hendrix, Harville (1988) *Getting the Love You Want - Guide for Couples*. Henry Holt, NY
2. Brown, Rick (1999) *Imago Relationship Therapy: an Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Wiley, NY.
3. Stuart, Richard (1980). *Helping Couples Change: Social Learning Approach to Marital Therapy*. Guilford, NY.

### Case Illustration

Sara and Joe were considering divorce after 30 years marriage. He angrily sensed her hostility and she was upset that he acted towards her like an automatic, silent robot. In session 1 each described the other's main complaints; she knew it disturbed him that she held grudges for years, and he said she disliked his very predictable behavior. Before starting a dialogue they jointly practiced progressive muscle relaxation and then each imagined their own safe place. When relaxed, Joe could more easily listen and mirror back what he heard Sara saying about feeling loneliness and pain when he disengaged from her even as she spoke to him. They reviewed what they did alone: Joe sat silently reading for hours and Sara spoke on the phone with friends. They agreed to do more together – go out at least once a week and acknowledge each other's presence at home by discussing a book Joe had read, and Joe being present while Sara practiced on the piano. They discussed their dream relationship e.g. going on cruises, freely expressing negative and positive feelings which they heard and related to. They detailed instances of such feelings and prepared plans to practice benignly expressing them in dialogue (*homework*).

Joe felt frustrated that Sara ignored him while preparing for Sabbath, reinforcing memories of feeling 'invisible' as a child in his parents' home. He asked that for the next two Fridays Sara would find the time to serve him at 12 noon a salad including Bulgarian cheese, black olives, and green onions. She agreed to this, understanding its value for him and for herself, realizing she might manage more than she'd originally thought she could.

After session 13 they went on their first cruise but returned disappointed, each having felt neglected and ignored by the other. Nevertheless, they could now dialogue: listen, express understanding of the other's point of view without necessarily agreeing, and empathize with one another, giving a sense of confidence and more calm and pleasure with one another. Joe initiated their going to plays and expressed interest in what Sara enjoyed. She learned to express herself freely without upsetting him. They rediscovered that they liked one another. Therapy over 9 months involved 30 1-2-hour sessions. At 3- and 6-month follow-up they were pleased at the transformation of their relationship.