

SILENCE IN RELATIONSHIPS AND CFT

Christian Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D.

Silence can be the most destructive phase in a relationship. Meaningful communication is the stuff relationships are made off and what maintains them. Heated emotional exchanges., as long as they are not aimed at personality attributes or communication patterns that are close to the core self of a person, are usually not as damaging to a relationship as is silence.

In communication-focused therapy (CFT), as developed by the author, the emphasis is on restarting and maintaining a process of meaningful communication, so that the partners can make better decisions about the future of their relationship. At the same time, individual therapy is helpful because an apparent unwillingness to communicate frequently points to intrapersonal difficulties.

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Introduction

Sometimes I get asked how to spot trouble in a relationship. It may be surprising, but it is usually not when partners argue or fight, but when they do not talk at all. Meaningful interactions are the lifeblood of any relationship, and these also include intense emotional exchanges of whatever colour. A relationship can survive temporary silence, but not for any substantial length of time. The task of psychotherapy is to help a couple communicate again in meaningful ways, where 'meaningful' means relevant to both, their values, needs and aspirations.

Important steps in starting a meaningful communication process are to develop an awareness for the communication processes, to better connect with oneself and others (internal and external communication), to reflect on communication patterns, to experiment with them, and to gain insight and understanding into the own basic parameters (needs, values, aspirations) and those of others.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication makes up most of our communication. One can often tell from the body posture and gestures to what depths the trouble in a relationship goes. What people do when they sit next to each other gives the therapist an initial indication how they experience and live their relationship. If they are turned away from each other, but move and gesticulate in synchrony, things may be better than either of them realizes. Looked at individually, these signs might not mean much, but in combination with what the couple says they can be informative.

Intrapersonal Dynamics

In addition to the outward communication, there is the intrapsychic dynamic in each partner. Both partners bring along their 'baggage', their past experience and emotions. However, important is

not what they bring along, but what they make out of it. Unresolved issues and conflicts get communicated, whether we like it or not. This can lead to misunderstandings in a relationship, and in the long run even to a breakdown in communication.

The Future

To really determine if a relationship can work and where it might go in the future, the couple needs to be open with their basic values, needs and aspirations. They are unlikely to change much, because they are deeply rooted in one's personality. If there is a significant incompatibility, the outlook for the relationship is not good, and no amount of therapy is likely to change that. If there is a high degree of compatibility, the prospects can be very good. The problem is that many people never really spend much thought on what is truly important to them, let alone communicate it. When these issues surface under

the relationship problems, couple's therapy as well as two individual therapies may be required.

The Therapeutic Process

As soon as a couple commits to the therapeutic process, the question should be asked what they want and expect from therapy. This answer should come before the question what they want and expect from each other. Clarity in the therapeutic relationship brings the stability required to work with it. An individual's values, needs and aspirations form the individual background to any interaction in a relationship. In order to understand the partner's messages, one needs to be aware of what he or she values and hopes for. This should be addressed. Understanding the partner's position is of fundamental importance to the survival of a relationship. Any emotions evoked in the process can best be explained in the context of the individual's own experiences, if they have not evolved from the relationship.

Individual vs Relationship Issues

Individual issues often surface early on, which may need to be dealt with in individual sessions with another therapist outside the couple's sessions. A relationship is like a lake which is maintained by two rivers flowing into it, what comes down the rivers ends up in the lake. The state of the rivers determines the state of the lake. Sometimes it is argued, individual therapy should be 'both or none', either both go into individual therapy or none. The rationale is that if there are

large differences in the individual processes and in the amounts of self-discovery this can lead to an imbalance, which can lead to an extra burden on the relationship. However, it is difficult to imagine how a meaningful individual process could make the other worse off. So, I believe one partner going into individual sessions is still better than none, if there is an obvious need for it.

Restarting Communication

The crucial step is to get a couple talking to each other. It is not of much help if both partners only talk to the therapist rather than to each other. The therapist does not have the answers, only the partners to the relationship do. His job is to enable them to provide the information the relationship thirsts for. In the beginning there may be a phase where the communication is largely bidirectional between the therapist and each partner. However, the raised issues and the provided information should allow the therapist to keep the interactive ball rolling and subtly direct it so that a conversation between the two emerges.

Once relevant communication between the partners begins, there might be a lot of subtle or not so subtle emotions between the two. Here it requires some faith in the power of communication and the realization that the only thing that can stop it is if both become afraid of these emotions. Relevant thoughts and emotions need to be communicated.

Reflecting on destructive comments and noting the fear and hurt that may lie underneath them ensures that the communication process remains

open. Often at this point a couple feels an urge to 'get it over with'. They realize there is no turning back. Emotions and various types of resistance resonate with the life experiences, emotions and values in each partner. Dealing with the issues in a relationship can help the partners acquire a deeper understanding of the relationship and themselves.

The following steps reflect the author's experiences with his development of communication-focused therapy (CFT) for various mental health conditions. (Haverkamp, 2010a, 2017, 2018) For a discussion of how this may fit into the dynamics within larger social groups the reader is referred to the author's book *The Lonely Society* (Haverkamp, 2010b).

Awareness

Many people are not aware of communication processes, largely because they tend to run well automatically and have autoregulatory features. However, autoregulatory processes can break down for several reasons, either due to internal or external factors. An internal factor could be due to a lack of resilience to a negative emotion which then can cause spiralling anxiety about communication and a disconnect. The lack of resilience can be caused by past external events, such as traumatic experiences or maladaptive communication patterns in childhood or adolescence.

Internal communication is the sending and receiving of meaningful information within oneself. For example, a feeling of anxiety can be a meaningful message if it contains a signal that can bring about a change in oneself. However, this requires being able to receive (listen) to the message and to identify it as such. For example,

an emotion of energy may not be perceived as such, if one does not allow oneself to feel angry, but felt as tension or anxiety. If one cannot make the link between tension or anxiety and underlying anger, the signal from the anger is lost. Conscious change at least is then impossible.

Since the brain biologically adapts and changes to outside events, the distinction between internal and external factors is from a communication perspective artificial, and both can become subjects of awareness.

Experimentation

Experimenting with communication patterns, internally and externally, is an important part of the therapeutic process. It makes it possible to act and see how the world reacts to these actions. One can then adapt in ways that optimize the prospect to have one's needs, values and aspirations met.

Internal communication, trying out different communication behaviours with oneself, helps to find ways that work for oneself to get one's basic parameters (needs, values, aspirations) met. At the same time, internal communication also helps in the identification of these basic parameters, which are important in decision-making and increasing the perception of the own strength of self and one's resources.

In a relationship setting, both the internal and the external communication are important to build and maintain a relationship, and to see it flourish. Experimentation should preferably take place on two levels. On one hand, each partner individually needs to engage in connecting with oneself, emotionally and cognitively, to gain increased insight into the basic parameters and self-

awareness in general. This is a prerequisite to a focus on the external communication in the relationship which can become directionless if there is little self-understanding and insight into each partner's needs, values and aspirations which are important to chart the future of the relationship.

Reflection

Reflection is the process of looking at information that is modified by something else. If light reflects on a surface, it is modified by the properties of the surface. Reflecting on one's communication patterns means seeing how they appear if 'bounced off' the world. It also means looking at them from different perspectives, which provides more information and insight on them.

Looking at something from different angles requires flexibility in thought and openness. When reflecting on the external communication of the partners in a relationship, it helps if they can experiment with different ways of looking at something. This often requires trying out different theories about the world, and in a relationship context, communicating more about communication itself (joint metacommunication). Getting metacommunication going often requires an outside observer, such as a therapist or a friend, because the flexibility and openness of the partners has already become too inflexible and closed, often out of fear.

Understanding

Understanding adds to reflection because meaning is distilled from the overall dynamic between and within the partners. While one cannot mindread the other partner's thoughts or

feelings, it is possible to form a theory about the basic parameters and the internal communication patterns of the other which, combined with a reflection on the own and the interpersonal communication patterns, provides an understanding into the communication system framed within the relationship.

The Relevant Time Frame

The present is the relevant time frame, yet the past and the future do matter. They need to be dealt with because they provide meaning when people communicate about their daily life. The experiences of the past and the wishes and dreams about the future are the fabric of any interaction, and often they need to be explained to the partner (and the therapist). When communication between partners breaks down, this can lead to blank patches on the map of their shared world. These blank patches are then filled by various emotions and hypotheses that restrict the freedom of the relationship to develop in new ways.

Let me provide an example. Insecurity and fear in an earlier romantic or non-romantic relationship can lead to feelings of anger as a defence mechanism, because I basically distrust myself to form good relationships and am fearful about losing them. Often anger is maintained by fear that lies hidden underneath it. But the constant background noise of anger in my mind can lead me to interpret the behaviours and motives of the other as hostile, even if they are not. This is because my current emotional state colours my thoughts. I project my emotions into the other person and see them there. So something as small

as passing the sugar can be interpreted either as a kind act or as a vengeful reminder of my calorie intake. Much depends on my frame of mind, in addition to my partner's frame of mind. Consciously I might even have access to the anger, but often not my fears of inadequacy, which are hidden below the anger. Building self-confidence and being in tune with my values, needs and aspirations can resolve the problem and save the relationship. This is where individual counselling helps the relationship, irrespective of any couple's counselling.

Creating Meaning

A meaningful exchange about the details of everyday life and my partner's thoughts and

feelings can help me acquire a deeper understanding of myself, my partner and the relationship. Often people shy away from talking about 'the little things' because they feel that it only leads to more arguing and greater frictions. But they can provide insight into the partners' inner life and their relationship and provide a lubricant for the relationship.

So, the fundamental aim in any couple's therapy is to get people talking about their relationship in a meaningful way and to work with the self-regulatory mechanisms that help them and the relationship. The starting point is that they both feel they have a meaningful communication, that is relevant to their fundamental values, needs and aspirations. If they can do this, the sum is greater than the parts.



Dr Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D. MLA (Harvard) LL.M. trained in medicine, psychiatry and psychotherapy and works in private practice for psychotherapy, counselling and psychiatric medication in Dublin, Ireland. The author can be reached by email at jonathanhaverkamp@gmail.com or on the websites www.jonathanhaverkamp.com and www.jonathanhaverkamp.ie.

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