

*When one party is in too much pain to hear
the needs of the other, we extend empathy,
taking as long as necessary to ensure that
the person knows their pain is heard.*

—MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PhD

Sitting on Opposite Sides of the Couch



The main goal my partner, Jori, and I have as mediators is to cultivate equality and connection between two parties so that compassion is inspired in each of them. In the way we mediate, we don't put any overt attention on coming to specific resolutions. We trust that once people are connected, compassionate giving and receiving will naturally occur, and that solutions will arise organically based on whatever needs are identified during the process.

So on one particular day, we sat with a married couple who were really in a rough patch. They arrived at the mediation separately, at different times. One came into our mediation room and sat on the end of the couch where disputants typically sit. About five minutes later, the other partner arrived. She sat at the opposite end of the couch. They both settled in and leaned away from each other, pressing against their respective armrests. This gave us a lot of information as we gauged their level of connection.

We explained our process and empathized with them right off the bat. We empathized with how it might feel to come to a

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mediation and to feel so tender and unsure of what would happen next in their relationship.

We began with our usual question: “Who is willing to listen first?”

There was a long silence; nobody really wanted to listen first.

This touches on a really important piece about empathy. Empathy has nothing to do with the words that we say and everything to do with where we put our attention. So Jori and I stayed in that silent space, empathizing with our eyes, with our hearts, with how much these two people both desperately wanted to be understood and heard.

Eventually he said, “I’m willing to listen first.” So she proceeded to launch into her story of pain.

We listened to and stayed with her as she spoke. We empathized out loud and reflected back, or recapped, what we heard in terms of what her needs were. At the point when she mentioned one essential need, we said: “We’d like to carry this over to the other person and see if we can get him to reflect it back. Is that okay with you?”

“That would be great,” she said.

We repeated the need that we heard her mention, to make it easier for him. Let’s just say the need was for understanding. He indicated that he’d be willing to reflect back her need, and he did.

“Thank you.” He’d just given us the gift of fulfilling our request, so we expressed our heartfelt gratitude.

Then we asked him, “Now, what feelings are coming up for you?” and he began telling his side of the story.

We listened to him for a while, acknowledging his experience and boiling it down to one essential point, and then did the same thing as before. We asked him for permission to carry over the essential need to his partner, and she was able to reflect it back. We just kept doing this little dance.

It’s simple, but we call it a mediation dance. We collect a need from one person and carry it over like a gift on Christmas

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morning for the other person to unwrap . . . and we find out how it is to receive that need—that gift.

For this couple, the dance went on for around forty-five minutes. If we had recorded it with a video camera, you'd have seen how their bodies stopped leaning away from each other as the process went on. Although their eyes stayed on us—they still refused to look at each other—their bodies began to relax.

After ten more minutes of continued back-and-forth, we watched as they gradually shifted in their seats until their knees pointed toward each other. They still directed most of their comments to us, though, so we kept the process moving forward.

The formula of finding the need and then reflecting it back is almost like a mechanical process. It's really puzzling why it works, but it does! It connects people at the heart. And this couple was no exception.

They gradually, inch by inch, moved toward each other. After fifteen minutes, this husband and wife began talking directly to each other.

Jori and I backed off and let them talk. Within a couple minutes, they were holding hands and had their heads right next to each other, making an A shape. We couldn't hear a word of their conversation, but it didn't matter. They had connected.

They stayed in this cuddling position for at least another ten minutes, which felt almost timeless. It was just so delicious for me and Jori to empathize with their hard-earned connection, after spending so much time empathizing with their pain. It was really beautiful to be in the presence of that extended moment.

Finally, they came back to us and made eye contact, so we continued with the next part of the mediation process. "Who has any ideas about what they'd like to do next?"

They decided they needed to have a meal together—a date. They hadn't had a date in weeks because of the little time they had together in their busy lives. They walked out hand in hand and left one vehicle behind as they drove away together.

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That was the first step in a process that strengthened their relationship. It took a few other mediations to clarify some agreements, but they really improved the quality of their connection by empathizing with each other using our support.

This experience gave them a renewed reference point—a reminder of what had been lost when they first started blaming each other. They were able to get past the negative mental image of blaming each other and instead remember the person they fell in love with. To support them through the process and help them move past the pain they'd been stuck in—this was a gift we savored. We always do.

—JIM MANSKE, www.radicalcompassion.com