

Gottman's Back-to-Back Exercise for Couples

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As a couples therapist, one of the most valuable tools I recommend is Gottman's back-to-back or wall-facing exercise. It's a simple but extremely powerful way to build emotional intimacy and closeness with your partner.

So what exactly is this exercise? Basically, you and your partner engage in an intimate conversation while sitting back-to-back or facing a wall together so that you eliminate visual distractions and forced eye contact.

It may sound a little silly at first, but that's the beauty of it! Not having to worry about direct eye contact helps many couples let their guard down and open up more authentically.

Here's why this intimacy exercise is so effective:

Eye contact can feel confrontational or distract from your words during vulnerable discussions. Without visual distractions, you're both able to be more present just listening. The back-to-back position cultivates a sense of trust, safety, and comfort. It prevents getting distracted by body language cues or expressions. Hearing your partner's voice alone often sparks a deeper emotional connection. So while it may feel a little awkward at first, give this exercise a try with an open mind. It can unlock a whole new level of intimate connection and communication with your partner.

How to Do the Back-to-Back or Wall-Facing Intimacy Exercise:

1. Find a quiet, comfortable space free of distractions. Living room, bedroom, or even outside on the patio or grass all work great.
2. Sit directly back-to-back or facing the same wall, close enough that you can feel each other's presence.
3. Decide who will initiate the conversation first by sharing something they'd like their partner to know – fears, hopes, dreams, appreciations, frustrations, anything!
4. As one person speaks, the other simply listens without interrupting or asking questions until their partner is finished.
5. Then the listener reflects back what they heard in a summarized way to ensure understanding.
6. Switch roles so the listener becomes the speaker. Take turns back and forth this way as long as desired.
7. When one person is speaking, the other avoids verbal input beyond brief acknowledgments to indicate listening (uh huh, I see, mmmhmm, etc.)
8. Let yourselves be vulnerable and go to an emotionally intimate place. Listen without judgment.
9. After the exercise, debrief on how it felt and what you learned. Share appreciations for being heard/listening.

Keep the conversation neutral at first until you build comfort with the exercise, then work up to more emotionally charged discussions over time.

Some conversation starters to try:

- What I appreciate most about you is...
- Something I'm struggling with lately is...
- A fear or insecurity I have is...
- My biggest hope or dream for us is...
- Something I don't think you know about me is...

The most important things are to maintain a tone of empathy, compassion and non-judgment during these vulnerable conversations. Be patient with each other. Notice how it feels to speak and listen in this unique format. Try it for 10-15 minutes a week!

