

How Naming What's Happening Can Help Your Relationship

By Sheila Rubin, LMFT, RDT/BCT

Often I notice that in the back and forth of the day to day, we can lose ourselves in one thing after another. Sometimes when we can put a name on to something that's happening and pause, it can allow us to stop and be in the moment in a more embodied way.

Let me give you a few examples. A couple from my practice told me how one day in the middle of their usual argument about who was going to pick up their daughter, who was going to buy the groceries, etc., instead of escalating the argument, the fellow said to his wife, "I want to thank you for choosing me so long ago." She was surprised to hear this, because he'd never said it before, and she stopped everything to listen to more. He said that after talking to an old friend from high school, he'd been daydreaming about the past and he'd realized that his life had gotten more on track after their relationship had started, so many years ago. She was surprised and happy that he'd said that. And they paused in their morning routine for a deeper sharing of the amazing life that they had together. In the midst of the stress and the struggle, he said that to her. And she felt touched.

Another couple from my practice, who have been together for about 15 years, had a different issue. She would keep bringing up with him how alone she had felt in raising their children. He couldn't understand why she kept complaining about the same thing, which had happened so long ago. He couldn't understand what the problem was. He kept responding by saying, "What's the problem? I'm here all the time. You're not alone." During a session, I had her tell her story and name the deep emotions under her pain, and I had him listen to her detail the emotion of feeling completely alone. He was then able to begin to understand that part of her pain came from his trying to talk her out of her feelings by continuing to tell her that she wasn't alone. She felt as though it denied her experience and left her feeling unheard and very alone with her pain. By stopping to name the emotions—her shame of not being heard, which left her feeling isolated and alone, and his shame of believing that if she wasn't happy it was his fault, which made it so that he couldn't even hear her pain—they were able to hear each other, acknowledge what was going on, and move on from the past.

With another couple who was having difficulty communication. So during a session I had each of them do a "frozen sculpture" based on the dynamic between them, where they each took a posture relating to how they were feeling. Then I had them each give their postures a title. Partner A called her posture "Before the Storm" and Partner B called hers "The Ocean Wave." When I had Partner B bring her sculpture to life, the other watched in horror, saying, "That's

terrifying! It's like a huge ocean wave and I'm on the shore as it's bearing down on me. It feels like I'm going to be washed away! That's what it feels like when we get into an argument." Then I had her take on a posture of how she felt in response to that. She curled up in a fetal position like a small child, looking away with a frightened expression. When her partner saw her in that terrified place, she asked, "Is that what happens when I get loud? I only get loud because I think you're trying to run away from me." Partner B responded, "I only run away from you because I get scared." So in the session we worked with that: the ocean wave and the other running away scared. I had them play that out together. We named the parts of their cycle and found it didn't matter where it started—it turned into a free flowing movement. Then I asked the partner who was the scared child, "What's a different way this could be? How can we re-choreograph this pattern?" She said, "I wish the wave would stay over there and the ocean would be calm. Then I could come there more easily." Then they played that out and found a different dance in the back and forth flow between them. She was able to move toward the ocean, and instead of a huge, intense wave forming, the ocean wave got smaller and there was actually a gentle movement back and forth from the dance. I pointed out the beautiful co-creation that was happening between them and had them name what this new dance was. Instead of "Crashing Waves" they called it "Our Ocean Dance." Then they set a plan for how they could be aware of their dynamic outside of the session. Instead of one feeling the blame and shame of feeling too loud and frightening her partner and the other feeling the shame of being bullied in the "Crashing Waves" dynamic, they were about to do the "Ocean Dance." Both were included and both participated without watching for their hurt or scared places.

Being able to name something and pause rather than just react in the usual ways can create space for deeper connection. When there is deeper connection there is less need to blame or feel shame. People feel connected and it is a *fun* connection.

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