

So what do we do about it?...

An Overview of Imago Relationship Therapy

What is Imago? Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT) is an approach to working with couples that integrates many of the contemporary theories in psychology and neuroscience. It was founded by Harville Hendrix, brought forth in his book ***Getting the Love You Want*** which has been a New York Times Bestseller since its original publishing in 1988. There are now over 2,000 certified Imago Relationship Therapists in over 35 countries around the world.

“Imago” is the Latin word for image. This takes on two meanings in IRT. First, the imago is the unconscious image of our childhood caretakers – both their positive and negative traits all wrapped into one. This image becomes the radar for who we are attracted to in our adult relationships. We experience the positive traits early in the romantic phase, then the negative ones show up with the power struggle. This leads to the second meaning. Our imago match is that person uniquely qualified to bring healing to those childhood wounds. Yes, we need to find the person not only who gives the magic chemistry of falling in love, but the one who pushes our buttons in ways that can drive us crazy by repeating old patterns from childhood. All unconscious, but with a purpose – to finish the unfinished business of childhood.

The Imago Dialogue. Communication is the number one presenting problem in couple therapy. Developing good communication is much more difficult than most people want to believe. The single most important skill that you will learn is the Imago Dialogue, which will provide a new way of communicating. Predicated on safety, dialogue allows partner to take turns – one sending and one receiving.

In sending, you will focus on yourself – your experience, thoughts and feelings – vs. talking about your partner. I statements are the norm here. There is no shaming, blaming or criticizing. Those are destructive and toxic to your relationship. You will learn new ways to express your frustrations that will ask you to own your own side of the street, and not blame your partner for putting you there.

Truth be told, the receiving is typically the most difficult part of the work. It requires you to contain your reactivity, to quiet the chatter in your own mind so that you can stay present for your partner. The goal here is understanding – not agreement. There are three components to receiving.

1. ***Mirroring.*** First you will mirror back what your partner is speaking, pausing them as you go along to assure that you are staying connected. When your partner is finished, you will then summarize their message.
2. ***Validation.*** Validation expresses to the other person “you make sense.” This does not imply agreement. It means that you can see their perspective, respect their position, even if (and if often will be) different than your own.
3. ***Empathy.*** You will then imagine how this leaves your partner feeling and check in with them for accuracy. This is often where the connection happens because you’re going beyond repeating back their words, and trying to step into their shoes and imagine how they are feeling.

If this sounds at all confusing, don’t worry. That’s what I’m here for – to teach you the skills and shepherd you through the process.

Ultimately, the Imago Dialogue is the most important tool in this work. Like any good tool in your toolbox, it takes time to become effective and efficient. It often feels awkward in the beginning because it is new. You'll want to react and go back to the old ways that got you here in the first place. Remember that you're taking on this work not just to learn a new tool, but to build safety and connection into your relationship and bring you closer to one another. Stay with it. You will first become a mechanic, then a craftsman, then an artist!

Other Important Aspects

➤ **Rediscovering the Good.** What couples often don't realize is that relationship problems don't just stem from conflict, but from the gradual erosion of the good parts of their relationship. What was once appreciated is now expected. Dates are a thing of the past. Genuine romance gone. The good must be rediscovered.

In our work, this is done through exercises such as the Appreciation Dialogue and Flooding of Admiration. These are conscious and intentional exercises to reconnect us with the perhaps dormant feelings of love inside. They may be challenging when there is great tension, but that's when they take on greater meaning. It is the mature person who can acknowledge something positive in their partner during these times.

➤ **Developing a Vision.** Couples will develop a Relationship Vision, in which they are invited to dream and step into making that dream a reality. Reflecting upon one's own desired relationship, couples then come together to develop active statements that become part of their vision. By speaking into that vision and putting it to paper, the work to make that vision a reality is already happening.

➤ **Restructuring Frustration.** Couples will learn how to get out of the frustrating cycle of nagging and complaining, and to be able voice their own needs and experiences. Frustrations always connect to a deeper part of that iceberg hidden under the surface. Doing the work to make those connections opens the door to change. Demands for change become requests based on your own wounding and needs. It's amazing how much your partner will want to do something when they see it as something important to you vs. a character flaw in them that you're trying to fix.

It Can Be Done!

All this may seem daunting to you, but I want you to know that it can be done. The first step is having the curiosity and openness to start the process. That's all. I will help you from there.

Start now. Contact me at: 310-268-7792 or Michael@DrMichaelD.com