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Verbal Intercourse as a Prelude to Sex

An eBook by Dr. Susan Campbell

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Sexual Vulnerability

Chapter Two: Intimacy as a Spiritual Voyage

Chapter Three: Holding Differences

Chapter Four: More Tools for Enhancing Intimacy

Chapter One: Sexual Vulnerability

If you want to have great sex, the willingness to be sexually vulnerable is a must.

Most people protect themselves when they are around other people. This is true even in sex. We tend to give “the other” the power to hurt us. So, just in case, we keep a layer of protection around our hearts. Then, if they do something that we associate with rejection, criticism, or any of our other favorite fears, we say, “I knew it! I knew this would happen! It’s a good thing I didn’t let myself get completely vulnerable—because then, I’d be even more hurt.”

Allowing yourself to be completely open and potentially vulnerable with your partner is an act of great trust. It is the most important thing you can do for yourself if you want to heal your old wounds and realize that you’re big now—that you can trust yourself to deal with whatever happens to you. Being openly vulnerable can also help you see that the pain that another person’s behavior triggers in you is useful information about what you still need to heal in yourself. Pain can reveal to you the areas in your unconscious belief structure that need to be updated. So pain is not a bad thing. It shows you where you need to focus in your journey toward wholeness.

Once you learn to accept that some emotional pain could happen when you make yourself sexually vulnerable, it is less likely that you will experience pain. That’s how life works: it gives you the things you need to learn to accept and deal with, and once you do, it gives you new and different lessons. So once you stop defending against “being disappointed” (for example), then you won’t have so many disappointments in your life.

What are your areas of potential vulnerability with respect to sex and lovemaking? For many, the area of “asking for what I want” is the big one. We considered one way of dealing with this fear in the example of Lisa and Steve earlier in this chapter. Another way is to simply ask for what you want while feeling your fear, but not explicitly speaking about it. Experiment with both approaches. Sometimes one way will be more real for you, and at other times the other way will feel better.

There are other ways of being sexually vulnerable also. Just allowing the other to see exactly what you are thinking and feeling is a wonderful gift—to yourself and to your partner. Some people are afraid of “not looking good” when they are in the heat of passion. Maybe they think they’re too gross or loud or out of control. And they judge this as bad. If you have this fear, please talk to your partner about it. Probably you will be reassured to know that most people feel honored to be trusted with that level of vulnerability from someone they love.

Other ways to practice being open and vulnerable are:

Looking into one another’s eyes while in the heat of passion.

Telling your partner exactly how something feels that they are doing.

Letting your partner know when you are feeling unsatisfied or when you are in a state of longing for more closeness (without blaming your partner for your feeling).

Asking your partner for feedback about what you are doing to pleasure them (with an attitude of sincerely wanting to please).

Chapter Two: Intimacy as a Spiritual Voyage

The word intimacy comes from the Latin *intimatus*, meaning to make something known to someone else. When you make yourself known to someone else—your feelings, your desires, your fantasies, even your upsets—you are contributing to deeper intimacy. An intimate sexual relationship can also make yourself more known to yourself. That's the other side of the intimacy coin: as you get closer to your partner, you will discover feelings, desires, fantasies, and yes, even upsets—that you didn't know were there in yourself!

An intimate sexual relationship is indeed both a journey to know your partner as well as a journey to deeply know yourself.

Dr. Susan in her best seller, *The Couple's Journey*, defines “intimacy” as “knowing and being known.”

Dealing with Fears of Intimacy

Everyone has one or two “favorite fears.” For some people it's rejection. For others, it's abandonment or betrayal. And then there's the fear of being misunderstood or not being heard; and of course the old standby, being smothered or controlled. These fears originate in childhood, but even when we become adults, fears have a way of finding their way into the bedroom.

An intimate sexual relationship can provide a safe place to uncover and own up to your favorite fear or fears. While this might not sound like much fun, it is a very valuable thing to do. When you can admit and speak about your fears to your partner, this is a big first step toward healing whatever early wounding led to the fear in the first place. Here is an example: When Lila was a little girl, her mother ignored her when she cried loudly for what she wanted. So Lila came to the unfortunate conclusion that “it's not safe to ask for what I want.” Now, in bed with Steve, she is hoping he'll stroke her head as part of their foreplay. But (based on her early experiences with asking and not getting) she is afraid he will just ignore her, so she doesn't ask. Instead she attempts to override her desire and just enjoy the feeling of Steve's hands on other parts of her body. The only trouble is, she isn't really able to push her real desire out of her thoughts. So she cannot be fully present to enjoy Steve's touch. She's “in her head” worrying about what to do, rather than “in her body” enjoying this present moment with her lover. You see, when you have a feeling that you try to push away, it usually won't go. This is especially true if the feeling is related to a childhood-based fear that needs to be addressed and healed.

If you find yourself in a situation similar to Lila's, first gently remind yourself that the beliefs about what is and isn't safe that you learned in childhood are not true. “That was then, and this is now.” When you were little and dependent, it was indeed scary if you asked for something and got ignored. As a little person you were totally dependent on the big people for your survival. Now, you are big and self-supporting, not little and dependent. If Lila asks Steve to stroke her head and he ignores her, or if he does it but not the way she really likes, she will survive. So the idea that it's not safe to ask for what you

want is an old, outdated belief that she now has the opportunity to heal or outgrow. If she asks and doesn't get what she wants, at least her asking gets her back into present time with herself and her lover. So the healing comes, not so much from asking and getting, but from asking and finding out that just the act of asking is an act of affirming yourself. Becoming self-validating or self-affirming is what adults do. Waiting for someone else to make you happy is what children do. So remember, you're big now.

If you decide to take the risk and ask for what you want, it's often a good idea to mention also that you are feeling some fear associated with asking—that you are feeling tentative and vulnerable due to old tapes in your mind, not because of your partner. Telling your partner that your fears are about you and not him or her can help a lot. This helps your partner not take what you are feeling personally. Mentioning your fear out loud also helps you accept yourself just as you are. And it helps you take your fear less seriously and get over it. After expressing a feeling, the feeling usually changes. Funny how that works!

Here is how an intimate request like this might go: “Darling, I’m feeling very close to you, and I’m also feeling that I want to ask you to touch me in a particular way.... but I’m afraid to ask. I know this fear is something very old...something I’ve always had...long before you and I met. So what I want is for you to stroke my head as you were doing last night while we were watching TV. That always feels so special when you do that for me.”

How to Ask When You're Afraid to Ask

1. Feel both the fear and the want.
2. Express the fear to clear it out of your “foreground.”
3. Appreciate something about what is going on right now.
4. Express the want in specific terms. (Say what you want, not what you don't want.)
5. Be open (to receiving it or to not receiving it).
6. Remember that it is a good thing to ask, even if you don't get it.
7. Appreciate yourself for taking a risk.

Chapter Three: Holding Differences

The intimate journey of two people toward wholeness will inevitably involve differences and conflict about these differences. Communicating openly about these differences can feel scary. That's normal. But open communication can also lead to an actual expansion of each individual's sense of "myself," resulting in a deeper sense of unity, not only with each other, but with all of life. To illustrate how this happens, here is a true story of a couple in conflict about the issue of monogamy versus an "open lifestyle."

Paula is fifty. Paul is forty-six. They have been married for ten years. This is the second marriage for both. When they first got together, they agreed to be monogamous, but now things have changed. Paul believes he has "only a few good years left" in terms of his sexual vitality. He has only had four sexual partners in his life, and he's feeling a need to experiment with other lovers. He also has the idea that being monogamous is killing his passion and his sense of vitality as a man. He sincerely believes that it is dishonest for him to pretend to be satisfied with just one sex partner. He loves Paula and enjoys he and she have together, but Paul keeps noticing his sexual attention being drawn toward other women.

Paula is beside herself with grief and anger. She wants to stay monogamous. She believes that sex is a sacred act, and she has not had any desire to be with other sex partners. They have arrived at a true impasse. Paul feels strongly that he cannot be true to himself and stay monogamous. He also feels genuine empathy for Paula. It hurts him to see her in pain. Paula imagines that if Paul has sex with other women, she will not be able to be as open and vulnerable with him. She trusts what Paul says about himself—that he feels dishonest pretending to be monogamous. She wants Paul to have what he wants, and at the same time, she thinks she'd be untrue to herself staying in a non-monogamous relationship. Paul wants Paula to feel safe and open with him.

If you were Paul or Paula, can you imagine how you might experience such a predicament? Can you imagine feeling two contradictory things at once: the wish to have what you want alongside the wish for your partner to have what he or she wants? This is often what it feels like to hold differences. It's like hanging out in an unresolved predicament without knowing if there will be a resolution. Some people can't stand the tension, so they jump to a premature conclusion—like "I'm out of here" or "I know I'm not being fair to you, so I'll just leave." Yet sometimes when you do stay with your experience, you get to a deeper level of what the conflict is really about. It can be intensely painful, but if a couple can stay with their pain, with awareness, a breakthrough will occur. If you can stay in the impasse for enough time, allowing the difference to exist rather than rushing prematurely to a resolution, you will be changed by the experience. This change is not predictable. It doesn't take the form of giving in or compromising but rather of expanding yourself.

In Paul and Paula's case, after they had stayed with their pain and uncertainty for about 6 months, they both stated that they felt a sense of ego transcendence: Paul discovered that his need for other lovers was actually connected to some unresolved anger both at Paula

and at his mother. After he was able to express his anger to both and to get over it, Paul shared: “What I thought I needed for my survival doesn’t seem so crucial now.” Paula also got a deeper look at herself after staying with her pain. She remembered a time early in the marriage when Paul broke one of his agreements with her—an agreement that had to do with money, not sex. After she cleared this up with Paul, by expressing her resentment, she then saw that “breaking agreements” had been a trigger for her all her life. She did some crying and grieving for some of the disappointments she had felt as a child. Afterward, she was finally free enough of old baggage to say truthfully, “I feel a lot safer, like my security doesn’t depend on other people, like I’ll be okay if the relationship ends, even though I still very much want to be with Paul.”

Outcomes like this often feel magical or unbelievable to the people involved—when they consider where they were before they got unstuck. For so many just staying in the impasse, holding their differences for a period of time, produces an inner expansion or transformation that enables them to experience a deeper level of what’s real for each of them.

Holding Differences: A Practice Exercise

To help you experience holding differences, pick a topic about which you and your partner have some unfinished business. Sit facing each other. Partner A opens the dialogue by sharing a resentment about the other partner (using the sentence structure, “I resent you for...” and then sharing bodily sensations, self-talk, or anything else related to the resentment.) Partner B actively listens, mirroring back to A what he has just heard. Then, when his partner says she is satisfied with how he listened to her, B shares what he is experiencing right in the moment. He does not debate the content of her message. His experience can be whatever he feels, thinks, or says to himself after hearing what A said. Partner A actively listens and then shares her present experience. They keep going back and forth like this for five to ten minutes.

Active listening is a communication practice that helps you stay present to what your partner is saying without getting defensive. It also lets your partner know that you are attempting to hear her accurately.

Here’s an example:

Dan: I resent you for not initiating sex with me more often—you’ve only approached me 3 times in the past 6 months. I feel a tightness in my jaw and in my throat. And my self-talk is, “I’m not a priority in your life.”

Dora: You resent me for not initiating sex. Your jaw and throat are tight. And your self-talk is that you’re not a priority in my life. Is that what you said? (Dan nods.) Okay. I resent you for saying I never initiate sex. I feel that in my face, and in my arms and hands. They’re tense.

Dan: You resent me for saying you never initiate sex. Your face and arms and hands feel tense. Did I hear you correctly? (Dora nods.) And I resent you for

saying the word, “never.” I didn’t say you never initiate. I said you have done it 3 times in the last 6 months.

Dora: You’re saying you resent me for saying “never,” and that what you really said was I only initiated 3 times in the last 6 months. Did I get it? (Dan nods).

And I’m feeling sad. I’m saying to myself that I’m not so good at initiating even though I’d like to. I’m unsure of myself in the arena that you’re so good in.

Dan: You’re feeling sad and you’re thinking that you don’t have confidence in your ability to initiate sex. Is that right? (She nods.) And right now I’m feeling softer toward you. I can feel a relaxation in my belly and around my heart.

Dora: You say you’re feeling softer toward me. Yes? (He nods.) I feel the tension going out of my face, and I’m feeling a little bit softer and more relaxed now too.

In this example, Dan and Dora started out resenting each other and ended up feeling softer toward each other. Things don’t always happen this way, but often they do. This sort of change is most likely to happen when the two people stay present to what the other has just said and share their here-and-now response. Paying careful attention to your own experience and to each other allows for feelings to be experienced more fully so that they can be released.

It also teaches you both the art of Holding Differences.

If you are a couple with a long history of conflict, it would be a good idea to do this exercise with another person or pair observing. Having a witness or witnesses helps you stay with the exercise, which can be very difficult. Couples are so accustomed to bypassing their present experience and going immediately into their interpretations, generalizations, stereotypes, knee-jerk reactions, and self-protective judgments about each other. It’s highly unusual for people to simply share their present experience.

Dan and Dora’s conversation took place between two people being real with each other--instead of between one person’s interpretation and the others’ interpretation. The latter would look more like this: “You don’t care about my needs. I’ve told you a hundred times what I want.” (This is an interpretation followed by a generalization. He can’t really know what she does or does not care about.) “Well, you don’t care about my needs either! You never treat me with respect.” (Another interpretation and another generalization.) Does this sound familiar? Well, if you’ve ever been married for any length of time, it probably does! Mates who have been together for a while tend to camouflage the really painful unfinished situations by making interpretations, generalizations, comparisons, and assessments. They apparently hope that this sort of more distant, less intimate, language will keep them a safe distance from the pain.

If the pain or tension of holding differences becomes too great, it’s okay to agree to set the subject aside for several days or even weeks and to come back to discussing it at an agreed-upon time in the future.

Holding differences trains you to tolerate more intensity of feeling, whether it be painful or pleasurable. As a practice, it helps you stay with the discomfort, and stay with noticing your experience, until clarity is reached. It also helps partners discover what is real for each other, instead of getting caught up defending their interpretations and stereotypes. Using active listening with the intent of staying in your experience is a very effective tool for helping you stick to *what is*, rather than escaping into explanations or defensiveness.

Chapter Four: More Tools for Enhancing Intimacy

The practices offered so far in this book are designed to help you discover a deep sense of trust in yourself and in life — a sense that whatever life deals you, you can deal with it. They are designed to help you own your bigness and do what you need to do to heal the little wounded child that hides inside of you so you can fulfill your innate potential for pleasure and creativity. This last section contains some other practices for enhancing intimacy and self-knowledge.

1. Creating Safe, Sacred Space

Whenever you and your partner have something important to discuss, such as the Holding Differences exercise in the previous section, it's a good idea to have a special place in your home that you set aside as a safe space or sacred space. This is where you go to talk about matters of importance. To sanctify this space, you might light a candle, burn some incense, or “smudge” by burning herbs. Whenever you enter this space, even if there is disharmony in the air, you enter it with an attitude of openness to *what is*— willing to speak about and to hear whatever is ready to be revealed.

2. Word Fasting

If you and your lover are planning to spend the day together, try agreeing to be totally silent the whole time. Some people like to do their word fast while taking a long hike in a beautiful natural setting. Looking at each other, touching, pointing, laughing, and any form of nonverbal contact is permitted, but no talking, no writing notes in the sand, no sign language. This kind of contact can be a wonderful thing to experience with someone you care about. After the day is over, then you can have a conversation about how it felt.

3. Free Association

This practice is modeled after the free-association technique used by Freud and other psychoanalysts since Freud. The two of you lie on a bed or on the floor in a comfortable nest of pillows and blankets that you have created for the occasion. Just lie there, maybe looking at one another, but not necessarily. When something to say bubbles up from the subconscious mind of either person, speak it aloud. It could be something related to the present situation, or it could be a memory, a feeling, a thought, a wish, a dream fragment, or a theory. You share anything and everything that enters your consciousness, uncensored. Allow plenty of spaces between the sharings. And do not try to have a regular conversation -- although if conversation happens, that's okay too.

4. Meditation

Meditation is usually practiced alone, but you can also do it with your partner, side-by-side or facing one another. There are many traditions of meditation, such as Zen,

Vipassana, and Transcendental (TM). There are also a number of acceptable postures, including sitting and standing. Basically, the practice involves being in one another's presence and at the same time being totally present to yourself. Paying attention to your breathing, to your physical sensations, or to a mantra that you repeat silently to yourself can help you stay present.