



Dialog 5: Elaine and Julia

Spouse Helping Spouse / Initiating the Conversation

Elaine and Julia have been married for seven years, and together as a couple for 12. Lately, Elaine feels that Julia has been distant. The behavior that most annoys Elaine is Julia's smartphone use during dinner.

Step 1: Permission

Inner Prep

Elaine begins by centering herself. She turns off her tablet, shuts off the radio, and sits on the couch and slows her breathing. She'll have this conversation with Julia tonight, in the bedroom after dinner. Elaine begins by assessing her thoughts and feelings. "I'm angry and hurt that she ignores me. I'm lonely. I'm sad. I'm scared that our relationship may end."

Centering and becoming her own ally first (chapter 8).

Next, she looks at the flip side of those negative thoughts and emotions: what are the legitimate needs and values that she wants to honor and express?

"I feel this way because I value connection and love. I want intimacy."

Then Elaine explores her thoughts and feelings about Julia's behavior. "What if she doesn't love me anymore. Heck, she probably doesn't even like me. She's trying to punish me for having to work so many hours. She's selfish. She likes the feeling of power that she gets by withholding affection."

Empathizing with the other person (chapter 9).

Those are harsh judgments, Elaine notices. She inquires: what's the possible positive intent behind Julia's behavior?

"She may feel that I've been ignoring her, and this is the only way she feels safe expressing her own anger and sadness. She's dealing with things with her family of origin that are really hard, and perhaps the emotional labor is draining her, and she just doesn't have the capacity to deal with my stuff. I have been complaining about work a lot, and I have been pretty stressed. Maybe she's cutting me off emotionally to protect herself."

Elaine asks herself what she wants. "I want us to be close again. To connect with care and intimacy. To express that intimacy by spending time together, not just in physical proximity, but through paying undivided attention and really listening."

She expands that outcome into what she wants for them jointly. "I want us to be able to communicate fully and both feel heard and cared for, and to be able to ask for what we need in a positive and healthy way."

The Conversation

Bedtime. Julia is on her phone, scrolling through social media. Elaine is next to her, with a book.

Elaine: Hey hon, can I talk to you about something?

Julia: (sighs) I'm really tired. Can it wait? (watching a video of someone she doesn't know making carrot bacon)

Elaine: Yes, of course. But I really miss talking to you. When do you think you'll have the energy?

Julia: (Puts down her phone with a sigh) Well, we're talking now. Let's just talk now.

Taking the "can it wait?" as a yes, but not this minute. And leading with a vulnerable statement of outcome: "I really miss talking to you." (chapter 11)

Even though this sounds a little begrudging, it's still permission to take the next step. Julia is annoyed, but has said yes.

Step 2: Outcome

Elaine: I miss being close to you. (Long pause.) You were texting while we were sitting together at dinner tonight. You've done that most nights over the past couple of weeks. I find myself coming up with all sorts of theories about what's going on for you, and some of them have been worst-case scenarios. So what I really want is for us to be able to communicate on a deep level again. And I'm curious what you want.

Julia: Yeah. Of course I want that too. But I'm not the problem. You're the one who's been shutting me out. Do you even know or care what I've been going through with my mom and my sister over the past year?

Elaine: Yes, you've been — (Pause) — I don't know. I thought I did, but it sounds like you've been feeling the same way I have — ignored and disconnected. And for much longer than I have. Am I hearing you right?

Elaine almost takes the bait. But catches herself, then pivots to recap and empathy (chapter 22).

Julia: Mom's dementia is getting worse, and Tammy is overwhelmed with three kids at home and Tom got laid off. I've been feeling guilty, and helpless living over 2000 miles away and letting Tammy do everything. And you've hardly noticed — all you seem to care about is the damn merger.

Elaine: You're right. I didn't realize how heavy that all was for you. I've been pretty self-absorbed, I guess. I'm really sorry about that. And I really want to know - what's been

going on with your family?

Julia and Elaine talk about Julia's family issues for 10-15 minutes. Elaine listens, asks questions based on genuine curiosity, and empathizes.

Julia: I come home from work and I've got a whole 'nother job helping Tammy deal with mom. Did you know that I've been coordinating with a home health agency, and filling out applications for continuing care communities? Do you even know what I'm texting about at dinner?

Elaine: So my work pressures and your family pressures have gotten between us, it seems. I don't want us to continue this way. And I really want to know: what do you want?

Julia: I want to know that you have my back. I want you to acknowledge that your problems aren't the only ones in this relationship.

Elaine: It sounds like you've been missing me for a long time. And now I'm missing you as well. Can we do something about it? I really want us to be close again. I want us to be able to share our struggles and burdens, and not just make small talk.

Julia: Well that's what I've been wanting too. I just didn't feel like I had the right to complain, because I know how stressed you've been about work. I didn't want to add anything to your plate, but I really resented your job always being the center of your attention.

Spending time just listening and empathizing here serves two huge purposes. First, it helps Julia get to a place where she can fully engage in the conversation, without feeling resentful or grudging. Second, it's exactly the kind of connection that Elaine wants!

There's the energizing outcome.

Step 3: Opportunity

What's happening now?

Elaine: So it sounds like we both need this. I've been trying to protect you from my stresses, and you've been trying to protect me from yours, and we've both felt alone and unsupported. And it's not always easy, because these are vulnerable topics, and I can see that what's been happening now is that we're both avoiding these conversations. We've been stressed and tired, and it's just been easier to sweep it under the rug.

Julia: Yes.

Find the Opportunity in the Problem

Elaine: I'm really sorry. And you're right, work has been incredibly stressful. And Bellamy is making unreasonable time demands of me, along with the rest of the project team. But that's no excuse for me taking you for granted.

Julia: Well, we're talking now.

Elaine: I hope that's OK with you.

Julia: Well, it's the only way we're going to fix this, isn't it?

Step 4: Plan

Identify Options

Elaine: What can we try to get connected again?

Julia: Well, you can take more of an interest in my life. And maybe take some time off from work — when's the last time we've had a proper vacation? Or even a 3-day weekend?

Elaine: That's a great idea. I have been kind of burnt out, haven't I?

Julia: That's an understatement. You've been downright grouchy. Or here but not here.

Elaine: I see that. And I'm sorry.

Julia: Well, I'm not always the best at saying what I feel. It's easier for me to just get hurt and angry and shut down, than to say what I'm really feeling.

Elaine: Thank you for saying that. I often find that I'm playing "guess what she's thinking" because you don't tell me what you need.

Julia: That's not fair for you. I want to tell you, but I'm afraid that you'll think I'm needy. And I was raised to not ask for things. It's hard to change.

Elaine: Sounds like we both have some patterns that have contributed to where we got to. And it feels like this conversation is a first step in addressing those patterns. But we are who we are — what do you think about getting some outside help?

Julia: (uncomfortable) Do you mean go into therapy?

Elaine: I don't know. Maybe. Maybe take a course together. Or maybe just start doing more recreational activities as a

In this scenario, talking about the problem using the Four Steps is the opportunity (chapter 21). Notice that while this echoes Julia's grudging willingness to engage in the conversation at the start, it's different now. Julia is acknowledging that they are both acting differently in a way that addresses the problem and achieves their shared energizing outcome.

What can we try (joint responsibility) (chapter 24).

Elaine takes ownership for her contributions to the problem. This reinforces her stance of "Let's make this better" rather than, "I need you to stop doing that." This move requires emotional courage from Elaine, and models it for Julia (chapter 5).

couple — kayaking, or ballroom dancing, or —

Julia: Do you remember when you stepped on my dress at Jasper and Warty's wedding and I knocked over the flower arrangement?

Elaine: Yeah, maybe there's more than one good reason for us to take dancing lessons. (Both laughing) But it feels like we got here via a slippery slope. Like there wasn't a big fight, or a betrayal, or any particular incident. We just grew apart through being busy and preoccupied — at least I did. What can we do to make sure we pay attention to each other and to the relationship?

Julia: What if we scheduled meetings with each other, and made rules. Really listening to each other? Maybe even having some question cards as prompts. I saw a video where someone had made a deck of conversation prompts against small talk. I could try to find it online.

Elaine: I love that. Maybe we could combine that with Texas Hold 'Em.

Julia: I think you're bluffing on the flop. Now tell me about your most embarrassing childhood moment. (Both dissolving into laughter)

Choose

Elaine: So what do you want to do?

Julia: Can you take off any time in the next couple of weeks? I think we need a honeymoon booster shot.

Elaine: I'll ask tomorrow. No, I'll tell them that I need next Thursday and Friday off. I have some personal days in the bank. Let's plan a romantic getaway.

Julia: Can we make time every day just to check in?

Elaine: I'd love that. I'm real curious about those cards you mentioned. They sound like fun, and a good way to help us be more connected. Can you look for them?

Julia: Yes, I'll order them.

Elaine: I love that we're problem solving together. And I know that I'm going to get stressed out at work, and we both have ingrained patterns. What might get in the way of "project intimacy" that we should anticipate and prepare for?

Julia: Ooh, this is why mother always told me to marry a

Humor can help the other person go from defensive to discovery mode, as long as it isn't at someone's expense (chapter 15).

project manager. "Honey," she said, "there's nothing sexier than someone who knows how to plan for contingencies and mitigate risk."

Elaine: You fell for me the minute I showed you my Gantt chart.

Julia: Sorry I'm making fun of you. It's a good question, really. I think that I tend to clam up when I'm feeling vulnerable, instead of asking for what I want. And you tend to go into problem solving mode, which makes me feel like you aren't really listening. Maybe we each can come up with a code word for when we see the other going into one of those patterns?

Elaine: That's good. And the other person has to stop and take 5 deep breaths whenever they hear that code word. So we get into the habit of self-reflecting rather than reacting. What do you think?

Julia: That's very Manchurian Candidate of you. I think it's a wonderful idea.

Elaine: How do you feel about our plan? Are you confident that we can do it?

Julia: I am. Are you?

Elaine: Yes, it feels really good to laugh with you again. I think if we're laughing together, we can handle anything.

Julia: Yup. I'd almost forgotten how funny I am. Lucky you! And I have another idea for how we can achieve greater intimacy...

(Since this is a business book, the curtain comes down now.)