

Unraveling a Knot: A Process for Connecting

by Diana Alstad

Supplement to “Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga”

In a knot, each person trying to win by convincing the other they’re “wrong” is what keeps people stuck *arguing over content*. Instead, if you temporarily put your position on the back burner, you can try seeing if each of you could be partly “right.” Totally *identifying* with your position locks you into subjectivity. But if you *shift to curiosity* about how the knot works and where the other is at, you can join hands in exploration – bypassing some of the conflict’s divisiveness by becoming interested in its nature.

The new goal is to *understand* the knot and its *hidden roots*, to be curious about the other’s reality and how you affect each other’s feelings, to discover *imbalances*, to reveal new *information*, to see the **TOTAL PICTURE** – instead of trying to resolve the knot, win, or change the other. If you learn something new, *say it!* Making someone feel understood and acknowledging their reality can be as or more important than changing.

I. GETTING CLEAR: Choose a knot (repeated conflict, pattern or stuck place) to work on. Breakthroughs and major new seeings can sometimes come from just doing these next two steps:

1. SWITCH ROLES: Take turns stating the other’s position as if it were your own, using the same sentences, logic, emotions, tone of voice, etc. Try to experience what it feels like to be in the other position.

2. STATE YOUR OWN POSITION as cleanly as possible to give your partner a feel of your living reality. Before the other states theirs, they should repeat or describe yours *to your satisfaction*. This helps you both really hear each other and feel heard.

II. ANATOMY OF THE KNOT*:

To clarify your knot’s dynamics, separately or together write or reflect on these aspects of it:

3. FEELINGS caused in each other by the knot. Identify the **TRIGGER WORDS** and **BUTTONS** – *Map the minefield* that makes you both defensive, reactive, hurt, angry, and out of control. Identify how and where each position “hooks” the other.

4. VALUES underlying each position – implied or stated. (**CLUE:** Which of your beliefs and values *justify* your feelings and give you a “right” to them?) You can argue endlessly about values and each make a good case for being “right” – that’s where people get stuck.

5. WANTS & FEARS underlying the values. Values often protect from fears and justify, legitimize or rationalize wants. (**CLUE** – Ask yourself what’s the worst thing that could happen if you *lost*, or gave up defending your position?)

6. Do you get a hidden **PAY OFF** from the knot? Just keeping the *status quo* can be a pay off – when it’s in your self-interest. However, if a knot is caused by external factors (gender or other inequalities, lack of child-care, finances, etc.) one person may not be getting a pay off. *It’s not always symmetrical.*

7. REPLAY knot by interacting – but *without trying to win or find solutions*. **SHIFT YOUR FOCUS FROM CONTENT TO PROCESS** by paying attention to both of your feelings and their causes. Say when they occur and explain why.

TREAT ALL FEELINGS AS IMPORTANT FEEDBACK, as “facts”, rather than as either “justified” or not. Once acknowledged, feelings often change. Avoid triggering each other if possible. Instead of reacting defensively (mechanically or aggressively), you could try responding to the hidden hurt often underlying anger.

THE KEY IS TO BE CURIOUS and more into *exploring and communicating clearly* than winning, convincing, *changing* or getting back at the other. Ask yourself honestly, where are you *really* coming from?? That’s what the other subliminally responds to.

In intimacy, **WHEN YOU WIN, YOU OFTEN LOSE**. Openness, trust and passion don’t last very long in a win/lose framework.

***Important exceptions:** true *impasses* and disguised, “*truncated knots*” have different dynamics from most knots. See Diana’s “**Exploring Relationships**” (*Yoga Journal*, 1979) at JoelDiana.com.

See also “**MOVING PAST THE KNOTS: THE YOGA OF RELATIONSHIPS**” by Diana Alstad (*LA Yoga*, 2006) at JoelDiana.com.