

How to Stop Dialogue and How to Make Dialogue Thrive

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We know from biology that fear incites the amygdala in the brain to pour adrenalin into the bloodstream, to give us the sudden energy that gets us out of a burning building. We know that while the amygdala is working, synapses in the brain are inhibited so we can focus on the danger at hand. No new dendrites grow in an adrenaline-soaked brain!

Thank you James E Zull and “The Art of Changing the Brain.” So, fear is a sure way to stop dialogue. “You stupid child! You’re going to get it!” Fear, scolding, laughing at a learner, shaming of any kind inhibits movement towards the frontal cortex and stops learning. It is all biology, baby! **#1 Dialogue Killer: Fear**

My dear friend Paula and I sat by the fire one cold winter evening and considered what else inhibits those synapses, stopping learning, cutting off dialogue.

How about “BUT”? I offer an insight or a suggestion and someone in the group says BUT...dismissing my idea, giving 19 reasons why it would never work, kicking the amygdala into action. Dialogue dies. **#2 Dialogue Killer: BUT...**

How about what I irreverently call dialogue interruptus. You are speaking, and I speak right over your voice, interrupting any listening or possible responses to your contribution. **#3 Dialogue Killer: Interrupting**

How about “just”? This is often a self-inflicted killer: When I offer my idea, I say: “This is just an idea...” “Hello, it is just me.” I have dismissed my own ideas and my own self! **#4 Dialogue Killer: Just**

How about “I”? When Mary offers an idea, John immediately says: “I tried that once and it was a mess!” Or “I did this and that” or “I can see how that would be difficult in MY situation...” I, I, I. Mary’s offering is dismissed by what Paula and I called the Greedy Grabbing Eye. **#5 Dialogue Killer: The Greedy Grabbing “I”**

Dialogue is a gentle, loving, productive art and is both susceptible and vulnerable. It needs attention! It needs a quiet amygdala (safety), throughout the room. It needs our preparatory work through the LNRA so we know as much as we can about the learners’ themes and contexts. It needs some quiet time and always careful listening.



Dialogue thrives when I begin my response to your idea with AND, not BUT.

Dialogue thrives when I let you complete your thought and never interrupt you.

Dialogue thrives when I do not put myself or my ideas down. Instead of “It is just me...”, “Hello, it is Jane!”

“This is what I think.” Instead of “‘I’ just thought perhaps we could...”

Dialogue thrives when I avoid an immediate reference to my situation, beginning my response with YOU instead of I. “You must have felt frightened in that situation”, instead of, “I had a close call on the highway just last week...”

What other Dialogue Killers do you notice? And what are the opposite behaviors that can make dialogue thrive?

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