

A-B CONVERSATIONS

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A-B CONVERSATIONS

A BETTER WAY TALK ABOUT THINGS THAT MATTER A STEP-BY-STEP MANUAL FOR COUPLES



BRIEF OVERVIEW— WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Warm greetings. I love that you're here.

This is the latest version of the super tool I designed over twenty years ago as a homework tool for couples in my therapy practice. It was my answer to a question I kept getting from couples at the end of a therapy session: *"Why can't we have conversations at home like we do in your office?"* **YOU CAN.**



“Why can't we have conversations at home like we do in your office?”

After just two A-B coaching sessions, where you'll get firsthand experience doing A-B Conversations with me, you'll be ready to use this manual to have A-B Conversations on your own.



WHAT MAKES IT A SUPER TOOL

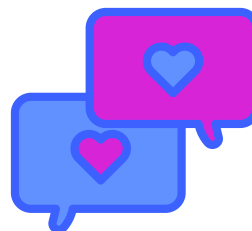
You don't need to be an Einstein to drive a car. You just need to know how to drive, and follow the rules so no one gets hurt. And **you don't need to be a therapist to have breakthrough conversations with your partner.** You just need to learn how to do it, and follow the rules so no one gets hurt.

The beauty of this tool lies in its simplicity. As long as you practice **A-B Conversations for one hour every week** for at least three months, **and** you follow the instructions laid out in this manual (including the rules that define your roles), your relationship will improve. It has to. Success is baked into the A-B experience.



WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

- How to talk to each other so you both feel cared about, even when you don't agree.
- How to speak your mind, without hammering your partner to death.
- How to talk about sensitive topics with greater sensitivity.
- How to ask questions that encourage more openness.
- How to listen like a therapist, so you feel smart, and your partner feels understood.



HOW IT WORKS

You meet each week for an hour. The hour is divided into two, 20-minute conversations. In one, you're **Person A**, while your partner is **Person B**. After 20 minutes, you debrief, switch roles, repeat the process.



UNDERSTANDING YOUR TWO ROLES: **Person A** ↔ **Person B**

When you are **Person A**, you'll pick the topic you want to discuss. You'll have 20 minutes of your partner's undivided attention to explore the topic in any way you find helpful. You won't be interrupted, have your ideas challenged, or be given advice by **Person B**. (Cool, right?) Take advantage of this opportunity. Pick topics that are important to you. Good candidates are topics you've tried talking about with little success, or topics you've been avoiding because you don't want conflict.

When you are **Person B**, your job will be to listen carefully, and do



As **Person B**, your success will depend more on what you *don't* say than on what you do.



what you can to help your partner feel understood at a deeper level. To achieve this goal, you'll be asking your partner a series of open-ended questions (included on p. 14-17) designed to help **Person A** explore the topic however

they wish, without being rushed, judged, interrupted, dismissed, contradicted, or sidetracked. What makes **A-B Conversations** so effective is the structure of these conversations, as well as the specific rules you both must follow. As **Person B**, your success will depend more on what you don't say than on what you do.



THE DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE STRUCTURE OF AN A-B CONVERSATION

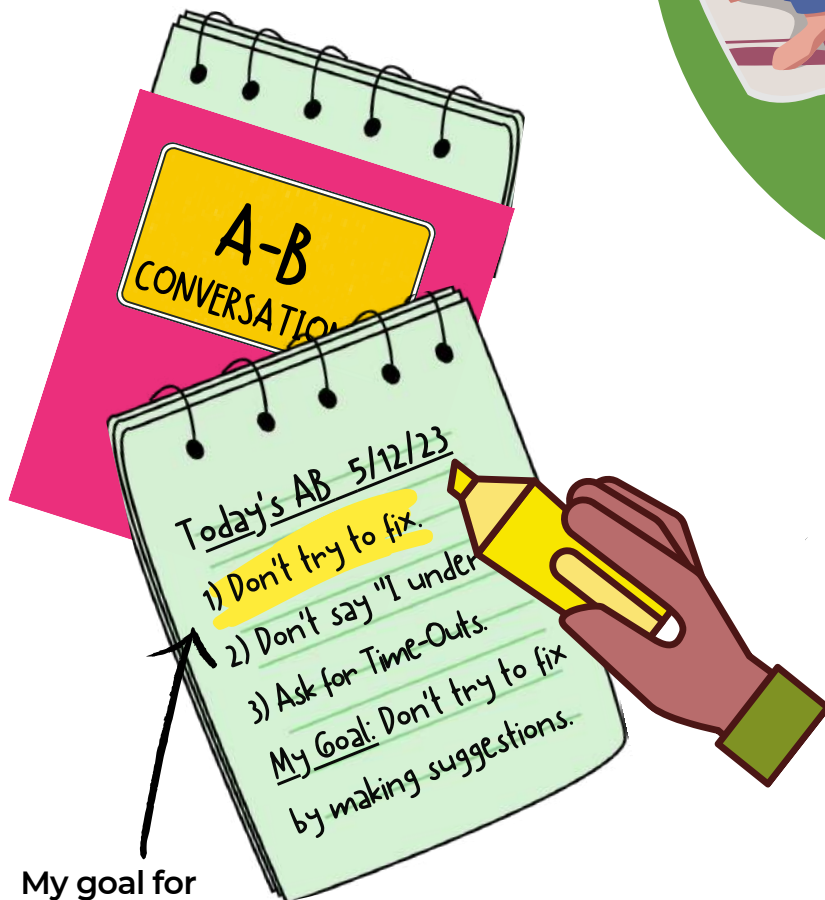
You'll both get to be **Person A** and **Person B** every time you do A-B Conversations, so it doesn't matter who goes first. Alternate, or let whoever has the greatest need be **Person A** first. Here's how it works:

1. **Person A** picks the topic for the first conversation. **Person B** helps **Person A** explore the topic, by asking a series of questions provided on pages 14-17 of this manual. (I've also included some tips on those pages to help **Person B** keep their shit together—which can be a challenge with difficult topics.)
 2. The first time you are **Person A**, choose an issue you're struggling with personally, but not one you're struggling with as a couple (e.g., dieting, exercise, self-confidence, work stress). Save hot topics for later. They'll be easier once you know what you're doing.
 3. Follow the rules for each of your roles (p. 7-10), and keep them with you.
 4. Set a timer. Each conversation goes for 20 min. 
 5. Debrief. When **Person A** feels finished, or 20 minutes are up, the first round ends. Using the questions below, take 10 minutes to exchange feedback. Don't skip this step! 
- How did each role feel and what were the most challenging parts for you? (e.g. holding back, not offering suggestions, believing everything you said, being completely honest.)
 - What did your partner do or say that you liked?
 - What would you like to be different next time?
 - What did you learn about yourself? Your partner?
 - How would you rate your own performance as **Person B** ?
 - How would you rate your partner's performance **Person B** ?

SIMPLE STRUCTURE cont.

6. Switch roles and repeat.

7. Start a notebook. Record the date and write down what you learned from your two A-B's. Then, each of you should write down one goal for next week's **A-B conversations**.



My goal for
next week's A-B's

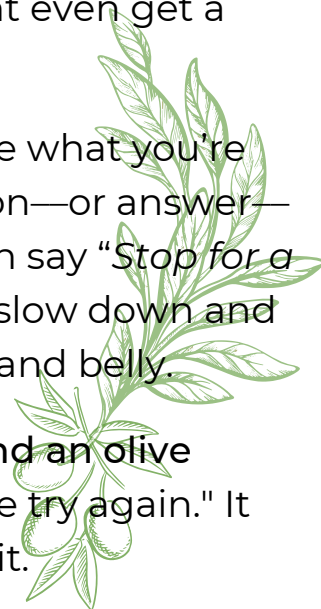




PROPER MINDSET FOR BOTH **PERSON A** and **PERSON B**

On the surface, an A-B conversation looks like two people having an ordinary conversation. But these conversations are far from ordinary. Before you begin, it's important for you both to come to your new practice with an open heart and curious mind, and a desire to be there for each other in a deeper way. Keep these tips in mind:

- **Stay open to learning.** Regardless of which role you're playing, both of you need to expect speed bumps along the way, and be willing to: mess up, keep trying, get honest feedback, and take responsibility for your words and actions. What you say matters.
- **Let go of your need to be right.** For this exercise to work, both of you need to **decide that you care more about the health of your relationship than you do about being right.**
- **Assume the best.** Most people are basically good. So when good people do bad things, start by getting curious, not furious. Hear them out. Give them the benefit of the doubt. They might have been selfish, or thoughtless, or devious. But assuming the best is still the best way to begin a conversation. You might even get a heartfelt apology.
- **Pay close attention to your feelings.** If you're unsure what you're feeling, tune in to your body. Notice when a question—or answer—generates strong feelings, negative or positive. Then say *"Stop for a second. I'm feeling something."* This is your cue to slow down and feel into your body, particularly around your throat and belly.
- **If you slip back into old habits, apologize and extend an olive branch.** Just say, "That didn't come out right. Let me try again." It costs you nothing and your partner will appreciate it.





THE BEST WAY TO GET STARTED

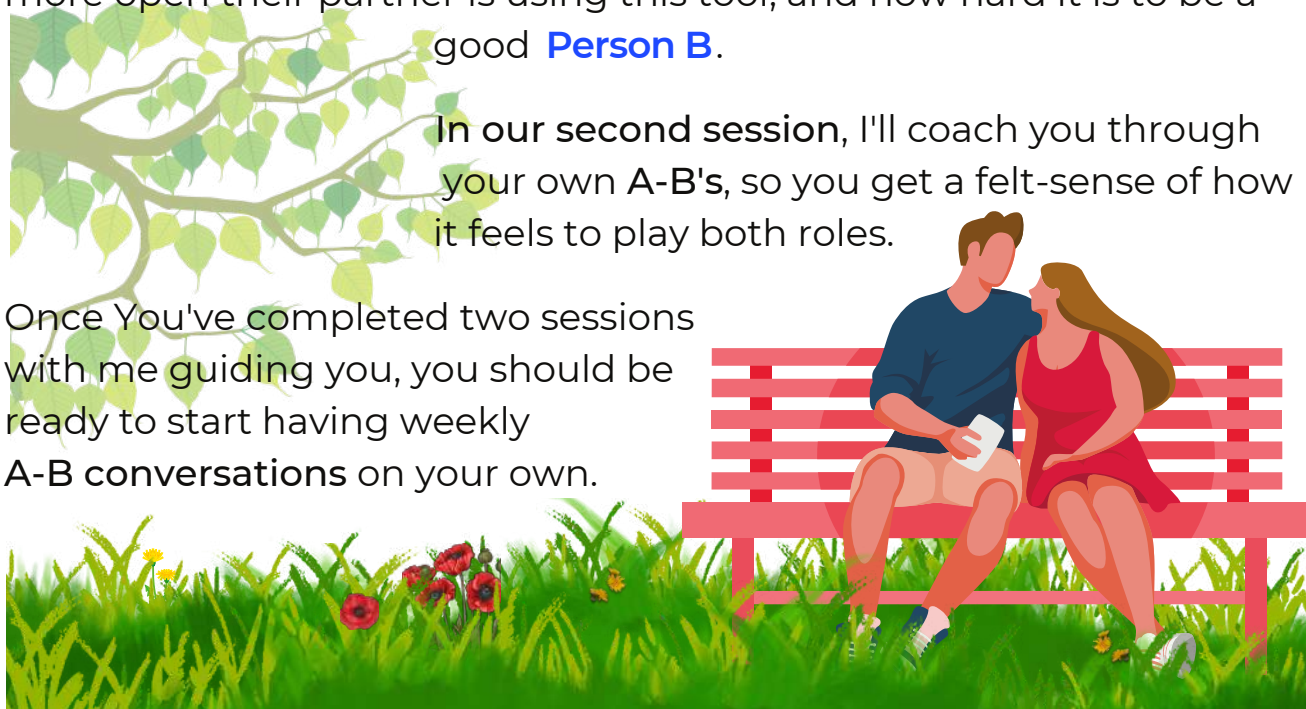
The couples who have the greatest success with A-B conversations first learned how to do them with me, either in my office or more recently, in video sessions. I strongly recommend booking two video sessions so I can walk you through your first couple A-B's. (Once you've experienced how the process works, everything in this manual will be much easier.)

In our first session together, I'll demonstrate the A-B process by leading you through two abbreviated A-B conversations. Both times, I'll be playing **Person B**, while each of you takes a turn as **Person A**. That way, you'll both get to experience the luxury of a conversation that's 100% devoted to you and your needs. And when you're not playing **Person A**, you'll get to be a fly on the wall so you can witness me working with your partner.

In particular, you'll get to hear what I say (as **Person B**), and more importantly, what I *don't* say. I'll be following the RULES FOR **Person B** (p. 9-11). And you'll be able to observe your own reactions to the things being said by your partner. Most couples are surprised by how much more open their partner is using this tool, and how hard it is to be a good **Person B**.

In our second session, I'll coach you through your own A-B's, so you get a felt-sense of how it feels to play both roles.

Once You've completed two sessions with me guiding you, you should be ready to start having weekly A-B conversations on your own.





THE RULES

Print out the rules for each role and **USE THEM**. Don't improvise or you're likely to derail your practice. Each "full round" takes 60-minutes divided into two, 20 min. conversations, plus 10 min. to debrief before you switch roles. For best results, practice weekly, for at least 3 months.



RULES FOR PERSON A

Rules A

- **Be honest, open, and patient with your partner.** Introduce the issue in no more than a sentence or two: *"I want to talk about the fight we had last night."* This sets the stage and is enough information to get **Person B** started.
- **Be gentle.** **Person B's** role is harder than yours. So be nice.
- **Set limits.** If your partner gives advice, or offers suggestions, say: *"Thanks for trying, but that sounded like advice."* or *"I don't want to talk about that right now."* As **Person A**, it's your call.



- **Give positive feedback.** This tells your partner what's working. Example: "I hadn't thought of that. Great question." Criticism at this stage is likely to feel like a slap. Save it for your feedback session. You're teaching your partner how to meet your needs. When they get it, right, let them know. It doesn't hurt to say, "Thanks!" or "This is hard. Thanks for doing this with me."



THE RULES FOR PERSON B

Rules B1

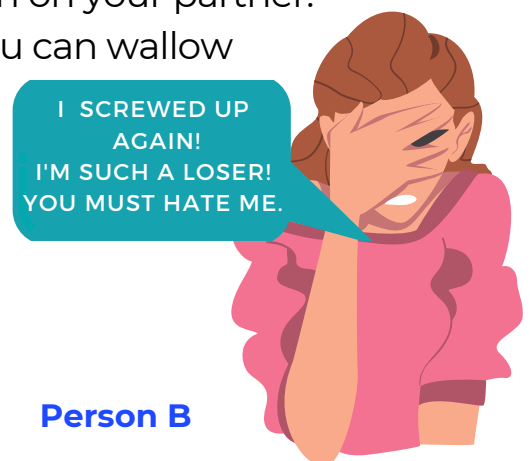
-8-

- Ask questions without an agenda. Don't 'tell by asking.' (e.g., "You don't *really* want to eat that last piece of pizza by yourself, do you?") No one likes leading questions because your agenda is always felt, even if it's not spoken. Questions that come from the desire to understand—rather than to persuade—invite your partner to see the world with fresh eyes. They also promote greater intimacy.
- Don't say, "I understand." Ask, "Do you feel like I'm getting it?"
- Be a mirror for your partner. Share observations (e.g., "I notice you're crying. What are you feeling?"). Your questions start the ball rolling. The direction it rolls should be driven by your partner.
- Take correction without taking offense. Correction can be hard to take, but you need to know when something you're doing isn't working. **Remember:** As **Person B**, you have one job. That's to serve **Person A** by giving them your undivided attention, and helping them express their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas.
- If your partner tells you a version of the story that's different from what you remember, don't argue. How **Person A** remembers a story is the key to understanding their behavior.
- If you screw up, apologize and move on! Keep the focus on *your partner's feelings*. If you're wallowing in your own guilt, you've done a bait and switch on your partner.

When you're **Person A**, you can wallow all you want. Until then, give your partner 100% of your attention.



Person A



Person B

- Use the list of **SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND TIPS FOR PERSON B** (p. 14-17 in this manual) to help your partner go deeper. The list of sample questions should be your main source of questions for now. Each one is designed to help your partner explore new territory, and to teach you how to ask "open-ended questions." These are questions that can't be answered with yes or no. For example, *"What options are you considering?"*
- **Don't sound like a robot!** If your partner says: *"I was itching so badly, I actually ran out of the room!"* Don't respond by parroting the same words back to them: *"So you were itching badly and ran out of the room?"* Instead, match their intensity so they know you're feeling it, too: *"Oh, wow! You must have been jumping out of your skin!"*

You don't need to guess right. You just need to let your partner know you're trying to understand.



- Ask your partner to stop if they go on too long and you start getting lost in the details. You can teach your partner how to 'chunk' their presentation into smaller bites. It's better to say, "*Slow down, please.*" than to space out. Just say something like, "*Hang on, a second. I want to be sure I'm getting all this. So far I've heard X. Have I missed anything?*"





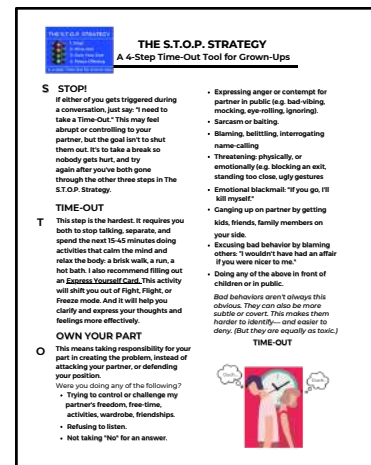
TAKING BREAKS

Being a great **Person B** is hard no matter how many times you do it. That's because, while **Person A** can pretty much say anything, **Person B's** job is to say as little as possible, while at the same time encouraging **Person A** to go deeper, speak more freely, express their feelings more completely. This is especially hard when **Person A** has issues with your parenting, or your drinking, or how much time you waste on FaceBook...or...or...or...

Whenever either of you feels like you're getting triggered by what your partner is saying, it's time to ask for a Time-Out. That's when you both take 15-45 min. to use the structured Time-Out tool below (The S.T.O.P. Strategy), along with the Express Yourself Cards to take a breather, calm down, and quiet your mind till you can think straight.



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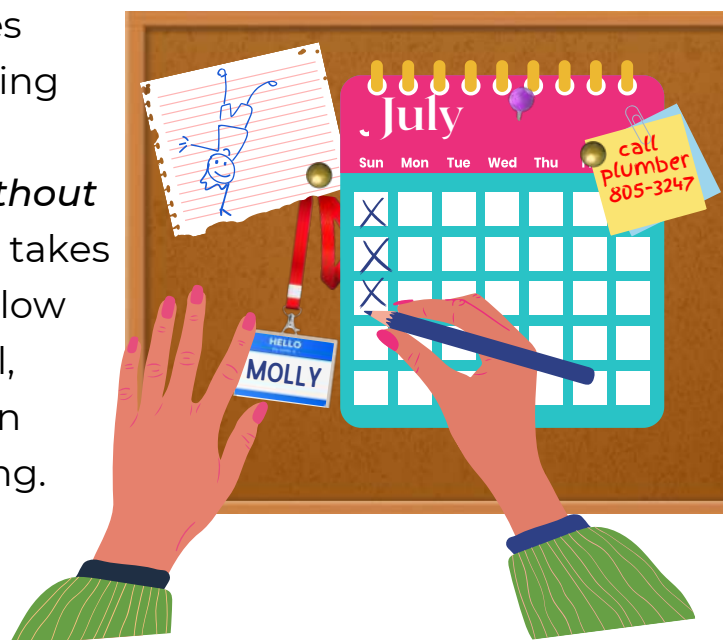
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HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE DO A-B CONVERSATIONS?

Without exception, the couples whose relationships keep getting better are those who do **A-B Conversations every week, without fail**. A "full round" of A-B's only takes an hour, and as long as you follow the instructions in this manual, you'll get positive results—even when the topics are challenging.



“

Changing how you talk to each other
Changes how you feel
about each other.

”

So, get out your calendars and mark off your **A-B's** for the coming month. It helps if you can practice at the same

time each week. That way, you'll know that no matter what's going on around you—kids, holidays, work, chores—you'll always have a solid hour of uninterrupted, quality time together. Sadly, most couples don't even make time for that. Communication is important. Changing how you talk to each other changes how you feel about each other.

One of my favorite couples has been doing **A-B's for over a decade**. And my daughter and her husband have been doing them for about a year. I recently asked Molly if she and Dave were still doing them. I laughed when she told me, "We do **A-B's** every week, whether we feel like it or not. They're not always easy, but they always help." Consider yourselves well-informed!

HOW OFTEN cont.

But you can certainly do A-B's more often. Once you get used to using them, you'll know when an A-B conversation might make talking about a hard topic easier. Because the rules dictate that each of you will spend 20 minutes as **Person A**, as well as 20 minutes as **Person B**, you'll get a chance to both "serve" and "be served" by your partner.

The deliberate strictness of the rules prevents any opportunity to attack, argue, correct the record, or blow a gasket. The only goal for these conversations is that you speak to be understood and listen to understand. What's not to like?

The only requirement is that you be both willing to play by the rules. When you do, it's like having an in-house therapist there, whenever you need one.

**Nobody wins unless you both
go away feeling cared about,
understood, and more connected.**

»—love—»



Whatever you do, don't rush, and don't skimp! A full round of A-B's always takes 60-minutes. The time is divided equally and consists of two, 20-minute conversations, plus 10 minutes for feedback and note-taking after each one. Good luck!



SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND TIPS FOR PERSON B

Q1 ?
-14-

Always start with the first four questions. Use the rest in any order and feel free to skip or repeat questions (Good ones to repeat are marked with a yellow star.)



Once you get the hang of it, come up with your own. Just be sure you're asking for clarification, and not to steer the conversation. You can also make comments, share observations, express compassion.

1. Can you tell me in a few words what you'd like to talk about?
2. Can you give me the headline first, so I know the general topic?
(After hearing the response, go to question 3.)
3. It sounds like you want to talk about X. Is that right?
When you repeat back what you're hearing, don't parrot your partner's exact words. By paraphrasing key points, you make sure you're understanding before **Person A** moves on. It's better to ask for clarification than to misinterpret what your partner really means. By asking for clarification you don't just help yourself. You give your partner a chance to give a more nuanced answer.
- ★ 4. Have I missed anything important? (If you did, it's okay. The most important thing isn't doing this perfectly. It's showing your partner you really want to understand.)

TIP: Sometimes, your partner may give too many details for you to keep track of. If this happens, ask them to slow down so you can catch up. I call this 'chunking the flow of information.'



It means asking to make one point at a time so you don't get overwhelmed or miss something important. If you let them go on too long, it will backfire. You'll forget things, and **Person A** will think you weren't listening.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND TIPS FOR **PERSON B** cont.
Skip, repeat, or jump around. These are in random order.

Q2 ?

-15-

- Do you know why this topic is coming up now? Did something just happen, or is an on-going issue?

TIP: If you have a hunch, it's okay to say something like, "I remember how scared you were of your dad's drinking. Does my drinking scare you because of how your dad got when he drank?" Detach from being right about your hunch. It doesn't matter. What matters is that your partner can see that you're trying to understand.



- ★ • Could you say more about X...? I feel like I need more information.
- ★ • I'm having trouble being a good **Person B** right now because... (e.g., "you're raising your voice and Jonah's in the next room.")



- Is any of what you're telling me confidential?
- ★ • How am I doing so far?
- Do you feel like I'm understanding or are there things I'm missing?



SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND TIPS FOR PERSON B cont.

Q3
-16-

- Do you know what you'd like to get from me out of this conversation? (e.g., more understanding? an apology? a compromise? particular change in behavior?)
- Let me know if there are things I'm saying or doing that you don't like so I don't screw this up. (e.g. asking for too many details, interrupting, offering my opinion, arguing, etc.)
- Does the topic, or situation trigger painful memories, or is this a new experience?
- What would you change if you could change anything about this situation ?
- What is holding you back?
- What do you see as possible options? (Ask more questions to help your partner flesh this out.)
- ★ • How can I help you? Are there things you'd like me to do differently?
- If I did that/those things, how would it change how you're feeling about me/us/the situation?
- If you were a little kid and had to use one word or short sentence to express what you're feeling, what would it be? (e.g. "Ouch!" "Waaaahhh." "I hate you!")
- How hard is it to say all this out loud?
- Name something I could do that would hit the spot?



SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND TIPS FOR **PERSON B** cont.

Q3 ?

-17--

- I just noticed X... (observation) What are you feeling?
Tip: This statement followed by this question can often lead to greater awareness and appreciation for how closely you're paying attention. Never ignore tears, or sudden shifts in position or mood. If you see something, say something.
- Would you like me to be involved? If so, how—specifically?
- If I got more involved, how would you feel?
- If you're in pain because of something I did, what can I do to repair the damage?
- When was the last time you felt better about this? What's changed?
- ★ • Can I tell you what I've understood so far? (Remember to ask this question from time to time to make sure you're understanding. Your partner will appreciate it.)
- ★ • How hard was it for you to bring this up to me? If so, what were you worried might happen if you talked to me?





10-minute feedback discussion

END EACH 20-MIN CONVERSATION WITH THESE 4 QUESTIONS

1. What questions haven't I asked that you wish I had?
2. Can I summarize what you've said so I'm sure you feel understood?
3. Do you feel like I've understood?
4. Before we end this part of the exercise, is there anything else you'd like to say?

Congratulations!



**kindness
changes
everything**

