

## 330: The Imago Dialogue Process



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**Jen Riday**

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## 330: The Imago Dialogue Process

You're listening to the Vibrant Happy Women podcast. I'm Dr. Jen Riday and on this episode I'll be sharing a few thoughts on communication with a spouse, with friends, with kids when it gets hard. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the Vibrant Happy Women Podcast.

Hey, my friends, I have a quick and easy episode for you today and this one is for all of you who are wanting to improve your moments of communication. Here in the northern hemisphere of the world here in the US it is summer vacation time. That means travel, and togetherness, and a lot of communication with our loved ones. For me I just took a trip with my 12 year old, we went to Boston and Cape Cod. She chose that moment to say really insulting things to me, I don't know if it was a love test or what, things like, "Hey, mom, your hair looks like a mop."

And normally I let this stuff roll off my back but after about 25 such statements from my preteen I needed to communicate about it. Similarly, I had something happen with a couple of friends where we had a moment where someone's feelings were hurt and we needed a tool in place to talk it through, to make sure everyone felt seen and heard and valued. And I was so grateful for this tool.

Another example, my immediate family, my husband and the four kids that live at home and I were traveling to visit my parents and had a moment in the hotel where there was, I guess, a miscommunication and feelings got a bit into fight or flight. We needed a tool to talk through and soothe those feelings, so everyone felt seen, and heard, and valued. Ultimately I think these communication tools help us stop going into fight or flight, stop our flooded nervous system response and come back to safe and social.

[Vibrant Happy Women](#) with Jen Riday

## 330: The Imago Dialogue Process

I feel like safe and social, I am relaxed, I feel seen, heard, safe, valued, calm. I feel important. All of those things we want to feel, when I'm in fight or flight, I perceive the other person as a threat. And I want you to pause for a moment and consider, when you're feeling like you're struggling in a relationship, you're upset with someone, your heart races, your muscles clench a bit, your voice gets a bit louder, you are experiencing something in your body. Your nervous system perceives a threat.

Now, we can bring our brains back online when we have little structures in place that can help. And the tool I want to share today is called the Imago Dialogue process. And you can Google this. It is well used and well known by many in the therapy field, the counseling field, the coaching field, the dialogue process was created by a couple named Harville and Helen. And now it's just known as the Imago Dialogue. It's kind of a script. This is super helpful when I don't feel and heard by my spouse for example.

That story at the hotel, the difference of opinion, or the problem with communication revolved around eating breakfast together. My husband took one of the kids and went and ate breakfast, didn't invite any of the rest of us and then I had this image in my head as we women often do of we're going to eat all together, it's going to be fun, it's going to be bonding. And I felt hurt that he had done that. And granted, he gets to feel, think, believe, and do what he wants but I said, "I don't feel heard. You're not feeling any remorse for this, let's go through the Imago Dialogue."

So, we pulled it out, what are the steps? I let my husband go first, he was what is called kind of the first sender, and I was the receiver. As the sender he is the only one that gets to talk. I receive by doing three things, mirroring, validating, and empathizing. So, in my head I'm just thinking about what he had done to wrong me. I was frustrated, I was a little bit angry. I had envisioned this great breakfast before we went out for the day.

## 330: The Imago Dialogue Process

And I received first though, and immediately he said, “Well, Silas got up in the night to talk on the phone at 1:00am. He’d left the hotel room,” Silas is 17½ so it’s not a big problem. But I was worried he couldn’t get back in because he didn’t have the room key. So, I didn’t sleep until he came back at 3:00am. I’m really tired, I don’t have time to have this conversation. I don’t have the energy to have this conversation.

So being in receiving mode I received this and I mirrored back, “Okay, I hear you, I heard you saying that you’re exhausted, Silas did this frustrating thing. You didn’t get a lot of sleep. You feel like you don’t have energy to have this conversation about breakfast. Do I have it? Do I understand you?” And he’s like, “Yeah, that’s it, that’s it.” I’m like, “Great. Well, it makes sense that you don’t have energy to have this conversation.” I’m validating now.

“It makes sense because you didn’t get very much sleep and you’re tired. I heard you saying you’re not sure if you can even do this whole day we have planned ahead of us.” See how I’m validating? And then the final step, step three is to empathize. “I could imagine you might be feeling exhausted and concerned about this long day ahead of us. You might be feeling dread having to have this conversation with me, is that how you feel?” He said, “No, I don’t feel dread. I feel just tired.” So, we went through the whole process for him, nice and easy.

I knew where he was coming from then. Then he flipped the three steps. Step one, I gave him my computer, he always needs the structure right in front of him with the steps on it. And he said, “Okay, there’s all these steps here. Mirroring, okay, okay, okay.” So, I said, “Well, I’ll share. I, when I set up this vacation imagined having these great meals together before we go out for the day. It was just part of my image in my head. And I kind of had this idea that families eat breakfast together.

## 330: The Imago Dialogue Process

So, when I heard that you and Cora had already gone to breakfast I felt hurt. I felt unimportant to you.” And instead of getting defensive which would be his MO, he looks at the list and he says, “Okay, if I understand, you feel hurt that I went to breakfast with Cora because you want to eat together as a family?” I’m like, “Yes.” And then he asked the question, “Is there more?” I’m like, “Yeah, I just want you to think of me and want to be around me.” So, I added that, he repeated it back.

Then he goes to the validation step, “Okay, I can see where you would feel sad about this because for you eating together seems very important.” And then he goes to the empathize step of, “So it sounds like you’re feeling sad.” Okay, now, this sounds silly, that was how we did it. The Imago Dialogue, you can look it up. But the forced structure of saying what you feel, repeating it back, making sure you have it, hearing your spouse say it back, it does allow you to start to calm your nervous system.

You start to shift out of fight or flight, you’re looking at each other, your voices are calm, you’re using part of your rational brain, which helps you further get out of fight or flight because you can’t really use your rational brain when you’re in fight or flight. That said, I have to interject something, when you’re in extreme fight or flight, you probably can’t even do this process, take a breather, take some breaths then come back together. We weren’t in extreme fight or flight.

So, we talked it through, we both felt seen and heard, Now I know my husband’s exhausted. He’s not going to have a lot of energy for really anything today. From the conversation we created a new plan of taking turns coming back to the hotel to rest. So, the conversation not only helped us resolve the situation but plan to meet each other’s needs moving forward throughout the day. So, the Imago Dialogue process. As you go throughout your lives wherever you are in the world, I encourage you to use this.

## 330: The Imago Dialogue Process

Whenever you feel upset at another person, Imago Dialogue, I-M-A-G-O D-I-A-L-O-G-U-E. It's also known as the dialogue process. I find it extremely helpful to have these tools in place. It works with your teens. It works with your spouse, it works with friends.

I recently did this with a friend, I had been sharing a story and she felt othered, she felt like I was saying she was different than other people in the group. I believed I was complimenting her. She perceived it as I was making her seem different from the group, so we talked it all through. Everyone's feelings were valid but if we hadn't talked it through we both would have remained defensive. Talking it through actually ended up making us closer because we got to understand how the other person thinks and end up being closer friends because of it.

So, if you want to use and practice the dialogue process we are doing it in the club all the time, practicing our communication, practicing managing our emotions. We use thought tables, the feel it to heal it method, the dialogue process that I just taught you. We talk about our nervous system and how to shift from fight or flight back to safe and social. We also talk about how to shift out of the freeze and shutdown response which many of you might experience as depression or lack of motivation. How do you get out of that and back to safe and social?

We do all of this in the club, you are more than welcome to join us. We have soul circles where we talk in small groups to work on these skills. We have classes led by me. And you can learn more at [jenriday.com/club](http://jenriday.com/club). My friends, you deserve to be seen, heard, and valued. And a lot of times the way you make that happen is having the right tools in your back pocket. You can do this. I love you and I will see you again next time. Until then, make it a vibrant and happy week. Take care.

If you enjoy this podcast, you have to check out the Vibrant Happy Women Club. It's my monthly group coaching program where we take all this

[Vibrant Happy Women](#) with Jen Riday

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material to the next level and to get you the results that will blow your mind.  
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