

Dr. Bruce Chalmer

Dr. Chalmer's Newsletter - Issue #4

Everything about relationships! Be kind, don't panic, and have faith.



Please tell your email app to display images--if you're not seeing my smiling face, your email isn't cooperating!

Welcome to Issue #4!

And welcome to folks who have subscribed recently! If you want to catch up on earlier issues, you can find the archive [here](#).

Yes, I'm still crowing about my book *It's Not About Communication!* reaching #1 bestseller status on Amazon in one of its categories (Couples and Family Therapy). What I'm looking for now is customer reviews.

So if you're one of those wonderful people who bought the book, may I implore you to do a review (5 stars, I hope)?

It's easy. Go to [this link](#), scroll down to "Review this product," and press the "Write a customer review" button. You don't have to write a megillah! Even a sentence saying something you liked, or were surprised by, or made you think. If you want a Cliff-notes type summary of what's in the book to give you ideas, you can get it [here](#).

And if you're one of those wonderful people who haven't yet bought the book, please [check it out!](#)

Notice how I've said you're all wonderful people, whether or not you've bought the book? That's because only wonderful people read this newsletter. (Not pandering too much, right?)



Today's Relationship Tip

“Do these pants make me look fat?” A primer on emotional “Closed Captioning”

Okay, let me first pay due respect to those of you who find the whole topic:

- offensive—it’s clearly heteronormative, it smacks of body-shaming, stereotypes women as vain and unreasonable and men as emotionally clueless, and trivializes couples issues; and/or
- hopelessly dated—what is this, the 1950s?

To those of you who feel that way, I hear you. Those are valid objections. I would also point out that real people ask me variations of this question frequently, and, stereotypical or not, it’s a genuine concern. So here goes.

(I stopped myself from going into a rant here about what happens when people, on the political left, right, and center, try to render a topic off-limits to discussion. You’re welcome.)

How should you handle the question, “Do these pants make me look fat?” If you’re the one asking it, what sort of answer do you want? And if you’re the one being asked, how should you answer it?

The key to dealing with this kind of question is to recognize that it’s actually two questions in one. Of course, there’s the actual, literal content of the question. Maybe the person asking it—let’s assume it’s a woman asking it of her male partner, which is classically the case—is actually asking for fashion advice.

But she’s also asking another question, and you won’t recognize it unless you’ve turned on “closed captioning” (CC) on your mental TV set. The CC question is actually a bunch of questions in one—it says something like, “Do you love and respect me? Do you desire me? Do you still want to be with me?”

Is that *always* true when a woman asks a man that sort of question? I don’t know—I’m not a woman. I’ve asked women that, and heard a lot of different answers. (Women? What say you?)

What I do know is that it’s a good assumption for *both* partners that **any time your primary partner says anything to you, the CC question is being asked too**. And you’re answering it whether you’re aware of it or not.

Not only that, but **the answer to the CC question is way more significant than the answer to whatever the explicit question was.** Because if the answer to the CC question is “Yes!” your answer to the explicit question will reflect that, and your partner be able to hear it. And, alas, if the answer to the CC questions is “No,” your fashion assessment is pretty much irrelevant.

I don’t think Judy (my wife and podcast cohost Judy Alexander) has ever asked me the “Does this make me look fat” question. But she has definitely asked me “How does this look? Is this a good look for me?” And my standard answer is some form of this:

“I’m not really a great one to offer an objective judgment, because you look beautiful to me no matter what you’re wearing.” And I mean that genuinely—it’s not just a clever way of wiggling out of the question. I then sometimes follow that up with, “I think I like the blue one better” (or whatever), if I actually do have an opinion.

Let me hasten to note: I don’t offer this as a script. If that’s not true for you, don’t say it. My point is that the CC question is primary—that’s what I want to answer first.

So learn to turn on the closed captioning!

What do you think?

Send me a message!



What's the Big Idea?

In this section, I tell you about one of my favorite Big Ideas—at least, / think they’re Big Ideas. These are the ideas that guide me in my work, and get me all excited. Of course, I’m a recovering nerd with frequent relapses, so what I find exciting might be, well, less so for you. But I know a lot of the folks I’ve worked with have found these ideas helpful, so maybe you will too.

These Big Ideas are pretty much what I write about in my books and talk about in my videos, so [check them out](#) if you want to explore these in more depth.

Today’s Big Idea:

No, really—it’s not about communication!

Where have you heard that before? Well, for those who haven't read the book yet, here's a capsule summary of the idea.

When people come to me for therapy, and I ask them my favorite opening question (hey, read the book if you want to find out what I ask people in the first session—I lay it out in detail in Chapter 7!), seems like almost everybody says some variation on the theme, “We need tools to help us communicate better.”

And there are a zillion websites and thousands of therapists and coaches that will happily teach you tools for how to communicate. There are techniques like active listening, I-statements, mirroring, talking sticks, etc., etc. There are whole systems like Nonviolent Communication.

And don't get me wrong—those tools they teach are generally based on good ideas. People who are doing well with each other are pretty much using those tools, even if they don't realize it consciously. You might not be using a talking stick, but if you're having a good talk with your partner, you're listening to each other—I mean, that's part of the definition of a good talk, right?

The problem is that imitating people who are doing well won't make you do well. You can take turns carefully, and mirror what each other saying, and be sure to talk about your own feelings, and all that good stuff—and if you hate your partner's guts it won't help you.

The thing is, unless you're on the autistic spectrum, or have some other form of communication disability, you're already communicating very effectively with your partner. If you're having problems, it's not because you don't know how to communicate.

The problem isn't *how* your communicating; the problem is *what* you're communicating. (I haven't yet put that on a coffee mug or tote bag or tee-shirt, but let me know if I should add that to our [podcast merch](#).)

If you're angry, or contemptuous, or smug, no amount of active listening will disguise it. And if you're respectful, and loving, and compassionate, that will come through loud and clear.

So what you need in couples therapy isn't techniques for conveying your mistrust of your partner more clearly. What you need is help tolerating the anxiety of actual intimacy, so you and your partner can reconnect.

Did I mention I've written [a book about this](#)?

Do you have a Big Idea? Or a Big Question? (Or even little ideas or questions?)

Send me a message!



News & Schmooze

Book news: Well, I already put in my request (shameless begging?) for reviews, so please go for it!

Podcast news: Judy and I have posted some fun and fascinating interviews on our [“Couples Therapy in Seven Words”](#) podcast this month:

- Julia Postema and Jeremiah Gibson are sex therapists who specialize in helping people with negative religious backgrounds discover sexuality that works for them. They talk about their own experiences growing up, and how they came to do the work they do.
- Wendi Dumbroff is also a sex therapist, with a specialty in applying mindfulness techniques to helping her clients.
- Charlene Byars specializes in helping women find relationships they want, and talks about helping heterosexual women find “devoted, masculine men” (and yes, we ask her what she means by that).

You can find all of our episodes at <https://ctin7.com>.

We’re always looking for some more listener questions for our guests. So allow me to dangle before you an offer.

The first three people to write to me with a question for us and our interview guests to handle will receive a code for a free download of the audiobook version of *It’s Not About Communication!*, narrated by yours truly. Such a deal!

As always, if you have ideas for guests (including yourself) or topics you’d like us to include, [drop me a line](#).

That’s all for now—bye!

--Bruce

[Send me a message!](#)

P.S. If someone forwarded you this message (feel free, by the way), and you'd like to subscribe yourself, [go to my website](#) and watch the magic box appear that says "Click here to sign up for Dr. Chalmer's

Newsletter!" And if I don't already have your email, don't forget to look for the confirmation email--that's an anti-spam thing, which is why I do it. I'd love to welcome you on board!

Please take a moment to make sure these emails actually make it into your inbox! The easiest way (at least for those of us in Google-land) is just to add me to your contacts.

[Here's a link](#) that tells you how to do it for various email services. Please let me in--it's lonely in the Spam or Promotions folder!

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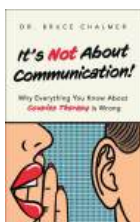
Podcast

Couples Therapy in Seven Words



Website

Dr. Chalmer's website:
Books, couples therapy practice, blog



It's Not About Communication!

Why Everything You Know About Couples Therapy is Wrong



Reigniting the Spark

Why Stable Relationships Lose Intimacy, and How to Get It Back

Dr. Bruce Chalmer

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