

The Mirror Process[®]

Communication, Improved Relationships, Personal Growth

By Daniel Craig-Morse, MFT

The Mirror Process is a communication tool that can navigate the rapids of emotionally roiled conflicts, where close relationships can actually be strengthened instead of being shaken up and left in disarray.

During relationship conflicts, each person typically has very different viewpoints and feelings about what happened and both people are trying to say how they are right and the other person is wrong. The Mirror Process is a simple but effective way of slowing down the back and forth arguing, in which each person uses an active listening process called “mirroring” that allows the other person to be heard. As this mirroring goes back



and forth, the charged emotions, which are driven by a desire to be heard and understood, decrease and the pathways for conflict resolution become much more available.

This is what happens when no one is “mirroring”.

***People tend to talk more than they really listen.
But people really want to be heard and understood.
The Mirror Process is a way to address this.***

The Mirror Process in Couples Counseling

As a couple’s therapist, I use the Mirror Process in helping to improve strained relationships. In offering this process, I have experienced a high degree of success where many couples were able to get back on track with the flow of love. As I work with The Mirror Process in counseling sessions, with time and practice the couple learns to use this tool on their own without the need for a third person facilitator.

How the Mirror Process Works

When two people find themselves in conflict that isn't easily resolved, they can then both agree to do The Mirror Process.

1) Emotional Level Check

First, each person tunes into themselves to determine what level of emotional charge they have from a level of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest level) and, upon comparing numbers, the person with the highest level goes first. We call this person (for lack of a better term) the "Talker".

2) Statement of Accountability:

To begin, the Talker says in his or her own words (or has said before so that it is understood between both participants),

***"What I am saying is my experience
and I don't want this to discount your own [personal, subjective] experience."***



3) The Talker expresses what they are going through

There are no specific guidelines for how the Talker expresses him or herself other than for them to simply say what they are going through and what they are feeling. (Note: I use the non-gender pronouns "them" and "they".) The process allows for emotional expression to happen without the risk of immediately triggering or shutting down the other person because that person is committed to being focused on "mirroring". Having few guidelines and rules allow for an unfiltered outflow of what the Talker is going through. They are saying just what is going on, what happened, why they are sad, mad, scared, etc. They are speaking from their experience, so in this way these are "I" statements (though I find it can be somewhat forced to expect everything to be said as an "I" statement). This can happen in the form of a wave of expression. If there is high emotion, it is best to let the other person mirror sooner, with shorter waves of talking, rather than in longer waves where it can be complex and more difficult to mirror.

4) The Mirror mirrors

After the Talker expresses (and emotionally discharges) what is happening for them, the other person mirrors them by giving a synopsis of what they are hearing. The Mirror (person who is mirroring) needs to do their best to set aside their own reactions and to simply listen with an ear towards what it is like for that person and what it is like to be in their shoes. It could be that what the Talker is going through may be rooted in something completely independent of that conflict (such as from a prior difficult relationship or trauma). The mirroring doesn't have to involve a detailed recap of what was said, but can be a synopsis, offering the gist of what was heard, paying particular attention to what the person was expressing emotionally (especially with core emotions like anger, fear, sadness and shame). "Wow, I get that you are upset at what that person said to you!" would be an example. Or, "It sounds like you were really hurt when I..." If the person says "Yes" with a strong affirmative, this indicates that they feel heard and their emotions may begin to subside with relief that they don't have to keep trying to be heard. If the Talker doesn't feel that the Mirror quite gets it, then the Talker can further clarify so that the Mirror can reflect back a better understanding. The task of the Mirror is to "get" as clearly as possible what the Talker is going through in a way that gives the Talker that experience of finally being heard and even, if possible, understood. "Yes, that's it!" is the sound of success in mirroring.

Tips on mirroring

The Mirror is simply trying to understand and then reflect back to the Talker what they are going through, nothing more. When you are mirroring, do not argue with them or try to console them. Do not give feedback. Do not make suggestions, or take the point of focus off the Talker by talking about your own experience. You are simply reflecting what they said and it is often helpful to use the same words they used. Also, as a Mirror, try to come from a place of emotional attunement where you can feel or sense what they are going through. We call this "wet mirroring", where there is emotional attunement and empathy, as opposed to "dry mirroring", which is just rote repeating with no connection to their feelings. With the help of the Mirror, the Talker can begin to see from outside themselves how they are reacting, and reflect on what they are going through on a deeper level. They might, for example, then see how they might have gotten triggered something that relates to issues that go beyond just that specific conflict. Ultimately, the Talker learns to increasingly reflect on and manage their own inner process. This is where the conflict can serve as a catalyst for personal growth.

5) Switch so that the Mirror is now the Talker

After this mirroring, the Mirror then switches to being the Talker, speaking what is true for them, what came up for them, or clarifying more of what they are going through. Afterwards, the other person mirrors and this goes back and forth between expressing and mirroring until the emotional charge settles down and there can be an easier and more reasonable conversation about what happened, where the misunderstanding was, and how they can move past it and learn from this conflict. This involves a softening of tension between the couple as a result of reduced stress on their relationship bond (attachment), as is explained below.

6) Emotionally attuned empathic responsiveness of the Mirror

The key to successful mirroring is for the Mirror to express empathy and appreciation for the suffering from the perspective of the Talker's subjective experience. This does not need to happen each time one mirrors. However, for the conflict to find some resolution, this really needs to happen at least sometime during the mirroring session. What is most important here is that the Mirror offers some *empathic responsiveness* to the Talker, such as an expression of a new understanding, some gesture of compassion, or even a sympathetic apology that could help soften that person's hurt, even if the hurt was unintentional. It can be just some words of empathy, such as, "I had no idea you would take it this way and I am sorry this hurt you." This is an offering that is not caving or backing down from what was true for the Mirror and has to be heartfelt and genuine for it to make a difference. As the Talker shares, the Mirror is learning about their partner's vulnerabilities so that the Mirror can be more aware of them in the future to avoid further upset. The Mirror is trying to acknowledge their understanding of the Talker's distress, even if it is illogical. At times, this can be connected to the Talker's deeper hurts or traumas from a completely different time in their life. The important thing is to allow these to surface rather than to simply argue against them. As Carl Jung said, "We cannot change anything until we accept it."

Mirroring and attachment

By receiving this gesture of empathic responsiveness, the Talker's inner distress is no longer held in isolation, but is appreciated and shared across the relational field to where the Talker's emotional buildup is dissipated. We see this happen when a parent is emotionally attuned to and responsive to their child, and a healthy and secure attachment develops as a result. Emotions serve as a form of communication where corresponding facial expressions (like an angry or sad face) are signals that can be received and



responded to by another. This back and forth emoting and mirroring functions to help keep us in relationship with others. Emotions, emotional expression, and responding to another's emotions are all keys to forming secure attachments and, as such, keep us connected and guard us against falling into isolation.

Mirroring is essential in both parent-child and adult attachment.

The Mirror Process as a bridge

This process is designed to help bridge disruptions in relationships. It is also a bridge to a deeper awareness within ourselves, which we may not have been aware of before another person became upset with us. The loving attention of a Mirror can help open us to how we may be projecting onto others something that we are unconscious of in ourselves. The discovery of one's unconscious material is not the Mirror's job, however. It is up to the Talker if and when they become consciously aware of this in themselves, though this awareness might be stimulated by the Mirror. The ability of each person to self-reflect and become more aware of their own inner process makes this mirroring system a valuable tool for personal growth.



Couples can be at odds for long periods of time over seemingly little things or from an argument that never gets resolved. The Mirror Process is an advanced tool for helping couples move through emotionally charged conflicts and helps the relationship adjust to each person's ever-changing needs, passions, vulnerabilities and ways of sharing love. Most people agree that it is our relationships that matter most in life. With this tool, a little attention can go a long way to keeping the enjoyment and love between two people alive and well.

*The Mirror Process® was developed by **Dan Craig-Morse, MFT** during his 22 year marriage and was the topic of his Master's thesis at the Pacifica Graduate Institute. He has a private counseling practice in Sebastopol, CA.*

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