Couples: Understanding ourselves, understanding each other · About 4 minutes

Before Offering the Solution

A partner's experience may need room before advice becomes useful.

Halfway through your partner's account of a hard evening, you see exactly how the problem could be solved. Then you look up and see their face.

There may be nothing wrong with the suggestion. You may simply have answered a question your partner was not asking.

Wren and Isa are fictional partners. Wren has returned from a small exhibition of her drawings. Several visitors passed the work without stopping. Isa suggests better lighting and a different place for the display. Wren goes quiet. She had wanted to describe how exposed she felt standing beside something she had made.

Isa has moved toward improving the next exhibition. Wren is still in this one.

It can be difficult to stay with an experience you cannot quickly improve, especially when you care about the person having it. Advice offers you something useful to do. It may also carry you past the part your partner most wanted you to hear.

Jessica Benjamin's account of mutual recognition gives each person's experience room to exist as their own.[1] In practice, that includes allowing someone to correct your sympathetic explanation. Even an emotionally perceptive guess can leave them lonely if it describes the wrong thing.

Isa might say, "I went straight to the display. What was difficult about the evening for you?" Wren could talk about feeling exposed. Or she might say the greater disappointment was that a friend did not come. Isa would then have something different to understand.

The aim is not to find the deeper meaning and hold onto it. Wren's answer should be able to change the conversation. There is no need to defend the idea about exposure if she says it misses what mattered.

Being heard may bring relief. It may also let the disappointment become more apparent. Isa does not have to produce words that make sadness disappear, and Wren does not have to feel better to show that listening was worthwhile.

There are times when practical advice is exactly what someone wants. If Wren asks how to improve the display, Isa's ideas may fit. Urgent responsibilities sometimes require action while emotional understanding remains unfinished. "Listen first" is a useful reminder, not a rule that every problem must wait for a prescribed amount of feeling.

Isa's capacity also matters. If this is a bad time to listen, an honest limit is kinder than pretending to be available. A promise to return should be one Isa can keep; Wren can seek company elsewhere rather than wait indefinitely.

You can notice the difference by comparing the lighting suggestion with the open question. Each invites a different conversation. Which one fits depends on what Wren wants to share, not on which sentence sounds more therapeutic.

Before there is a move to make, there is someone hoping to be met in what happened.

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The idea can wait for a moment. I would like to know what happened in the part of the evening they were still trying to tell you about.

Companion reading · Meet Me Before You Move Me

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Couples: Understanding ourselves, understanding each other (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Benjamin, J. (2004). Beyond doer and done to: An intersubjective view of thirdness. The Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 73(1), 5–46. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2004.tb00151.x Source.

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