

Meet Me Before You Move Me

The Difficult Work of Being Understood Without Losing Ourselves

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There is a simple request I often return to in couples therapy: “Meet me before you move me.”

Before you explain why I shouldn't feel what I'm feeling, reassure me, defend your intentions, or tell me what I should do differently, would you be willing to understand what this experience is like for me?

It is a request for emotional recognition before correction, persuasion, reassurance, or problem-solving. But often the moment one partner most needs understanding is precisely the moment the other feels criticized, inadequate, overwhelmed, or compelled to defend themselves.

There is a deeper paradox: the longing to be understood can become so urgent that it leaves little room for the person from whom understanding is sought. How do we learn to meet one another without losing ourselves?

Why Being Met Matters

Human beings do not develop emotionally in isolation. From our earliest experiences, we come to know ourselves partly through how others respond to us. When a child is frightened, sad, angry, or overwhelmed, a responsive caregiver does more than solve the immediate problem. Through facial expression, tone, presence, and responsiveness, the caregiver communicates: Your experience matters. You are not alone with it.

Such experiences can contribute to our capacity to recognize, tolerate, and regulate our emotional states. But many people grew up where feelings were corrected, minimized, dismissed, or treated as burdensome. Some learned that sadness invited impatience, anger threatened belonging, or expressing needs created conflict. Others learned to manage the emotional states of those around them.

These experiences may become part of our implicit expectations about relationships—what attachment theory calls internal working models. As adults, we may long for the recognition we did not receive, while bringing protective strategies that make receiving it difficult.

When Our Defenses Become Each Other's Wounds

Imagine one partner feels hurt and begins explaining why. The other hears criticism and defends their intentions. The first feels more alone and speaks with greater urgency. The second becomes overwhelmed and withdraws. Soon neither feels understood.

One experiences withdrawal as abandonment. The other experiences pursuit as accusation or pressure. Both may be protecting something vulnerable: one against being unimportant or left alone, the other against feeling inadequate, controlled, or unable to get anything right.

Each person's defense activates the other's wound. The more one pursues connection, the more the other retreats; the more one retreats, the more the first intensifies pursuit. This does not mean both partners are equally responsible in every conflict or that every conflict reduces to childhood. It suggests that the argument is often only part of what is happening.

Why Meeting Someone Can Feel Threatening

To meet another person's experience, especially when it concerns something we have done, requires emotional courage. We temporarily set aside the impulse to establish innocence, explain intentions, or correct inaccuracies.

For someone whose worth depends on being good, competent, or blameless, acknowledging hurt may feel like admitting wrongdoing. Listening may awaken shame; anger may evoke earlier experiences of powerlessness. Reasoning, reassurance, defensiveness, silence, or withdrawal can become ways to manage threat, yet leave the hurting partner unseen.

The task is not to eliminate protective responses by willpower. It is to recognize them, understand what they protect, and develop room for another response.

Understanding Is Not the Same as Agreeing

A partner says, "When you walked away, I felt like I didn't matter." The other remembers leaving because they were overwhelmed and afraid the conversation would become more hurtful. Both experiences can be real.

Meeting the first partner might sound like: "I can understand how my leaving felt like I didn't care, especially when you were trying to reach me. I didn't realize how alone you felt." That does not require agreement that they were uncaring.

Later there can be room for: "I also want you to understand that I was overwhelmed and didn't know how to stay." When explanation comes before recognition, it can sound dismissive. But the partner seeking recognition must eventually make room for the other's perspective; otherwise a request for understanding can become a demand for agreement.

When the Need to Be Understood Becomes a Demand for Agreement

Who gets to decide when someone has been adequately met? The person seeking understanding should be able to say whether they feel understood. We cannot announce that we understand and insist they be satisfied.

Yet a problem emerges when one person's subjective feeling becomes the sole measure of whether the other listened, cared, or responded appropriately. A partner may acknowledge hurt and their contribution, yet hear: "You still don't understand," or "If you understood, you wouldn't be defending yourself."

Sometimes this identifies a genuine failure of attunement. Sometimes the pain reaches into older experiences that no present acknowledgment can entirely resolve. Sometimes the person seeking recognition cannot tolerate a different perspective. The distinctions matter.

When Emotional Recognition Becomes a Test of Loyalty

Consider a partner who experiences disagreement as evidence of not being loved. The other acknowledges hurt while offering a different memory of events; the explanation is labeled defensiveness. Further reassurance remains insufficient. Eventually the listener realizes that ending the conflict may require abandoning their own perspective.

A request for recognition has become an implicit requirement for agreement. The person seeking recognition may feel frightened rather than controlling, but intention does not erase impact.

Not every long or painful conversation is coercive. Persistent requests for understanding can be reasonable when a partner repeatedly dismisses, minimizes, or refuses accountability. The broader pattern matters: Can both people disagree, set boundaries, and participate in repair without punishment?

The Problem of Giving One Partner Authority Over Reality

Each partner has authority over their own experience; neither has exclusive authority over the meaning of a shared event.

"When you walked away, I felt abandoned" describes an experience worthy of recognition. "You abandoned me because you didn't care" additionally assigns intention and meaning to another person's behavior.

When feeling becomes indistinguishable from objective reality, disagreement may be treated as invalidation. One partner may feel compelled either to surrender their experience or be accused of refusing to understand. Being emotionally met should never

require surrendering the capacity to know what we think, feel, remember, or intend.

Who Decides Whether Understanding Has Actually Occurred?

Not feeling understood is not, by itself, evidence that our partner has failed to understand us. But neither is our partner's insistence that they listened proof that meaningful understanding occurred.

A partner may genuinely listen, acknowledge pain, take responsibility, and offer change, yet the other continues to feel unseen. Perhaps acknowledgment was intellectual rather than emotionally engaged, perhaps promises have been broken, or perhaps earlier deprivation makes present recognition difficult to receive.

Conversely, someone may believe they listened because they remained quiet or repeated words, while internally preparing a defense or trying to end the conversation. Intention and impact differ.

Neither person possesses exclusive authority to determine whether understanding occurred. One knows what it felt like to be received; the other knows their intentions, efforts, and limitations. Neither has full access to the other's inner world.

Can the listener describe what mattered emotionally, even while remembering events differently? Can the person seeking recognition notice a genuine effort, even if imperfect? Can both remain curious about what is missing? Can the listener's experience eventually enter the conversation?

Feeling understood matters profoundly, but feeling understood and being understood are not identical. We may be understood more deeply than we can receive, or reassured without being understood at all. Even when understanding occurs, accountability and changed behavior may still be needed.

To meet someone is neither to certify their interpretation as truth nor to decide for them that they have been adequately understood. It is to participate in an encounter in which two subjective worlds become more knowable without either disappearing.

When the Past Enters the Present

Our reactions to partners are shaped by the present and by what earlier relationships taught us to expect. A person repeatedly dismissed may become sensitive to signs of minimization. An explanation, pause, or different perspective can awaken the expectation: Once again, there is no room for me.

Implicit emotional learning can make a familiar threat feel immediate even when circumstances differ. Insight alone may not undo this response. The task is to distinguish

what belongs to the present relationship from what is reactivated from earlier experience—not to dismiss present hurt as childhood material.

We can ask: What is my partner doing right now, and what am I afraid it means? What can they reasonably offer? What part of my longing might need more than their agreement or reassurance?

The Difference Between Attunement and Emotional Compliance

Attunement means recognizing and responding sensitively to another's emotional experience. Compliance means changing one's behavior or stated position to satisfy expectations, sometimes at the expense of one's own experience.

Both can look alike: apology, softening, acknowledgment, agreement. But is the person becoming more available, or trying to end an impossible interaction? Expressing understanding, or learning that disagreement prolongs conflict?

Compliance can temporarily resemble repair. One feels relief while the other becomes increasingly unseen or resentful. The relationship may become organized around preventing one person's distress rather than supporting both people's development. This pattern can emerge when appeasement meets attachment protest, without either partner consciously intending harm.

Differentiation: Loving Without Surrendering the Self

Attachment reminds us that people need emotional responsiveness. Differentiation reminds us that intimacy requires two distinct people. Without attachment, differentiation can become distance disguised as independence; without differentiation, attachment can become merger disguised as closeness.

A partner might say: "I understand that my leaving frightened you. I care about that and want to work on how I take space. I also need you to understand that I was overwhelmed, not trying to abandon you."

The other might respond: "I see that you were overwhelmed. I still need us to find a way for you to take space without leaving me uncertain whether you'll return."

Neither has to disappear. Successful attunement is not measured by agreement but by increased capacity to recognize the other's experience while remaining truthful about one's own.

We Must Also Learn to Meet Ourselves

When a partner is angry, can we notice shame without immediately defending? When they withdraw, can we recognize abandonment fear without automatically pursuing? When misunderstood, can we stay curious rather than becoming occupied only with proving our view?

This is not emotional independence or denial of relational needs. People need one another and regulate emotion partly through relationships. Yet mature intimacy involves receiving comfort without making another wholly responsible for our stability, and acknowledging impact without assuming responsibility for every feeling our partner experiences.

When Understanding Is Not Enough

Couples may understand each other well and remain in pain. Knowing why someone withdraws does not erase the absence of engagement. Understanding the origins of anger does not eliminate the need for anger to be expressed differently. Insight does not automatically change behavior, and empathy does not require tolerating repeated harm.

In relationships involving intimidation, coercion, contempt, or boundary violations, accountability and safety take priority. When abuse or coercive control is present, encouraging mutual vulnerability may be inappropriate. Sometimes differentiation brings clarity about genuine differences in values, capacities, or willingness to repair—not necessarily reconciliation.

A More Reciprocal Invitation

Perhaps “Meet me before you move me” needs a companion principle: “Let me meet you without requiring me to leave myself.”

The first protects the need for recognition. The second protects differentiation. One partner must approach experience with curiosity rather than immediate correction; the other must allow understanding to emerge without demanding agreement, self-erasure, or unlimited availability.

Repair is not established simply because one person feels relieved. It requires enough safety, honesty, and mutual recognition that neither person must abandon themselves to preserve the relationship.

The deeper invitation is not only “Will you understand me before trying to change me?” It is also “Can I allow you to understand me without requiring you to become the person I need you to be in order to feel safe?”

Real intimacy does not require two people to have the same experience. It asks whether they can remain present, curious, and accountable while discovering how differently they may experience the same moment—and whether, in that difference, they can still find a place to meet.

Clinical Foundations and Further Reading

This article integrates research, clinical theory, and the author's clinical experience. Its distinctions between attunement and compliance, and between requests for recognition and demands for agreement, are integrative clinical formulations rather than findings established by any single study.

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Full annotated references and further theoretical discussion may be retained as a scholarly companion within Brian Kennedy Learning.