

A Conversation with
Dr. Elsbeth Martindale

author of

Things to Know Before You Say “Go”

Book and Card Deck

&

The Questions

iPhone app

1. Tell me how you came to write this deck of cards and book.

I was working, in therapy, with a fourteen year old girl. She came from a chaotic home and had lots of drama in most of her relationships. Towards the end of her first session she informed me that she had lost her virginity, the weekend prior. I inquired about the young man and asked her to tell me about him. I was saddened to hear she knew very little about him; he was tall, cute, on the basketball team, named Jeremy, and he was at the party. That was it! She gave herself to a boy she hardly knew.

I began to ask her if she thought it would be important to know other things about this guy, like how he got along with his friends, whether or not he was doing well in school, whether or not he has another girlfriend. My client agreed that some of these questions would be helpful to know. I began recording the list of questions that we thought might be helpful to consider. When therapy ended I gave her a copy of the list, hoping this would help her think about what was important to know. I thought to myself, “She’s not going to look at this list,” even though it was a brilliant idea! I took that list home and put each question on a separate card and laminated the card on my craft laminator in my basement. I gave her a copy of this stack of 20 questions at her next session. A month later she came to therapy and told me that she and her new boyfriend had spent hours looking through and discussing the cards. I knew I was on to something.

I learned, kids (much like adults) will look at challenging material, like relationship questions, if it is presented in small bites, in an appealing and tactile format. Now,

digital applications are providing another path to access the same kinds of questions, in a playful and immediate way.

2. How did this deck of 20 questions turn into the current deck of 76 questions.

My original intent was to make a tool for my one adolescent clients. However, after making the deck and seeing its effectiveness, I decided to make several more. I showed the cards to other clients, men and women, young and old, and they were fascinated with it. I made more decks, expanded the number of questions, and added backside sub-questions to deepen the inquiry of the main issue. This resulted in a larger deck of cards which I had printed at Kinkos. Eventually, I hired a designer who took the cards to a very professional level. I added a book that explained the value and importance of each question and then had it professionally printed. It was about a five year long process from the initial deck of 20 questions to the version it is today.

3. So, the deck is not just for adolescents or girls?

No, not at all. In fact it is selling more to adults than teens. I had a grandmother purchase six decks, one for each grandchild. I think older folks know the value of the questions. Teens don't tend to seek this information out, maybe because they know everything already! But parents and grandparents know how essential it is to be thoughtful about romantic encounters.

Single adult men and women also are loving this deck. Many folks realize they weren't taught to ask these personal and powerful questions when they entered romance and have made costly mistakes that they don't want to repeat. Lots of divorcees have purchased the deck as a way to avoid the mistakes of the past.

4. Why are these card questions necessary? Why not just write a book?

I think the cards offer a unique experience different from a book. There are several qualities the cards offer that a book can't.

- The cards are tangible, easy to manipulate, and interactive. This makes them appealing, inviting, and fun. People are drawn to pick them up and sort through them.
- The cards also slow you down, encouraging you to contemplate and reflect on the questions. You get to hold the question in your hand and heart at the same time. This makes the cards very personal and engaging. The cards also ask you to make a decision, you have to choose how to respond when you are sorting.

- The ability to sort is also something a book doesn't offer. This sortability is very well suited for the content of *Things to Know Before You Say "Go"*. Because in sorting you are answering questions for yourself and in the end you can see, literally, how your partner stacks up. You get visual feedback about your responses.
- The cards are also a way to take-in wisdom in small doses. These small bites are particularly useful for people who aren't big readers.

5. What are some of the ways the cards are being used?

Many exciting things have happened with the cards aside from individual sales.

- They, of course, were designed as a tool for psychotherapy. So many therapists have purchased decks to use with their clients in session or to let them borrow.
- I've also run a number of workshops using the cards.
 - I recently ran a mother/daughter workshop that was very fun and insightful. And another one is scheduled in March, 2011.
 - I've used the cards to teach a Moms-in-the-Know group. This was a group for moms of grade schoolers to equip them (the moms) with skills to begin relationship conversations early with their kids.
 - I've offered an Essential Questions group for single adults.
- The cards have been used at two high schools in Portland to teach the relationship segment of their health classes.
- I just finished writing an Activity Book for 44 activities that can be used with the *Things to Know Before You Say "Go"* cards. This is being published by Dibble Institute for use as classroom curriculum.

6. It sounds like you sort of "accidentally" made a successful tool but you didn't set out to make a product with such broad appeal. Is that right?

This is true. I made the first set to help one particular client but it was such a useful tool that it I kept following where it was taking me and am quite pleased with the end result.

I have always been a very engaging and active type of therapist. I like to assign homework and reading. I like using a variety of tools to teach the principles of good psychological health. If I couldn't find an appropriate tool I would often create my own. I've made dozens of handouts and tools to augment my practice. So designing this card deck was just another creative therapy tool, until it took off.

I teach workshops on the Psychotherapy Toolkit in which I share my bag of tricks with other professionals. Having good tools in therapy keeps me and my clients engaged in the process of growth and change.

5. *The Questions* iPhone app was developed and released in the fall of 2010. Tell us about that and why you chose to transfer your card deck to this medium?

The developers of the app, loved the idea at first sight. During our initial meeting I gave them a deck, so they could think about the project. When we met the following week they were completely excited and invested. The developers were actually a couple and had taken the deck with them on their anniversary weekend trip to the beach. They examined the cards on their trip and used them to assess their own relationship. They came back totally pumped to make the app because they experienced the utility of the cards in their own life and the potential applicability for others.

The Questions are a perfect fit for an iPhone app. It allows a relationship inquiry to be taken anywhere. It's like having a therapist in your pocket! The app includes all 76 questions as well as the sub-questions and the book—compressed digitally to go wherever you go.

The Questions focus on various aspects of a relationship: friendship, acceptance, trust, listening, privacy, roles and faults—just to name a few. It is a tool for insight into relationships or dating in general. This app offers a unique, more comprehensive version of the ubiquitous “love quiz”. Single men, women and teens can use it for self-discovery or to evaluate past relationships, while those currently in a relationship can work through the questions to identify current strengths and weaknesses.

The Questions app is available for iPhones and iPad Touches for \$3.99 at the iTunes store. A free introductory version of 10 questions is also available through iTunes.

6. How are the cards related to your personal story?

I grew up in a very conservative and restrictive family. There wasn't a lot of information about relationships other than not to be sexual until married. My older brother and his girlfriend became pregnant outside of marriage and this only made the rule of abstinence more strongly enforced for me. There was no conversation about what to look for in a partner or how to listen to your own feelings in relationships. My parents didn't know how to have these kind of conversations, they just clung tightly to rigid rules and imposed those on us. I wished my parents could have talked with me about what to look for when dating. The cards are, in a way, an offering to my own adolescent girl, healing the silence she experienced growing up.

7. What other psychotherapy tools have you created?

I have a set of Distress Tolerance Activity cards that is about to go into mass production. It's a set of 130 activities to consider to bring calm in the midst of crisis or challenge. People need to know ways to calm and soothe themselves and these cards offer them a variety of tried and true methods for restoring sanity in the midst of chaos.

I have a set of Distorted Thinking Cards that have the basic cognitive distortions explained individually on cards instead of a list. I find these to be a playful and helpful way to explore the often dry topic of distorted beliefs, an essential construct in psychotherapy.

And then, there are over 50 original handouts that I've made in my 20 years of being a therapist. I've been blessed with a bit of creativity that I've mostly channeled into my work.

8. Where is your creative work taking you now?

Who knows what's next. I have several ideas in the works. I've been collaborating with a couple colleagues on ideas for other psychological iPhone apps. I'll keep developing ways to use my *Things to Know Before You Say "Go"* cards to promote my agenda about conscious relationships. That's the beauty of creativity, it just keeps inviting another expression.

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