

FANOS

By Debbie Laaser, MA, LMFT

**A daily, 5-minute check-in with your spouse
to *offer* information about sobriety and
to practice emotional intimacy**

Years ago, Mark and I created a check-in for couples to help them practice emotional connection. We called it **FANOS**. Each of the letters of the acronym stood for something they were to share with each other. We like acronyms because they help us remember things. Our couples reported that this simple check-in has become one of the easiest, most affordable practices they used to help them grow emotionally. It first appeared in published print in my book, [Shattered Vows](#), in 2008. The truth is, we used it in counseling sessions for years before that and taught it at our Couples' Workshop.

As a Greek student in his graduate program, Mark remembered that there was a similar word to our word FANOS that was spelled phaino. When he revisited the definition, it said that phaino means “to bring forth into the light, cause to shine, to be seen”. We were so excited to know that our new word was meant to do exactly that—to reveal something of our inner life that we might not otherwise share.

I want to teach our check-in to you today for those who may not have been introduced to it, or for those that need a refresher.

FANOS (pronounced fan ohs), is intended to be a short, five-minute check-in. It is not a long interaction for a couple of reasons. First, practicing anything new, especially when it involves vulnerable information, can be hard to do. Secondly, people are busy, and it can be difficult to find a designated time to do this check-in if it gets too long. If you are not careful, you will use the excuse that there was not enough time and therefore, you did not do it all.

When you sit down to engage in this exercise, one of you will begin by sharing a short response to each of the letters of FANOS. There are no comments or questions to be offered by the listening spouse. There are no additions suggested either! When the first spouse is finished, the other

proceeds in the same way. Remember, no comments, no additions, no questions.

Feelings—state your feelings (not your thoughts!)

Using a feelings chart will help you expand your vocabulary of feeling words. We often use ‘good’ and ‘fine’. If you want to grow your emotional relationship, you need to know emotional language. As you are sharing feeling words, beware of the temptation to explain why you are feeling what you are. We want you to get used to expressing feelings without justifying them. It is OK to have an emotion, as that is part of who you are. So just use feeling words for now.

Affirmation—give your spouse an affirmation, or say ‘thank you’ for something she/he has done

When you are hurting or angry, it is often hard to find anything good about another person. You might assume that if you say something nice, that might mean you are not angry or hurting any more. It is not true that those two thoughts go together. It is good to find good in other people, especially your spouse. Whether it is big or small, figure out some way to affirm your spouse.

Needs—ask for something you need (knowing that sometimes your need will not be fulfilled)

We want you to practice stating a need (or desire), because we know how difficult this is for most people. We do not want this to be a global need (I need more peace in my life! Or I need to feel safe). We want it to be a specific need. It does not have to be a request of your spouse, although sometimes, it is. As you continue to work to become emotionally healthier, you will want to practice what to do when you ask (nicely) for a need and it is not attended to. That is for another article!

Own something you did—say you are ‘sorry’

Apologizing for ways we hurt others is essential to emotional closeness. It is also a significant part of one’s spiritual growth, we believe. We want you to get familiar with saying you are sorry about both large and small ways you have hurt someone. This part of the check-in is about what you are apologizing for regarding your relationship with your spouse. It is not about what you may need to own about a work situation, or an interaction with one of the children, etc.

Sobriety & Spiritual Growth—the addict will check in with his spouse about his sobriety

For the addict: The “S” is for checking in about your sobriety. It is important before you use this check-in that the two of you know how you are defining sobriety. For instance, at Faithful & True, we use the acronym, LAMP, to describe sobriety (no lying, no affairs--either emotional or sexual--no masturbation, no pornography). Once the definition is clear, it is easy to say, “I have been sober since the last time we checked-in with FANOS”. It is also very helpful to add something you are doing from your Green Circle—something that is healthy for your journey (such as, “I’m going to a new therapy group every week”, or “I’m joining a Bible study”, or “I’m committed to eating healthier and getting better sleep”). The “S” is a time for the addict to *offer* information to his spouse to build trust and emotional connection. When a spouse asks, “How you are doing with sobriety?”, you are failing to *offer* information that she needs to feel safe.*

For the spouse: the “S” can be a part of the check-in for you to own something you are working on changing regarding your behavior (e.g. emotional eating, rage, withdrawal, sarcasm, emotional spending, work, busyness, drinking, etc). This journey is about both of you becoming more Christ-like, and this is the opportunity to be companions in the process. You could say this part of the check-in is about your spiritual growth.

*If your sobriety has been in place for a long time and your spouse no longer requests your offering of that information, you may also choose something you want to change (e.g. habitual TV watching, rage, withdrawal, sarcasm, emotional eating, excessive work, drinking, excessive hobbies, etc.) for your spiritual growth and check-in about how your progress is going with that issue. Of course, it may be beneficial to check-in with sobriety as well.

Example:

F: I am feeling nervous, hopeful, & challenged.

A: Thank you for being so patient with me while I have been preparing for this.

N: I would like to get a babysitter tonight so that we can go out to dinner alone.

O: I really snapped at you when you were trying to tell me something and I apologize for that.

S: (For the addict...) I want you to know that I am sober today. I am also working on reducing my work hours and I still have more to do before it feels healthy.

S: (For the spouse) I am working on not withdrawing when I feel hurt or sad. I did very well until last night when I shut down and would not talk to you.

Here are a few additional tips to make this a successful practice:

Find a consistent time to check-in if possible. Right after dinner works well for many. Even if you have children, you can ideally find a way for them to be on their own for 5 minutes. Right before bed is often not good in case FANOS leads to additional talking. You will want time for an extended conversation.

Find a consistent place to check-in that is private and free of distractions.

Face each other and look at each other when talking, if possible. In the beginning, it might be easier to check-in while walking. We do not suggest checking-in while lying in bed.

This is a daily check-in, so do it daily! Have the expectation that you will do it. When couples fall away from this practice, it is often because one says the other did not initiate it. The truth is, for various reasons, initiation becomes the deal-breaker to stop this valuable check-in. Decide ahead of time how to manage that. Take turns initiating. Or choose days of the week when it is your turn. Of if you initiate, decide that the other one goes first (you will probably find you do not like to go first!). In whatever way you want to figure it out, figure it out. It is important.

This is not a place for an addict who is slipping to report that he is not sober. We assume that you can be sober if you are working a good program. If you have a slip or relapse, then we recommend that you invite your spouse into a longer conversation—or one with professional help—so you can discuss next steps.

Have a professional to talk to if you are having difficulty with the check-in. Talk through what is the roadblock and get help with how to get back on track to checking-in. Perhaps there is a need for a time out from sharing FANOS while another need is addressed (like on-going sobriety).

Our desire for you is that these elements of sharing become so automatic that you just include them in your everyday conversations. There will one day be no need to talk through an acronym. You will just easily share your feelings and needs. You will own your failings and fallings. You will encourage and thank those you love. And you will share your vision and those components of your life that you are changing. This is rich emotional, and spiritual intimacy. And it can start with a very simple practice called FANOS.