

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

Topics such as politics, race, and other “charged” subjects can be complex and deeply personal. Discussions can be uncomfortable or even heated. While it may be easier to avoid them, it’s valuable to be able to talk and listen to each other with respect and sensitivity. With a thoughtful mindset and good communication skills, real learning and growth can occur even when the differences may seem too vast to bridge. Below are some strategies that can help you navigate challenging conversations.

Prepare your mindset

Understand your own lens. Our perceptions of any issue or situation are shaped by our background, experiences, culture, subculture, privilege, etc. Understand the factors that inform your perception and how you make sense of the world.

Be curious. At the same time, other people’s views are informed by their own lens too. Approach these conversations from a place of curiosity and respect. Think of your goal as being to learn about different points of view, not to win a debate.

Keep perspective. Complex issues such as injustice, discrimination, or controversial laws may spark *many* conversations. One discussion isn’t going to “fix” anything. But being open to and having these conversations can open our minds to learning and discovery. Think of difficult conversations as an exercise and a process, a step along a pathway.

Be courageous. Many of us have no (or perhaps negative) experience engaging with others about these topics. It may feel like we don’t have the words. This can create anxiety that we will say the wrong thing. We may be afraid of offending someone, or feeling offended ourselves. For others, these topics are very private, not to be discussed with those outside the family. Stand up to these fears. Consider that taking risks, not being silent, is how we support change. And, the more risks you take, the more opportunity you have to learn.

Emotional awareness

Expect and accept discomfort. Conversations around these topics may expose our own or others’ “blind spots.” It’s not comfortable to learn that we or others have biases, that long-held beliefs may not be based in truth. Resist the urge to lessen the discomfort; learn to sit with it. Go deeper by examining why you’re uncomfortable. Accept discomfort as a necessary part of the process. Know that you can take a break if it becomes too uncomfortable and come back to it later.

Manage defensiveness. When you “put yourself out there,” you may feel vulnerable and exposed to judgment. Remember that others do not have to understand or agree with you, and that is okay. If you feel the rise of anger, hurt, or the need to defend yourself, stop for a few moments, and shift your attention to your breath. You do not need to explain what you meant or prepare a comeback. Simply listen and consider what you can learn from their feedback.

Be empathetic. Tough conversations may bring up strong emotions, such as outrage, guilt, shame, or sadness. Try to connect with the other person and their emotions, acknowledge their experience. Phrases like, “I see why you would feel that way,” or “I understand how that could make you feel angry,” communicate that you are hearing them. Try to put yourself in their shoes if they have a different perspective or are reacting differently than you would.

Having the conversation

Listen to understand. Listen to others' stories to help you form a picture of how they experience the world. Paraphrase what you've heard to confirm you are understanding them correctly: "I heard you say this. Is that right?" Don't make assumptions about their viewpoints or background – listen for their truth. Don't think about how you will respond as they are speaking. Just challenge yourself to truly hear the full story. It's okay if you don't know how to respond. Silence can help you process what you've heard.

Suspend judgments. Always assume the other person is speaking with positive intent. Try to recognize when your own biases and assumptions have come into play and bring your focus back to what they are saying. Don't let individual words that may be insensitive or offensive derail the conversation. Look for the meaning behind the words.

Look for commonalities. You might be surprised by how much you have in common with someone who may seem like your polar opposite. Look for similarities in your stories: a strong bond with family, or concern over the safety of loved ones, for example. Use that common ground as an anchor if your conversation begins to sound more like a debate than a discussion.

Create a dialogue. Ask open-ended questions to get the full story: "Can you say more about why you felt that way?" Offer your own perspective – "This is my experience" – and allow them to respond. Create a back-and-forth that allows you both to share and appreciate each other's viewpoints.

Speak authentically and honestly, from your own experience. Using the words "we" or "you" to refer to "people in general" is a way to avoid taking responsibility for your own views. Take ownership of your own feelings and opinions by using "I" statements versus "we" statements. For example, "I grew up believing..." vs. "we were taught to believe..."

Mind your non-verbal communication. Keep a calm, compassionate tone to help others feel safe in opening up to you. Be aware of what your facial expressions are saying. An eye roll or a frown can shut down a conversation. Keep an open and relaxed posture, and avoid aggressive body language like crossed arms or an aggressive stance. If you notice this in the other person, point it out; ask them if they'd like to share their feelings.

Give respect to get respect. Ask yourself how others might hear your message. Choose your words thoughtfully, with kindness, while still speaking your truth. Know the difference between sharing your perspective and reactively defending your position. Be humble. Respect others as the "expert" of their own experience, just as you are of yours.

Take breaks. These conversations can be hard emotional labor. It is okay to take breaks and focus on something else. Your relationships do not need to focus around difficult conversations all the time, but these skills can help you approach them more effectively when you do engage.

When conversations get heated

When conversations escalate into heated debates, it can be hard to listen. Here are some tips to keep your composure:

- ▶ Check your emotional response. Take a breath. Decide if you need to respond. Reacting with anger, hurt, or negative emotions can quickly spiral into personal attacks.
- ▶ Do not accuse the other person of ill intent (i.e., racism, sexism, etc.). This can spark defensiveness.
- ▶ Explain the impact their comment, phrase, or wording has on you on others: "When you said __, it made me feel __."
- ▶ Ask for clarification: "What did you mean when you said this?" or "Can you tell me more about your thoughts on this?" They may simply not understand how they are being perceived.
- ▶ Use kindness as a reset: "I can tell that this is really important to you. It's hard to have this conversation but I'm glad we are."
- ▶ Know when to end the conversation. It's okay to "agree to disagree" and come back to it later.

References:

American Psychological Association (APA). (2019, November 15). *Managing conversations when you disagree politically*. <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-conversations>

Kelly, C. (2019, April 12). *Keeping it civil: How to talk politics without letting things turn ugly*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/12/712277890/keeping-it-civil-how-to-talk-politics-without-letting-things-turn-ugly>

Kirkpatrick, C. (2020, July 28). *How to talk about sensitive subjects at work*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2020/07/28/how-to-talk-about-sensitive-subjects-at-work/?sh=486fd4bd226d>