

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

Recent and past events have encouraged us to hear and understand the stories of people who hold different perspectives from us. Many of us are taught that topics like race, politics, and other “charged” subjects are best to be avoided. For some of us, this may be our first time talking about these topics. These issues may be complex and deeply personal. As these discussions find their way to our homes, workplaces, and more, it is beneficial and necessary to be able to reach out and listen to each other with respect and sensitivity. With the right mindset and communication skills, real learning and growth can occur even when the differences may seem too vast to bridge. Below are some strategies that allow for you and others to connect with and understand each other:

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. Your goal is simply to learn about new perspectives, not to win a debate.
- › **Keep perspective.** Your conversation won’t “fix” anything. Complex issues like racism and injustice require *many* conversations. These conversations open our minds to new perspectives. Think of difficult conversations as a process, a step along the pathway to change.
- › **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. Taking risks, not being silent, is how we change the “status quo.” 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 judgement. 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 draw 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 guilt, shame, sadness, or outrage. 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 open and receptive to their view. Try to put yourself in their shoes if they have a different perspective or reaction 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 ensure understanding: "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 common themes between 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 negative nonverbal communication in the other person, 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 compassion, while still speaking your truth. Know the difference between proactively 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 allow you the ability to have them.

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 or 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 really 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 return to it at a later time.

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