



A Field Guide for Tough Conversations



***“I feel like at our current high school, there’s a lot of people with the same political beliefs, which is nice because it is more like liberal leaning and progressive and inclusive. I feel like I’m not very good at interacting with people with very different beliefs than me or our school.*”**

I just end up getting in fights. And I’m aware that’s not a good thing. In the real world, there’s going to be a ton of people that have very different viewpoints than I do...”

– DANIELLE, 18

HOW DO YOU HAVE TOUGH CONVERSATIONS?

Tough conversations that are important to have, and that help you grow and find your voice. Tough conversations that can help you speak up, ask questions, and better understand those around you. If you are not very good at having these types of conversations, then here is a good place to start.

**IF YOU'RE NOT
VERY GOOD AT
HAVING TOUGH
CONVERSATIONS,
THIS IS A GOOD
PLACE TO START.**

SIX TOUGH CONVERSATION PRINCIPLES

**01
CREATE
SPACE**

**04
SUSPEND
JUDGMENT**

**02
LIST YOUR
MUTUAL
AGREEMENTS**

**05
ACKNOWLEDGE
YOUR
ASSUMPTIONS**

**03
UNDERSTAND
SOCIAL
DYNAMICS AND
POWER**

**06
PREPARE FOR
THE WORK
AHEAD**

CREATE SPACE

Find the best time and place to have an open conversation.

WHERE, WHEN, AND HOW YOU HAVE THE CONVERSATION IS IMPORTANT.

Pick a spot that everyone in the group is familiar with, and choose a time that is convenient for everyone. Also, think about what you can add or remove from the space to help folks get through the conversation. For example, bring snacks, turn off the television, choose a spot with a scenic view, close the door to avoid unnecessary distractions, etc. Most importantly, engage in the conversation in a way that makes others feel safe enough to share their thoughts. Creating space in this way means being willing to receive people's feedback, information, and opinions. More on this below.



LIST YOUR MUTUAL AGREEMENTS

Agree on a set of ground rules, and hold each other accountable to them.

GET ON THE SAME PAGE WITH YOUR FOLKS.

Establish clear expectations about how y'all are going to engage in the conversation. These mutually agreed-upon guidelines will ensure that everyone feels comfortable sharing their perspective as well as provide a way to check in with each other in case behaviors stray away from your conversation's guidelines. Whether in a group or one-on-one convo, your list must be your own. But we recommend that y'all start with these:

**01
RESPECT
CONFIDENTIALITY.**

**02
USE "I" STATEMENTS.**

**03
CHALLENGE THE IDEA,
NOT THE PERSON.**

**04
SHARE THE MIC EQUALLY.**

**05
ENGAGE IN ACTIVE
LISTENING.**

**06
BEING FLEXIBLE AND
ADAPTABLE**

**07
START WITH A POSITIVE/
SERIOUS ATTITUDE**

**08
ASK IF THEY'RE
COMFORTABLE AND ASK
YOURSELF THAT AS WELL
DURING THE
CONVERSATION
(HOW CAN I MAKE YOU
COMFORTABLE)**

A photograph of two young women in conversation. The woman on the left is a white woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue denim jacket over a grey shirt. The woman on the right is an Asian woman with long black hair, wearing a black hijab, glasses, and a yellow shirt. They are standing in front of a wall with a sign that reads "ГАЗИРОВАННАЯ" in blue Cyrillic letters. The image has a green-to-yellow gradient overlay.

ГАЗИРОВАННАЯ

UNDERSTAND SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND POWER

Be mindful about the ways in which society's various "isms" come up in conversations.

IDENTITY CATEGORIES SUCH AS AGE, PHYSICAL ABILITY, RACE, GENDER, LANGUAGE, CULTURAL BACKGROUND, AND ALMOST ANYTHING ELSE THAT CONTRIBUTES TO A PERSON'S UNIQUE EXPERIENCE AND IDENTITY, ARE STATUS MARKERS AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF POWER.

These power dynamics cannot be avoided, and sometimes manifest in ways that are unproductive for tough conversations. Importantly, think together about how society's various "isms" (racism, sexism, ableism, heteronormativity, and more) might be showing up to the conversation. Bringing awareness to how social dynamics show up can help you effectively make use of your group's agreements and navigate the conversation with care.



SUSPEND JUDGMENT

If you wanna learn and grow, then you gotta lead with curiosity.

A photograph of two young women sitting together outdoors. The woman on the left, who is Black, is wearing a white tank top with teal trim and a necklace. She is looking towards the woman on the right. The woman on the right, who is Asian, has long dark hair and is wearing a dark blue sleeveless top. She is holding a book and pointing at it with her right hand. She has a thoughtful or slightly distressed expression, with her hand resting on her head. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a concrete wall and some greenery.

**IT'S INEVITABLE THAT DISAGREEMENTS WILL
COME UP DURING TOUGH CONVERSATIONS.**

Value them by asking questions. For example, don't prejudge people or make assumptions about who consumes cannabis or who uses drugs including alcohol. Keep the conversation going in a productive direction by responding to folks with sensitivity to their stories and perspectives. Recognize folks' personal connections to the topic, and be patient with each other as y'all learn and grow together. Importantly, be patient with yourself and avoid being judgemental toward yourself. Y'all are trying to learn and grow through tough conversation. Including you.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Recognize and challenge your own biases.

**OUR PRESUMPTIONS ABOUT RIGHT AND
WRONG CAN BE CONVERSATION STOPPERS.**

Try to have awareness of your own position and how your thinking about the topic has shifted in the past. Appreciate the importance of taking different perspectives into mind and practice critical self-reflection. Oftentimes, it can be productive to examine and factor in the ways in which parts of your identity have shaped our presumptions.

A woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a bright yellow jacket over a light-colored top, is looking up and to the right with an expressive, slightly open-mouthed face. She appears to be in the middle of a conversation. To her right, the back of a man's head and shoulder is visible; he is wearing a dark green jacket and looking towards her. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with trees and foliage. The overall mood is one of active communication and engagement.

PREPARE FOR THE WORK AHEAD

Having one tough conversation won't address things, but it will get you on a path to making situations and relationships better.

**IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT YOU'LL
FINISH YOUR CONVERSATION
FEELING AS THOUGH THINGS DIDN'T
GO THE WAY YOU HAD HOPED.
DON'T BE DISCOURAGED!**

Either way, the conversation can be a powerful starting point for future action. End the conversation by reflecting on any noteworthy comments that you heard, any questions that remain open, and make a plan for incorporating what you learned. After the conversation, spend some time reflecting on and processing what was said. And finally, always treat your tough conversation as a catalyst for making changes in your future.



**HARD
CONVERSATIONS
ARE NEVER EASY.
IT'S A COMMITMENT
AND A PRACTICE TO
CHOOSE COURAGE
OVER COMFORT.**

– BRENE BROWN

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