

How to have a difficult conversation

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Some conversations are a whole lot easier than others. For example, “Who is picking up the kids later?” and “Do you want to go over to the Milton’s for dinner on Saturday?” And then there are the difficult conversations. The ones that feel like they are littered with landmines. Where the potential for hurt feelings or angry words seems right around the corner. These conversations might be about the usual hot spots couples experience—sex and money. But they could also be about relationships with in-laws, how much help is being given around the house, time spent together, or how affection is being expressed. The list is endless because human beings can have feelings about anything.

Unfortunately, the conversations that are most difficult are often the ones that are most important to have. Because the conversation is important, there is usually strong emotion present and a need to be heard and understood. When we focus on being understood, our motivation to understand the other person can take a back seat. A couple usually has a history with difficult conversations and has reason to expect them to go poorly and create distance, so these talks tend to be avoided. When the important conversations don’t happen then aspects of a relationship go untended and over time leave a couple with walls between them that make intimacy a real problem. However, difficult conversations also have the potential to bring a couple closer and create shared understanding.

There is a strategy for having these conversations that greatly increases the odds that the conversation will be experienced as helpful. It has gone by many names and has been taught in a variety of ways. I call the communication strategy “taking turns” and once a couple learns how to do it, it can be suggested to your partner by asking, “Can we have this conversation by taking turns?”

Here are the basics. There are two roles, and these roles cannot be occupied simultaneously. One role is “listener” and the other role is “speaker”. You must take turns in each role and stay in your designated role until the speaker feels understood. Whoever is the initiator of the conversation should be the first speaker, although since each partner will get to occupy both roles, it really doesn’t matter who starts.

The role of the speaker is:

1. to be as clear as possible
2. to be respectful in the communication (for example, no name calling)
3. to make one point during one turn (rather than adding things to the initial concern)
4. to be concise (so that the listener can follow)
5. to let the listener know if what they think they heard is actually what you were trying to say

The role of the listener is:

1. to listen with the sole intention to understand (as opposed to listening so that you can prepare your counter-argument)
2. to tell the other person what you heard them say, exactly. Your starting point is, “What I heard you say was...” You are mirroring their words, not interpreting them. You are not agreeing or disagreeing with their point of view, nor are you offering your own point of view.

After the speaker had said their piece, and they feel certain that the other person has heard them, then you switch roles. The person who had been the listener can now offer their point of view to what had been said a moment ago, or they can bring up a related point that they wish to make and have understood. The person who had been the speaker is now the listener and has the task of simply understanding, and communicating that understanding, to the new speaker.

This is **important**: a very skillful way for the listener to begin their turn as speaker is by talking about an aspect of the other person’s point of view which

they can agree with or by expressing that they understand how the other person is feeling. Try to look for the “kernel of truth” in what the other person said rather than immediately talking about how you see it differently.

The virtue of this kind of conversation is that each person can have the experience of being understood. The benefit, as listener, is that you don't have to defend yourself or try to argue against the other person's point of view. You have the assurance that your viewpoint will be heard when the other person is done. And when you are the speaker, you can relax a little knowing that you have the listener's full attention.

A difficult conversation which is carried out by taking turns in the way just described is usually a calmer and more civil conversation. The emotional thermostat tends to be turned down and there is less chance for feelings to be hurt or words spoken that are regretted.

Here is a brief example of such a conversation:

Wife: “I'm upset that you spent the whole day watching football. You had said that you were going to help me hang some pictures and to fix that broken table.”

Husband: “So what I'm hearing is that you are really angry with me because you thought I had promised to hang pictures and fix the table, and instead I watched football.”

Wife: “Almost, but not quite what I said. I didn't say I was really angry. Although that isn't far from the truth. I'm more frustrated and annoyed. It feels like this happens a lot. And I didn't say you had promised, but you did agree to help me do those things when I brought it up yesterday”.

Husband: “So you heard me agree to help and instead I watched football, and you're frustrated and annoyed because it seems like this happens a lot. Did I get that right?”

Wife: “Yes. That is what I'm feeling right now”. [They now switch roles]

Husband: “I guess I can understand that you would be upset if you thought I had agreed to do something and then didn’t come through. I remember it a little differently though. You had said you had wanted to hang pictures and fix the table, and I thought I had said that I would if I had time. I do like to watch the football game every Sunday and it is important to me. I feel like I work really hard during the week and this is one of the few times I get to relax. I only watched the one game and since I also had to rake the leaves earlier, it didn’t leave time to do it all.”

Wife: “So you are feeling like you kept your word. That you said you would do it if you had time and that the football game is important to you in order to try and relax before the work week starts. And that you didn’t have time because you also raked the leaves”.

Husband: “Yeah. That is how I see it”.

Now, conversations like this don’t usually end there. Often the conversation about football is really about something much bigger—but the talk about football is the entry point. In this example, what may really be bothering the wife is that she was hoping to do something together with her husband and that when he tunes into the game she feels like he is tuning her out. However, she may not really be able to understand that she is feeling this way until she gets to talk out what has shown up in her awareness first—her annoyance because she felt her husband wasn’t following through on what had felt like an agreement.

A turn taking strategy can create a climate where each partner feels safe to express what is on their mind, allowing for deeper and more intimate communication. If your difficult conversations get too heated to feel useful, then taking turns can allow you to feel understood so that you can get to the heart of what may be getting in the way of more closeness.