

Navigating Difficult Conversations

Whether it's planning a trip with family, making decisions with co-workers, or discussing an upcoming election, opportunities for disagreement are endless. When such disagreements arise, tension may surface as well.

Over time, we may dread family gatherings or interactions with certain co-workers if we suspect a disagreement will lead to a heated exchange. Finding common ground may also feel unrealistic if we believe the gaps between us are too wide to bridge. But difficult conversations present the opportunity to foster connection even when there may be disagreement. The first step is striving to understand each other's perspectives.

Misconceptions about others can also emerge when there are differing viewpoints. Research from More in Common shows that [we tend to overestimate the gap between our opinions and the opinions of others](#). And according to the book *Beyond Your Bubble* by Tania Israel, we often believe that those with different opinions have bad intentions. Such tendencies can limit our willingness to hear others' perspectives.

Recognizing that our assumptions may not be true can help us overcome these barriers. By taking the time to listen, we can practice communication skills to understand the opinions and views of others.



Meet Julie, dedicated mother and IT support technician.

Check out Julie's self-care toolkit for managing conflict, available on the Lyra mobile app. After logging in, navigate to the Essentials tab and scroll to the Topics section. There you'll find "Strengthening Relationships" resources including articles, meditations, journals, and more.



Listen to understand

During tough conversations, helping people feel understood is vital. Instead of attacking or judging, we can help others feel heard through active listening.

Often, we listen to respond, meaning we're thinking about our reply while the person is talking. Instead, try listening to understand for more productive conversations. Below are three steps to active listening.

Step 1: Show you're paying attention

- Limit opportunities for distraction by silencing your cell phone or muting the TV. Take on a relaxed and alert body posture with your arms and legs uncrossed.
- Use gestures that show you'd like the speaker to continue. For example, gently nod your head and engage with eye contact. Allow for silence after the other person finishes to give them the chance to elaborate.

Step 2: Reflect back what they've said

- Rephrase the points that seem most meaningful and give the speaker a chance to clarify. For example: "What I'm hearing is that you're upset about how this issue affects your kids." Avoid repeating their exact words.
- Refrain from agreement, disagreement, interpretations, and questions when reflecting. Keep the focus on the person—not on your opinions or curiosities.
- Use reflections to ensure that you understand their perspective and that they feel understood before seeking common ground.

Step 3: Ask questions to deepen understanding

- Offer open-ended prompts. For example, "How does this issue affect you?" rather than, "Does this issue affect you?"
- Don't pressure yourself to ask questions if none arise. You can actively engage without interjecting. Saying, "Tell me more" is another option.
- Avoid interrupting the other person, even when you're tempted to make a point. If a rebuttal comes to mind while they're speaking, return your focus to their words.

Keep connection in mind

When we disagree on an issue that matters to us, we may want to justify our view, point out flaws in logic, or abruptly end the conversation. While such approaches may feel satisfying or justified, they can hurt relationships and limit understanding.

To find common ground or heal strained relationships, try connecting using the following tips:



Identify your goal. If you hope to find compromise, deepen understanding, or repair the relationship, efforts to “change their mind” may not help.



Generate warm feelings. Think about the other person in a positive way. Ask yourself: “How might their perspective make sense, given their life experiences?” or, “What do we have in common?”



Show respect. Do your best to assume they have good intentions. Use a kind tone; approach them with curiosity rather than judgment, and try to be open to being wrong.

Stay calm

Keeping connection in mind is hard when stress levels are high, so it’s important to stay calm. We’re also better able to hear other perspectives and express ourselves when we do not lead with our emotions. If you notice the urge to shout, fight, or run, try the stress-reducing strategies below.

- Feel your feet on the ground beneath you.
- Notice the places your body is making contact with the chair.
- Take slow breaths that fill your belly with air.
- Hold a soothing object, such as a stone or coin.
- Reassure yourself with phrases like, “I can handle this” or, “I’m OK.”

How to end difficult conversations

Pushing through tough interactions is a choice. If we're struggling to stay calm, we can choose to revisit the conversation at a later time. Planning in advance how you'll end the conversation can help you do so gracefully. Consider the steps below:

- Start by thanking them. Share something you learned or that made you feel closer to them. For example: "Thanks for sharing. I learned a lot."
- Next, let them know that you'd like to end the conversation. For example: "I think it's time for us to wrap up."
- Finally, say what you'd like to happen going forward. For example: "I hope our differences won't affect our friendship" or, "Let's talk more next week."

Know that you probably won't always get communication skills "right." You or the other person may get off track with active listening or struggle to stay calm. Do your best to offer yourself and the other person patience and grace. Acting skillfully during tough conversations takes practice. Allow for clumsiness, and keep trying if maintaining connection is your goal.



Get the support you need

From an online library of self-care tools to easy access to mental health coaches and therapists, Lyra provides care for your emotional health how, when, and where you need it.

Learn how to get unstuck, improve your communication, and strengthen your relationships with [Lyra Health](#).