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Difficult Conversation Lessons From a Psychologist Who's Been Dealing With People Problems For Decades

Instead of avoiding difficult conversations, start confronting people in a constructive way, with skill and empathy.



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Difficult conversations are inherently human.

We've all been there — We know we must talk to a partner, family member, our boss, a colleague at work, or close a friend about something very important but we avoid the conversation because it could be uncomfortable and explosive.

In any difficult conversation, the needs/wants, opinions/perceptions of the involved parties are diverse, with their emotions running strong.

In some cases of challenging conversations, something has gone wrong and you have a difficult task of delivering the unpleasant news.

Sometimes a difficult conversation is about a delicate subject you have been avoiding for months. And at work or even at home, it could be about something that needs to change. Finance is normally one of the most sensitive topics people tend to avoid even though it's critical to almost everything.

People are normally reluctant to start a challenging conversation out of fear of the consequences. Just thinking about having these conversations can fill you with anxiety. But, that conversation you have been avoiding can easily distract you from everything that requires your total attention.

The ugly truth is, if you don't confront the issue and have that conversation, you will stumble through a confrontation that may not end well.

As difficult as they may be, you can't avoid tough conversations but you can make it easy for yourself.

Relating better with others central to our existence. The skill of managing difficult conversation has become an integral part of success at work and at home. Our relationships with family, colleagues at work, and friends are deeply important. On average, we each interact with somewhere between 100–200 acquaintances, according to research.

Instead of avoiding difficult conversations, it pays to find the courage to start confronting colleagues and family members in a constructive way with skill and empathy.

Difficult conversations can be stressful. Prepare yourself for it. No matter how explosive a conversation can be, it's important to start with a calm mindset. Your attitude toward the conversation can influence the outcome of it.

In many difficult conversations, someone is likely to overreact. The worst thing would be to have *two* people overreacting.

For a productive conversation, tame your emotional brain, says Dr Albert J. Bernstein, a clinical psychologist with over 30 years of experience and the author of a number of books on dealing with people problems. He calls the emotional side of our mind the “dinosaur brain:”

“If you’re in your dinosaur brain, you’re going to play out a 6 million-year-old program, and nothing good is going to happen. In that case, the dinosaur brain of the other person is going to understand that they are being attacked, and then you’re responding with fighting back or running away, and either one is going to escalate the situation into what I like to call the “Godzilla meets Rodan” effect. There’s a lot of screaming and yelling, and buildings fall down, but not much is accomplished.”

Once you approach a conversation from a calm mindset, you can speak more slowly and react better or focus on finding a solution. Anything that slows the situation down will make you think instead of reacting. “When people are angry at you or attacking you, it’s very easy to fight back or run away, but what you really need to do is something that engages their brain,” he argues.

If people react to a situation, they expect you to resist them, or start yelling too, but if you stay calm, they will start to think, which breaks the pattern of the conversation. This makes them shift more out of “dinosaur brain” and into thinking mode, which brings the conversation back to rational engagement says Dr Bernstein.

If you want to get along well with people and understand what’s going on in situations, whenever somebody says something to you, ask yourself, “Why is he saying this to me? What’s going on with him?” That is a doorway to understanding, a doorway to getting what you want, and also a doorway to compassion. Rather than judging the person, try and understand them.

Once you've established a connection, listen don't judge, or assign blame. Focusing on blame inhibits our ability to learn what's really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it.

Don't explain. Ask questions, and encourage them to continue talking. The other person will interpret your explanations as a veiled form of fighting back, argues Dr Bernstein.

"Explaining is almost always a disguised form of fighting back. Most explanations will be heard as, 'See here, if you really understand the situation, you will see that I am right and you are wrong.' That is an attack, and it's also one of the ways we achieve dominance over other people. We act as if we just explain our position really clearly, then the other person will understand and agree with us. I've never really seen that work." One of the main rules that I say to people is if you want to get along with people, ask don't tell.

Approach the conversation with curiosity rather than judgment. Ask for clarification. "I'm not sure what you mean. Can you please help me better understand?"

Actively focus on what you're hearing, not what you're saying. Your genuine attention will encourage the other person to elaborate.

"You don't actually need to talk that much during a difficult conversation. Instead, focus on listening, reflecting, and observing," writes Joel Garfinkle, author of *Difficult Conversations: Practical Tactics for Crucial Communication*.

Listening makes it easy to handle difficult conversations well because you give the other person the opportunity to express themselves. And the feeling of having been heard makes the other more able to listen themselves.

Difficult conversations are inevitable part of life. We all have to manage them and move on. Avoiding or delaying a difficult conversation can hurt your relationships. Summon the courage to deal with them always.

Handling a difficult conversation is an art — with continued practice, you will get better, acquire the needed skill and make the next one productive.