

Difficult Conversations with Someone You Care About

Having a discussion about a difficult topic with someone you care about can be challenging, but there may come a time when it is necessary. Here are some strategies that might help you carry out these conversations.

1. Plan

Take a moment to think about why you want to have this conversation. Write out 2-3 things you want to communicate to keep your thoughts organized throughout the discussion.

2. Invite

Invite the individual to have the conversation with you rather than jumping in before they are prepared. It is better that they feel comfortable and not ambushed. They may try to avoid the talk, but try to establish a time.

Example: "There is something I would like to discuss with you. Is there a time we can talk?" or "Hey, when can we get together to talk about ___."

3. Context of Care

Let the other person know what you want to discuss and why. Explain that you want to address the topic because you care about them and are invested in your relationship.

Example: "Having you in my life is very important to me. I care about you and so I want to talk to you about..."

4. Respectful Space

Agree to hold a space for your conversation where both individuals can speak without being interrupted. This establishes respect and can help prevent one person from feeling attacked or unheard.

Example: "Before we start, let's agree to have this conversation in a space where we can both share our thoughts without being interrupted."

5. Share

Share what happened and how it made you feel. By explaining that the issue or behavior has hurt or affected you, you are asking them to acknowledge your feelings rather than to state directly that what they did was wrong. Use "I" statements to help with this.

Example: "I have noticed this behavior...and the impact was..." or "I feel really hurt that..."

6. Listen

Maintain the safe space by listening to them without interruption, even if you do not agree. Remember to breathe and try to keep an open mind as you might learn something too!

7. Acknowledge and Respond

Recognize what the person said and how they are feeling and then try to figure out a way forward.

Example: "So, what I am hearing is... Going forward let's..." or "How about if we..."

8. Appreciate

If all goes well, reestablish your appreciation for the person. Thank them for their willingness to listen and have a constructive conversation. Remind them that you wanted to talk because you care about them.

Example: "Thanks for listening. I am glad we were able to talk because our relationship is important to me."

9. Reflect Back

Think about how the conversation made you feel and write down what you think the resolution was. If you are not satisfied, consider having another discussion with the individual to keep working towards change.

What to Avoid

- **“You” statements** can sound accusatory, so stick to “I” statements instead.
- **“But” statements** warn that a contradictory statement is coming and can lead to a defensive attitude. Use “and” statements instead.
- **Inflammatory Phrases** like “I’m just being honest” and “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way” can make someone defensive before the conversation even begins.
- **Extremes** such as “you always” and “you never” may provoke the other person to try to “prove” you wrong with an example of when your statement was not true.

Conversation Model

- I care** Begin with a few statements that describe your relationship and set the tone for the conversation. Remind the other person that you care so that they are more accepting of what you say.
- I see** Describe any specific, observable behaviors and avoid making judgments.
- I feel** Let the person know how and why these behaviors concern you. Talk about how you feel and the effect on you rather than making accusatory statements.
- Listen** Allow the other person time to react and then share their information. Remain calm, focused, and non-judgmental if they get angry.
- I want** Try to agree to some positive action with the person. Be optimistic, but stay realistic. If your conversation is not effective the first time, stay open to the possibility of having additional discussions with the individual to work towards action.
- I will** Describe what you are willing to do to help and what your limitations are. Indicate that you are supportive, but do not make promises you cannot or will not keep.

Other Talking Points

- I’d like to discuss _____. I think we might have different ideas about _____.
- I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)?
- I’d like to chat about _____ with you, but first I’d like to hear what you think.
- Can we talk about _____? I really want to hear your feelings and share mine too.
- Help me understand what just happened.
- I think we have different ideas about _____. I’d like to hear your thoughts on this.
- I have something I’d like to discuss that I think will be important for our relationship in the long run.
- Our relationship is important to me, so I’d like to see if we could reach an understanding about _____

Information gathered from <http://www.heysigmund.com/how-to-have-a-difficult-talk>; <http://www.heartintelligencecoach.com/how-to-have-a-difficult-conversation>; <http://asoundmatch.com/blog/we-need-to-talk/how-to-start-a-difficult-conversation>; <https://www.judyringer.com/resources/articles/we-have-to-talk-a-stepbystep-checklist-for-difficult-conversations.php>; <http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu/facstaff/HowTo.pdf>

