

6 Steps to Help you Tackle Difficult Conversations

A friend may have left you feeling bad about yourself. You may need to end a romantic relationship. Or a family member's values may be really different from yours. There are times when a difficult conversation is hard to avoid, even if it makes us feel nervous, stressed and wanting to run in the other direction.

The thing is, avoiding it usually doesn't help. If you tackle the convo in the right way, it can help the other person better understand your feelings and beliefs and may even improve the situation or relationship.

Here are six tips to help you get a difficult conversation off on the right foot.

1. Listen up

- Don't spend the time when the other person is talking thinking about what you want to say next.
- Really listen to what they're saying.
- Try to understand their point of view. Ask them questions like: 'Tell me more about that' or 'How does that make you feel?'
- Don't talk over them.
- You may learn something about them that you didn't know or see the situation from a different angle. If they see that you're switched on and engaged with them, they're more likely to do the same for you.

2. Be clear about how you feel and what you want

A big part of tackling difficult conversations is communicating clearly and directly. Try planning beforehand what you want to say, so that your nerves or emotions don't get the better of you.

If you need facts to back up your point of view, you could do a Google search and make some notes on your phone.

Start by explaining how you feel, and what you think and why.

Use 'I' statements. So, instead of saying, 'You don't care about me at all!', try this: 'I feel really upset when [insert issue here].' (Using 'you' can make the other person feel attacked, and they'll be less likely to listen to you.)

Describe exactly what you want from the discussion – do you want them to apologise to you, or to acknowledge your point of view, or to behave differently in the future? This will help them see things from your point of view and give them a clear way forward.

3. Look at the issue from their perspective

It can be easy to get caught up in how you feel, especially if you've been hurt or are feeling awkward about something. Before you jump to any conclusions, though, try to put yourself in the other person's shoes and to see the situation from their perspective. You could try asking yourself:

- What are five reasons the person might have acted the way they did?
- Has this person done/said anything like this before, or is this totally out of character?

- Is there anything else going on in their life that might be a factor?
- Did I do anything that may have hurt/confused/angered them that might account for what's happened?

People do and say things for many different reasons. It's not always about you.

4. If things aren't going to plan, take a break

Sometimes you can do everything you can to have a constructive chat, but if the other person isn't willing to do the same, it can feel like it's going nowhere.

Here are a few options if the other person is too upset, angry or emotional to respond.

If you feel safe doing so, encourage them to express their emotions. Getting something off their chest may be a first step in resolving the issue.

Walk away and try again when they've had time to simmer down.

You could ask someone who isn't closely involved to join you both, to help reduce the tension and encourage both sides to try and reach a workable outcome.

5. Agree to disagree

Not all conversations like this are going to have a happy ending. There will be some people, situations or behaviours that you just can't talk through – and that's okay.

Agreeing to disagree doesn't mean you agree with their perspective. You're just protecting yourself by choosing which battles to fight.

6. Look after yourself

Difficult conversations can sometimes get a bit heated, as people may feel emotional or hurt, angry or confused. Taking care of yourself is a priority.

It's okay to take time out to let everyone cool down. Agree to come back later if there's more to discuss.

Use this time to switch off and relax. Go for a walk, listen to a podcast or some music, meditate, or talk to someone who makes you feel good.

You should also be proud of yourself for starting this conversation. It takes real courage. Each time you overcome your nervousness and do it, you'll build your skills and confidence.

What can I do now? Reach out to Lifeskills Australia on **1800 870 080** or email us on info@lifeskillsaustralia.com.au if you need support navigating difficult conversations.