

# Guide to Having Hard Conversations

**Bonus:** Extra resource to practice political conversations:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/18/opinion/thanksgiving-family-argue-chat-bot.html>

Before the Conversation		Examples (feel free to add your own!)
<p><b>Questions to ask yourself ahead of time</b></p> <p><i>Note:</i> You can also always work through these questions with someone you trust.</p> <p>Don't force yourself to plan this alone if you don't have to!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● CLARITY:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why are you having this conversation?</li> <li>○ What is the value of having this conversation?</li> <li>○ Why should this happen right now (instead of another time)?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● GOALS and RISKS:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What are your desired outcomes?</li> <li>○ What are some other possible outcomes? How do you feel about those?</li> <li>○ What is the risk in starting this conversation? Are you okay with this level of risk?                                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Anxiety checkpoint:</i> Am I imagining a realistic picture of how this conversation would actually go, or is my brain just coming up with worst possible scenarios?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>● CHALLENGES:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What makes this conversation difficult for you?</li> <li>○ What makes this conversation difficult for the other person?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	



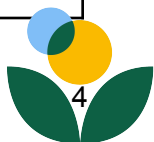
<p><b>Setting up the right environment</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What do you need while having this conversation?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What resources and environment would help you feel more comfortable and confident?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● What will the other person need during this conversation?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What resources and environments would help them feel safe and supported?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>People:</b> Someone trusted to debrief with afterwards, someone with you during the conversation for support, someone to practice with beforehand</li> <li>● <b>Space:</b> quiet, public/private, space where you're comfortable or feel safe, space where the other person feels comfortable or safe</li> <li>● <b>Time:</b> pick a time with no urgent time limit for either of you, set boundaries on how long you're willing to spend on this topic</li> </ul>
<p><b>Inviting someone to have this conversation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Affirmation sandwich: start with what you appreciate about them/your relationship, mention the issue you'd like to discuss, request a time/place for the conversation, then end with another affirmation to show them you care             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Note: this formula may feel awkward to use sometimes, but it really works!</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Use neutral language</li> <li>● Sometimes people can get worried/defensive when you bring something serious-sounding up, so you can use reassuring statements/language to keep your intentions clear.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Affirmation sandwich:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "Hey mom, you know I care so much about you, but I've been a bit bothered lately when we talk about politics. Do you think we can talk after dinner about it? I know you care a lot about this topic and I care a lot about you, so does that sound ok?"</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Neutral Language:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "I'd like to talk about our roommate rules for the bathroom"</li> <li>○ NOT Neutral: "I'm really annoyed about your gross habit of leaving hair in the shower."</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Reassuring Statements:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "Don't worry, I'm not trying to argue or fight right now. I really just want to understand better."</li> <li>○ "I know this might sound kinda intimidating to bring this up this way, but I wasn't sure how else to bring this up."</li> <li>○ "I want to talk about this not because I don't like you, but because I really care about you and want to make our relationship better."</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



During the Conversation		Examples (feel free to add your own!)
<b>Start off on the right foot</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Focus on connection, listening and hearing each other so that everyone feels listened to, can be authentic, and we can work towards a solution together</li> <li>● Start with sincere, honest appreciations</li> <li>● Establish common ground, understanding, and the importance of your relationship; you're both working towards the same goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● "You're one of my closest friends and it means a lot to me that you're taking the time for this conversation."</li> <li>● "I love you and I know you've always worked to support me in everything I do. I really appreciate the fact that you're willing to talk about this with me right now to support me better."</li> <li>● "I just wanted to say before we start, your new haircut looks really great!"</li> </ul>
<b>Name the Issue/Conflict</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use Observations, Feelings, Needs, and Requests (OFNR) to name the issue/problem.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Observation:</b> "When you spend 20 minutes in the bathroom in the morning when I also need to get ready,..."</li> <li>● <b>Feeling:</b> "...I feel frustrated and angry..."</li> <li>● <b>Need:</b> "...because I'm wanting more awareness of what I need and more consideration for my feelings..."</li> <li>● <b>Request:</b> "...Would you be willing to either have scheduled times for using the bathroom, or just finish and get out within five minutes of my knocking?"</li> </ul>
<b>Speak from your point of view</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements</li> <li>● Reference your real-life experiences instead of hypotheticals to show the actual impact of their actions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● DON'T use "you" statements:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "You're so inconsiderate you hog up all the time to use the bathroom!"</li> </ul> </li> <li>● DO use "I" statements:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "I feel grossed out and frustrated when I go in to take a shower and see hair and soap scum in the drain, because I want to have a want to trust that I'll be stepping into a clean tub when I go in to shower."</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



<p><b>Leave breathing room</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If the other person is getting overwhelmed, acknowledge their feelings/state. You can...             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Create breathing space</li> <li>○ Validate their feelings</li> <li>○ Reaffirm your connection</li> <li>○ Check in with them</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “I can see this is affecting you right now. If you need to take a minute to collect yourself, I completely understand. How do you want to continue this conversation?”</li> <li>● “I can see you seem to be feeling ____ right now, and that’s completely understandable. Take your time.”</li> <li>● “I know this is difficult to talk about. I just wanted to reemphasize that I do care about you, and I’m doing this because I want to have a better connection with you.”</li> <li>● “I know this has been a lot to process. How are you doing right now?”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Call people “in” instead of “out”</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Avoid accusations, blame, or labels – these quickly put people in a defensive position and much less likely to listen or change</li> <li>● Call “in” people: use neutral observations and focus on the other person’s needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● DON’T accuse, blame, or label:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “You’re always late to our group hangouts and it’s really frustrating. We need you to get it together!”</li> </ul> </li> <li>● DO call “in” with neutral observations and centering on the other person’s needs             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “I’ve noticed you tend to show up late to all of our group hangouts and I’d like to make sure we can spend quality time with you without worrying about when you’ll be there. Is there something in particular that makes you run late each time?”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Be clear about next steps</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Come in with suggestions for possible changes they can make to support you</li> <li>● Create space for the other person to suggest concrete action item</li> <li>● Taking action together can help show that you’re in this together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Maybe one way I can feel more listened to is if you offer feedback on my suggestions first before offering your own suggestions? That way I know I’m being heard, and it also helps me feel less stressed, so I can consider your suggestions with a clearer head too.”</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Select one or two simpler actions to take, so the change feels manageable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “I was wondering if you have any ideas for specific things we could do to make sure both of our needs are met?”</li> </ul>
<b>End with appreciations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What did you appreciate about this conversation?</li> <li>● Show them that you value having them in your life and that your relationship is important to you</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Thank you for listening to what I had to say. Knowing you’re here for me makes a big difference to me.”</li> </ul>
<b>Set boundaries as needed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If your needs aren’t being met, like if you... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ feel worse than you were prepared for</li> <li>○ feel attacked or overwhelmed</li> <li>○ feel like you’re not being heard or engaged with</li> <li>○ feel like you don’t have enough time to process while speaking</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>... you can always set a boundary</i></p> </li> <li>● Plan out a “parachute”: have a way to excuse yourself from the conversation if you need.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Time out. I need a second to collect myself.”</li> <li>● “I’m feeling overwhelmed right now; can you give me a minute.”</li> <li>● “When you speak really loudly, it makes me feel like I’m being yelled at, so can I just have a moment to calm down and process what you’re saying.”</li> <li>● “I can see this is going to take more time to figure out, so let’s pause the conversation for now”</li> <li>● “Sorry, I have to be somewhere so can we continue this at a different time?”</li> <li>● “This is a lot, but I care about this, so let’s both take a breather and discuss this later, ok?”</li> </ul>



After the Conversation		Examples (feel free to add your own!)
<b>Unwinding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spend some quality time together: Do an activity that's unrelated to the topic you talked about</li> <li>• Give yourselves some space but check back in to see each other in a few days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Ok, we got through this together! Do you wanna get boba with me and just unwind for a bit?"</li> <li>• "I'm glad we talked about this, and I'm gonna need a little time just to process things fully but can I reach out to you after a few days and check in on how you're doing?"</li> </ul>
<b>Self-Care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debrief with a trusted friend to recharge and support yourself</li> <li>• Write down some thoughts in a journal to process</li> <li>• <b>IMPORTANT: If the conversation didn't go like you hoped, give yourself a break!</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ You did what you needed to do and that's what's important here!</li> <li>○ Hard conversations are not always about immediate results but about <i>starting the process</i> to make things better</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<b>Accountability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A few days or a week later: Hold yourself and them accountable           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Are you making progress on the action items you decided?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Communicate with each other to decide if you need to have a follow-up conversation on this topic. If needed, you can use these tips in that next conversation, as well!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Hey, just wanted to follow up about our conversation last week! I'm feeling ____ about what we talked about– how are you feeling?"</li> </ul>

