



12 Game-Changing Tips for Handling Tough Conversations

People often complain that no one communicates clearly, or enough, nowadays. But the truth is that there is plenty of communication — most of it is just indirect, over text message and email, and often born out of a place of mindlessness (rather than mindfulness). Learning to communicate from a sincere, honest place in the present moment — rather than from a place of emotional regression — is not an easy task. But recognizing that good communication is a *skill* — not something that we can simply churn out without thinking about it — is very empowering.

This realization becomes especially helpful for those times when we need to broach a prickly topic, and engage in what will probably be a tough conversation. Whether it's an impending argument with a friend, a contentious talk with a co-worker, a long-standing issue with a family member or another potential conflict, cultivating good communication skills will prove to be very productive for you.

Here are 12 tips that will help you communicate — especially during trying times — so you can say exactly what you need to say without creating more disconnection in your relationships.

1. Set an intention.

Before the conversation, sit down and think with a very clear focus about what you want to get out of the conversation. Then take this intention and write it down. Truthfully look at what you hope to accomplish. If it is to blame or to get an apology, then wait at least 24 hours, as you're probably not ready to have an authentic, two-sided dialogue.

2. Watch your tone.

If you are initiating the conversation, make sure to approach the other person with a welcoming, open tone. Make sure that you are not coming to them from a place of aggression, defensiveness or passivity. You might even start by saying, “I need to have an honest conversation with you.” This gives the person the opportunity to realize that this is not going to be a run-of-the-mill conversation, while also providing them an open-ended request.

3. Recognize that mutual convenience matters.

Literally. Make sure to ask, “Is this a good time?” This very direct question allows the person to determine whether or not they are ready for the talk, showing them that their time and energy is a priority to you, regardless of the conflict. Waiting for a good time to have a difficult conversation can be the difference between a positive outcome and a negative one. If it is not a good time, make sure to ask when would be a good time and commit to it.

4. Use "I" statements.

If you're pointing the finger (i.e. *you did this, you didn't do that, you made me feel X, you made me do Y*), you not only put the other person on the defensive, but also position yourself as a victim. In other words, this discharge of anger might make you feel powerful for a short period of time, but actually puts you in a position of complete powerlessness. So instead of pointing the finger to make the other person automatically feel blamed, take responsibility for what *you* may have contributed to the problem.

5. Slow way down.

Allow the person time to respond without interrupting or defending yourself. Give them the benefit of the doubt and stand in the possibility of being wrong so that you can at least hear their side of the "story." One thing I can almost guarantee is that you'll find their version of events to be a whole lot different from yours.

6. Build in break signals.

Be aware of your emotional triggers and before even starting the conversation, make a pact that if things get too heated or emotional, taking a break is totally okay. It's a good idea to agree in advance on a time-out signal as well as on the length of the break. When you start feeling frustrated, call a time-out, but make sure to let the other person know when you'll be coming back.

7. Validate the other person's point of view.

You may not agree with what they are saying, but before launching your defense (or your attack), validate what they said in some way. This does not mean that you have to agree with them. You can simply say, "I didn't realize you felt that way" or "I hear what you're saying". Don't follow that sentence up with the word "but", "however" or any variation of these words as they negate everything that precedes them. Instead, acknowledge what they are saying and show them that you are actually trying to understand their point of view.

8. Do not try to characterize the other person's identity.

For example, if you start by saying that the other person is "a liar and a cheater," you are basically attacking their entire identity. Even if the person did cheat or lie, you need to keep the conversation localized in order to avoid escalating the conflict beyond its particulars. So rather than attacking the person's *identity*, keep the conversation about their *behavior*. For example, "When you lied to me on Monday about where you were..." The former questions who you *are*, whereas the latter questions what you *did*. You can change behavior, but you can't change who you are.

9. Ditch your expectations at the doorway.

Tough conversations are an exercise in mindfulness. While you can and should go into the conversation with a clear intention, make sure to loosen your grip on strict expectations. Expectations can perform more like premeditated resentments, setting you up for disappointment. Do yourself a favor and enter the conversation with an open mind.

10. No alcohol or drugs.

Do not, and I repeat, *do not* go into a tough conversation while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Although drugs and alcohol may seem like the perfect solution to help you relax for that tough conversation, it will exponentially decrease the likelihood of a favourable outcome.

11. Practice.

Especially if there is a lot at stake, you may want to have a role-play practice conversation with a trusted friend before going in for the real conversation. Take a few minutes to play out the worst-case scenario and then the best-case scenario. The purpose is to mentally prepare and also to get feedback on things like tone, language choices and so on.

12. Evaluate yourself.

When the conversation is over, look at the intention you wrote on paper, and on a scale of one to ten, rate how well you stuck to your intention. This will help you going forward: good communication is a *practice*.

You may be good at day-to-day communication, but communicating difficult emotions is a whole other skill set, one that takes practice to master! Start here and you'll be well on your way.

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