

Learning Conversation Stems

The following phrases and questions can help you to effectively engage in courageous conversations. Make them your own and think about what you might add to this list. Practice is the key!

In order for this to work it's important that you are open to understanding how your words or actions impacted the other person and that you...

- 1. Try and connect with the other person's feelings and needs.*
- 2. Show you are sincerely interested in him/her. Not using a technique.*
- 3. Focus on contributing to their well being. Try and see the beauty in them.*
- 4. Meet them where they're at.*
- 5. Focus on impact vs. intent.*
- 6. Empathize don't sympathize.*
- 7. Stay with it.*

Adapted from Dr. Marshall Rosenberg

The Person who offended

1. What impact have my actions had on you?
2. It seems like you might be having an emotional reaction to what I just said, and I'm wondering if you would be willing to engage me in conversation around it.
3. How did what I just said impact you? I notice you seem upset.
4. Can you say a little more about why you're so frustrated with me?
5. Were you reacting to something I did or said?
6. What was it that I said that caused your reaction?
7. Will you let me/us in on your thoughts?
8. I'm trying to understand these issues better. Can you say more about....?
9. I'm trying my best to grasp what you're saying but it's difficult for me given how new I am to these conversations, could you give another example of what you mean by...
10. I'm nervous having this conversation because I worry what you will think of me, but I will do my best to stay in it. Are you saying that...?
11. Let me see if I'm hearing you right, you're saying that...
12. I'm truly sorry for having offended you. I had no idea that my words had those subtle implications. Have I ever said anything like that before that has offended you?
13. I'm trying to listen for understanding but I'm struggling to fully understand how... Would you say more about that?
14. Can I start over?
15. Thank you for taking the risk to share how my words impacted you, is there something else I should be aware of?
16. I'm hearing that when I said... I revealed an unconscious stereotype about... Thank you for taking the risk to share that with me. I didn't know the impact of my words. I'm sorry...
17. _____

If you are the target of a microaggression and at first attacked or avoided the conversation and now want to engage, it's important you...

- 1. Work not to keep the enemy image. Don't insult or educate.*
- 2. Try and connect with the other person.*
- 3. What are the needs of the other person? Why did they say or do what they did?*
- 4. Don't punish, shame, blame or guilt them into understanding.*
- 5. Meet them where they are at.*
- 6. Move beyond a place of rightness and wrongness.*
- 7. Give them some grace to make mistakes.*

Adapted from Dr. Marshall Rosenberg

The person who was offended

1. Would you be open to hearing how I experienced what you said?
2. Would you be open to hearing how I heard it?
3. I would like to tell you how your words impacted me but I'm worried you'll become defensive. When you said... I felt...
4. I'm having an emotional reaction to what you just said and I'm wondering if you would be willing to engage in conversation about it.
5. What would it mean to you if that (racism, power, privilege, oppression) is still happening?
6. What are some of your thoughts about what is going on with...? (Describe something having to do with racism, power, privilege)
7. It would help me understand if you could share an example of...
8. Help me to better understand why you feel that way. Can you be more specific about how you came to believe...?
9. I want to better understand your perspective. Would you give me an example of when your whiteness (for example) worked against you?
10. I'm hearing that your intent was... I can appreciate your good intentions, and I'm also wondering if you would be open to hearing what I heard when you said...
11. _____
12. _____

Note: When engaging, acknowledge what the person has said in a way that shows you understand. Ask questions that help the person think about how his or her experiences have influenced the way he or she sees the world. It is important to keep these norms in the center of the conversation: Listen for understanding, expect and accept non-closure, speak your truth, stay engaged, experience discomfort, take risks, and no fixing.

It's important that we all...

- 1. Get good at asking questions.*
- 2. Give one another a chance to learn from our mistakes.*
- 3. Know that the other person's perspective is their reality.*
- 4. Avoid the posture that suggests all of our perspectives are 100% right.*
- 5. Are open to learning.*
- 6. Talk about our emotions in a way that helps the other understand them.*
- 7. Realize that we all have prejudice and bias.*
- 8. Practice becoming skilled at communicating effectively.*

Both

1. Shift from, "I understand," to "Can you help me understand . . .?"
2. Tell me more . . .
3. Can you say a little more about how you see things?
4. What information might you have that I don't?
5. How do you see it differently?
6. How are you feeling about all of this?
7. Say more about why this is important to you?
8. I'm wondering if it's possible to . . .
9. I'm wondering if it would make sense . . .
10. I need you to help me understand where you are coming from on this.
11. I'm wondering whether we could talk about how we each reacted to that conversation and whether there's a better way we could address these issues.
12. What do you mean when you say...?
13. I think I heard you say... (Paraphrase). Did I understand that correctly?
14. I'm feeling (anxious, concerned, etc) about having this conversation and how we're going to work together in the future. I'm also hopeful that we can trust each other enough to have difficult conversations. How are you feeling?
15. I know there are power dynamics in our relationship. How do you think that is or will influence our conversation?
16. I'm wondering whether we could talk about how we each reacted to that conversation and whether there's a better way we could address these issues.
17. I'm hoping we can have a "courageous conversation" about what happened earlier because... (Name what's important about your relationship with that person).
18. What's going on for you right now?
19. I noticed (name non-verbal communication that occurred) when... I said/asked.... Can we talk about what was going on for you in that moment?
20. _____

Pathways to a Connected Conversation

Explore where each story comes from

“My reactions here probably have a lot to do with my previous experiences. . . .”

“I’ve had some really bad experiences before trying to have these conversations and so it’s difficult for me to...”

Share the impact on you

“I don’t know whether you intended this, but I felt extremely uncomfortable when . . .”

“I know you didn’t mean it this way but when you said... it made me think/feel...”

Take responsibility for your contribution

“There are a number of things I’ve done that have made this situation harder. . . .”

“I’m not sure how, but I feel like I may have disrespected you in some way. I feel the tension between us; can we talk about it? I’m trying to become more consciously competent.”

Describe feelings

“I’m anxious about bringing this up, but it’s important to me that we talk about it.”

“I’m not sure why, but I’m feeling uncomfortable right now with what was just said, can we stop for a minute and talk about it?”

“When you said... I instantly felt angry because it sounded like you were saying...”

Reflect on the identity issues

“I think the reason this subject hooks me is that I don’t like thinking of myself as someone who. . . .”

“It’s hard for me to hear that what I’m saying is racist. I have always thought of myself as...”

Name the elephant in the room

“I’m wondering how you feel about having a White (therapist, teacher, etc) explore this issue with you. I imagine that if I was in your shoes I would be concerned about whether or not someone like me would understand your experiences.”

Build a Platform

- 1) When calling someone’s unconscious bias to their attention they are likely to get defensive which is often rooted in deep identity issues. Tell them how you see them as (e.g., caring, thoughtful, kind, open to learning, etc) so you are not saying they are a bad person as a result of them offending you.
- 2) Tell them why you decided to talk with them (concern for your child, you value your relationship, not wanting it to fester, your knowledge i.e., the impact on children).
- 3) Share a time when you have done something similar so they see you are not shaming or blaming them but see yourself as a learner too.
- 4) Talk about what they did or said.
- 5) Circle back at the end of the conversation and share how it was for you and ask how it was for them. “This was tough from me to bring this up with you but I’m glad we talked about it. I don’t want to start off on a bad note.” Ask where they are at with this conversation, “How are you feeling?”

To make the structure of a difficult conversation visible, we need to understand not only what is said, but also what is not said. We need to understand what the people involved are thinking and feeling but not saying to each other.

In a difficult conversation, this is usually where the real action is.

☞ Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton & Sheila Heen in *Difficult Conversations*

Adapted from Stone, D., et. al. (1999). *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*.