

How to Have a Hard Conversation Softly

What do you do when you are responding/reacting strongly to someone's words or behavior?

Whether or not the intent was negative, whether the other person is a family member, friend, relationship or colleague, when there's conflict, we can feel:

Annoyed, insulted, disappointed, hurt, angry, uncertain, frustrated, sad, scared, confused.

And it's normal to have to speak up for yourself. But sometimes it's hard to know what to say and how to say it. How is it possible to speak up for yourself and stay fair and engaged? How can conflict actually help you, the other person, and even the relationship?

When it comes to conflict, most of our first lessons came in our families of origin. What did you grow up believing about conflict? How did conflict actually happen in your family?

Did people blow up? get quiet? leave the room? blame someone else? raise their voices? throw things and hit people? argue their points reasonably? use drugs/alcohol? cry? gossip? stop and listen? describe their own experience in the conflict? did one person operate as the peacemaker? cite their sources?

There are many possibilities--some work better than others. I have three goals for any "good" conflict/confrontation:

1. To be clear about your own response/reactions, values, emotions, desires, etc. in a situation and
2. to listen for clarity, to empathize about what's going on with the other person.
3. Repeat.

In conflict, there can be both **clarity** and **kindness**. Here's a way to think about breaking it down when your blood pressure is up:

Behaviors

What specific behaviors/events brought up your strong reaction to the other person? For example:

"**When you** raise your voice . . ."

"**When you** didn't show up for our meeting . . ."

"**When you** roll your eyes and look away . . ."

Responses

What are yours? Check in with your own mind, heart, gut (people respond/react strongly from all three). What are you feeling? What is this like for you? For example:

. . . **I get** scared . . .

. . . **I wonder if** you want to work on this project . . .

. . . **I feel** annoyed . . .

Acknowledge

“Own” your part in what’s going on. For example:

“ . . . **I know that sometimes I can stop listening** when people raise their voices.”

Imagine

Imagine out loud what might have been going on with the other person. For example:

“ . . . **I imagine you’ve been frustrated** with how long it’s taken to get this project off the ground.”

Next time

Discuss specific ideas about what might work better in the future. For example:

“**As we continue to work together**, it would help me if next time you/we could . . .”

Outcomes

What might happen if we are able to handle our conflicts in this new way?

What might happen if things stay the same? For example:

“ . . . **because if we can**, I know I could do a better job.”

“ . . . **because if we can’t**, I think my frustration will grow.”

(Maybe you’ve noticed that the acronym for this process spells BRAINO. A goofy word, but hey. If it will help you to be both more clear and more kind in the face of conflict, it’s all yours!)