

Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

We all have to have difficult conversations sometimes – with friends, family and at work. We might not want to, and we might try and avoid them, however eventually they tend to happen. When we put them off, they can sometimes bubble up unexpectedly and go very badly. This happens for a number of reasons, for example, we might have overthought the conversation, we might have too many expectations for the conversation or too many emotions attached to it.

The next time you are facing a difficult conversation, take ownership of it. Use the following exercises to prepare yourself.

Preparing the Content

1. Check your mindset

If you have already labelled the conversation as difficult, you are likely to have some negative feelings attached to it. This will increase your levels of stress and anxiety. Try and reframe the conversation in a more positive way. Think about what you, and others, have to gain or learn from the conversation. It might be a tricky conversation that needs careful thought and preparation, but it doesn't need to be 'difficult'.

Describe your current mindset regarding your upcoming 'tricky' conversation:

Reflect on what you and others stand to gain from this conversation and how it can be constructive and useful if managed well:

2. Challenge Your Assumptions

One of the reasons you might be thinking that your upcoming conversation is going to be difficult is because you have some potentially incorrect assumptions about how the other person is going to react. Try and identify these and replace them with more liberating ones instead. Take a positive view as you do this i.e. believe that people are on the whole well intentioned and kind.

What are you assuming about the other person's intentions or reactions?

What else could you assume that is more benefitting instead?

3. Get Clear On Purpose

Using the above, write your purpose for the conversation. It could be about what you want to accomplish or the outcome you want to get to.

4. Structure the Conversation

Now plan a light structure for the conversation. Allow for flexibility in the dialogue you will have. Think about what you have noticed or the facts that you have, how you will explain that it matters, and how you will show curiosity to the other person perspective. You might also want to think about any insights or actions you have that might help.

5. Nail the Beginning

The practical block for a lot of people when faced with a difficult conversation is how to begin the conversation.

Write some possible openings for your conversation here:

Preparing Yourself

Tricky conversations bring about emotions and feelings in us that, if unchecked, may manifest themselves in an unhelpful way. No matter how well the conversation begins, you'll need to stay in charge of yourself, your purpose and your emotional energy. Preparing yourself mentally so you stay calm and centered in the conversation is where your power lies.

Try all or some of the following before and during your conversation to stay centered and calm:

1. Find somewhere quiet and repeat the outcome and positive mindset you have prepared to yourself a few times.
2. Take note and control of your breathing.
3. Ground yourself – literally! Place both your feet firmly on the ground and pay attention to any sensations in your feet, especially the soles of your feet. Do this for 30 seconds to take your awareness away from your mind and to center yourself.
4. Move - Mindful walking is often used to calm the mind. Try to sync your breathing with each step, for example, a two-count for each small stride. Try this for a minute or two. If it feels good, do it for longer. If possible, walk outside.