

Rules for Difficult Conversations

(From my book, *Couple Therapy in Practice*)

Overall mantra: “Be calm, curious, humble, and helpful.”

Rules *before* beginning

1. Remind yourself of your ultimate goals and separate them from your reflex-driven impulses.
2. Remind yourself that there is "dirty fighting" and "fair fighting" and that the former may feel good in the short run, but will backfire in the long-run.
3. Visualize the negative consequences of giving in to the desire to “fight dirty,” and then visualize the positive consequences of resisting that urge.
4. Be aware of your hot buttons, and if they are really the issue, try to clarify them to yourself before you begin.
5. Do not expect easy or rapid results. Expect and plan for the likelihood that your partner will not see things as you do and may behave in ways that aggravate you.

Rules for the listener

1. Try hard to put yourself in your partner’s shoes.
2. Don’t interrupt.
3. Hold your problem solving.
4. If you feel like objecting or rebutting or find yourself just waiting your turn to do so, don’t; instead think of yourself as a news reporter.
5. If you think your partner has the facts wrong, it is usually preferable to let his or her version of the story stand and remain curious about why the facts have been misrepresented—for instance, to express the intensity of hurt feelings.
6. Don’t cross-examine.

7. If your partner's position seems overly harsh, unfair, or irrational, assume that upsetting underlying issues have been activated, and try to discover what they are.
8. Don't be fooled or put off by an intense argument over seemingly trivial matters; instead use this apparent triviality to point you to important concerns which almost certainly explain the intensity.
9. Keep in mind that there is almost always truth on both sides of any heated argument; try hard to learn the truth on the other side.
10. If you don't understand something important, ask for clarification.
11. Check out your understanding from time to time by paraphrasing what you've heard.
12. After you get a more complete sense of your partner's account, try summarizing his or her experience including your partner's stated explanation for their distress.
13. When paraphrasing, begin by stating the main feeling that is preoccupying your partner.
14. When paraphrasing, be sure to maintain eye contact and watch your partner's body language; that will be your guide about whether you are on target or not.
15. If you agree with certain potentially disputed or painful facts, say so without delay.
16. If you are in partial agreement with what your partner has said, try to build on it rather than merely emphasizing its flaws; when commenting, use "and" rather than "but."
17. When you are not in agreement with your partner, do not skip the step of saying that you have received the message about what is bothering him or her.
18. Answer your partner's invisible questions: "Are my feelings OK?" "Do you understand them?" "Do you care about them?" and "Do you care about me?"
19. Recast intense attacks on you as attacks on the problem, and restate what you have come to see as that problem as seen by your partner.

20. If you find yourself struggling to follow the listening rules because of difficult emotions, try to identify, manage, and make use of your feelings.

Rules for opening difficult conversations

1. Decide whether you really need to talk; ask yourself if changing something in your own behavior would improve things substantially.
2. Plan.
3. Do not put off talking for too long.
4. Get permission to talk and ask if you have chosen a good time to do so.
5. If you expect an extended conversation, set an upper limit to how long you will talk.
6. Don't ease in.
7. For brief requests for change, use a "criticism sandwich": Begin with a compliment, insert what you would like done differently, and end with a compliment.
8. For somewhat more detailed, but still relatively brief requests for specific changes use Real's feedback formula.
 - a. Say what you saw or heard (describe what a video camera would have recorded);
 - b. Say what you "made up" about this (how you construed your observations);
 - c. Say how you then felt (the feelings that followed from your observations and construal);
 - d. Say what you want to happen next; what your partner can do differently in the future.
9. When giving feedback—with or without a specific formula for speaking—stress that you are open to persuasion ("Correct me if I'm wrong...") and that you are taking responsibility for your own feelings about what you thought happened ("what I made of it.")

10. For most difficult conversations—ones you know will deal with more extensive, emotionally-challenging subjects and areas of disagreement—begin by narrating “the third story.” The “first story” is your story, the “second” that of your partner, and the “third story” is the situation as you imagine it from the perspective of a neutral mediator.
11. Emphasize that your first goal is to have a “learning conversation.”
12. Emphasize that your subsequent goal is joint problem solving.
13. Be clear that your relationship is important to you.
14. Should your own “story” regarding your partner be very negative, ask for help to understand him or her in a less negative light.

Rules for continuing difficult conversations

1. Rather than merely examining the “facts”—about which you may well disagree—try to discover where your divergent stories come from. Be curious.
2. Ask how your partner sees things differently, and why.
3. Don’t mind-read.
4. Be skeptical and curious about your own story.
5. Take responsibility for your contributions, and do this sooner than later.
6. Don’t present your conclusions as truth.
7. Share where your conclusions came from and don’t conceal your feelings.
8. Abandon blame: map the contribution system.
9. Avoid certain language choices:
 - Don’t use hyperbole: “You always...” or “You never...” even if it feels accurate. “You often . . .” is less inflammatory.
 - Don’t use one-sided arguments, ones that leave out obvious truths.

- Don't swear or attack the other person's character.
 - Don't argue that others agree with you; some won't.
 - Don't argue that others do it your way; some won't.
 - Don't argue that you should be forgiven or the topic dropped because your partner is also guilty of something similar or equally bad; "two wrongs don't make a right."
 - Don't argue from, "Look what else I've done for you, you should do this for me!"; that may not have been part of the bargain.
 - Don't argue from, "I do it for you."; your circumstances may differ.
 - Don't argue from, "If you really loved me, you would..."; this can be countered with, "If you really loved me, you wouldn't ask me to . . ."
 - Don't argue from absolutes or "shoulds"; almost always there is a countervailing principle.
10. Personalize your requests, rather than cloaking them in appeals to virtue or logic.
 11. Criticize actions, not the other person's character. "Be hard on the problem, soft on the person."
 12. When requesting a change, state clearly what you want the other to do the next time the situation arises.
 13. Convey respect and appreciation; recognize your partner's status, expertise and contributions.
 14. Stay on topic.
 15. Be concise.
 16. Ignore, distracting inflammatory comments.
 17. Ask your partner to paraphrase back what you've said so that you both know whether you have been understood.

18. Ask your partner for help, and offer encouragement when they do so.
19. Monitor your couple process, and discuss it when relevant.
20. If you think your partner's core negative image (CNI) has become activated, work to dispel this feared expectation.
21. Use humor and other repair maneuvers to soften the process.
22. Should the conversation not be going well, return to fundamentals, and try the options below in the order they are listed:
 - (1) Work still harder at empathy and agreement; unilaterally, take the role of empathic listener and follow the advice for the optimal listener.
 - (2) Work harder at understanding what is most upsetting you, and if you figure this out, share your thoughts with your partner.
 - (3) Work to soothe yourself, and, should this fail, propose a timeout.
30. Should the conversation end without a satisfactory resolution, wait a while, and then try again.