

Right Speech In Difficult Conversations

The Buddha's Five Keys to Right Speech

"It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken kindly. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will." — AN 5.198

How to Navigate Difficult Conversations

- Oren Sofer

We can't avoid difficult conversations altogether, but we can navigate them more adeptly by learning to listen and communicate mindfully.

The difference between ordinary conversations and challenging ones is a bit like the difference between canoeing on open water and running rapids. Both involve paddling with balance, but the stakes are much higher and the skills more demanding in white water. Think of a terrible argument you had with someone or a time when you tangled with a coworker. Intense emotions, personal blind spots, and mistaken assumptions can make high-stakes conversations unproductive and even explosive. The boat capsizes, your gear gets soaked, and you wash up on shore somewhere downstream.

Like any journey where risk is involved, knowing how to handle yourself when conversation gets complicated is key. Preparing ahead of time helps clarify what's important, reduces reactivity, and increases the likelihood that we will be able to engage in a way that is in line with our intentions. Paramount to this is our internal preparation:

1. Nourishing yourself before a difficult conversation can help you feel clear, balanced, and well resourced.

This means getting some empathy for any pain, anger, or upset you may feel. Empathy can reduce reactivity and create more space to hear the other person. Find someone you trust, and ask them to listen to what you want to say, and reflect back what they hear. This could be a friend you feel comfortable enough with to help you discern your core needs.

You can also use mindfulness to help sort through your feelings to get at what matters most to you in the situation. Thinking about what you want to say, gently bring awareness to any emotion you feel, asking yourself, "What matters about this to me?" Then, "If I had that, what would I have?"

2. Investigating what's at stake helps us recognize the most important aspects of a complicated or intense situation and can inform our choices about how to proceed.

What do you want from the conversation? Understanding? Resolution? Are you entering with a range of ideas that might work for both people? What specific requests can you make to move forward? Pay attention to any blame or judgments that you hold.

Try to discern what parts of the conversation for you are logistical and which parts are relational. For example, is your upset about the addition to your already full to-do list, or do you feel frustrated that the person hasn't clearly communicated with you or doesn't seem to respect your time?

Finally, consider if your goals are realistic. Do you have the capacity to have the conversation in the way you'd like? Does the other person? Is this the right time to have the conversation or even the right person with whom to talk? Are you asking someone to resolve something that they don't have the power to do?

3. Humanizing the other person requires the humility and empathy to step outside of your own story and consider other perspectives.

If you can put yourself in their shoes and imagine, even for a moment, what might be going on for them, it can have a profound effect on the conversation. Whatever the situation, however confusing or harmful another's actions, there is some internal logic behind their choices. Decide how you want to show up in this conversation and focus on that, rather than on proving a point or being right.

Sometimes our best attempts at preparing for a difficult conversation aren't enough. We get triggered, the other person gets angry, and we realize we're headed straight

for the rocks. This is when the time you spent running drills—honing your mindfulness muscle—comes in. Tuning in to your body, recognizing your own signs of upset, and skillfully riding the waves of activation can help guide you back toward calmer waters.

Redirecting the River

Conflict can send a cascade of physio-logical effects through our body. Our breathing changes, stress hormones release, and, if we lack skills to meet this swell of energy, our cognitive function alters.

Every time we respond by blowing up, running away, or shutting down, we retrace and strengthen the neural networks for that behavior, like floodwaters carving a riverbed into a hillside. Inundated with stimuli, our sympathetic system prompts us to react with aggression, fear, or confusion, and we fall back on one of the four learned conflict behaviors (avoidance, confrontation, passivity, and/or passive aggression).

With mindful presence and skill, we can shift these patterns by carving new conduits into the hillside of our mind and body, creating different streams for that energy to follow. Progress is incremental, but every drop we redirect deepens the new riverbed, attracting more and more water to change the course of the river of consciousness.

In tough situations, the main thing to be mindful of is our nervous system. You can do this by recognizing when you're getting worked up, using mindfulness to help navigate the situation, and actively seeking out moments to pause in order to help integrate information and bring the emotion down a notch.

Recognize Activation

Under ordinary circumstances, our body and mind naturally ebb and flow through activation and deactivation, arousal and settling, like waves rocking a boat. Breathing itself follows this rhythm. The elasticity of our nervous system, its resilience, is our ability to navigate this cycle with ease, tolerating the stress of sympathetic arousal, allowing the settling of parasympathetic deactivation, and returning to a baseline state of "oriented awareness," when you feel relaxed but alert.

During interpersonal conflicts, the sympathetic arousal can snowball. Danger signals get amplified, and—to use a very precise, technical term—we lose it. Our ability to access higher cognitive function in the prefrontal cortex declines and we're along for the ride, like losing our paddle in white water and we get carried along with the

churning, wild, and unpredictable rocks and river currents.

If the level of stimulation exceeds our capacity to respond, we freeze. We shut down, withdraw into ourselves, or zone out, effectively ending any attempt to create understanding.

Ride the Waves

Feeling activated is completely natural. Mindfulness doesn't aim to suppress activation or achieve some imaginary neutral state. The goal is to become aware and adept at riding life's waves.

We each already know something about how to ride the waves and handle activation without reacting impulsively. Ever felt the inner agitation of wanting to say something but needing to wait for the right moment to interject? Anytime you relate to that internal pressure wisely—taking a breath, shifting your weight, making a mental note—you're handling the activation. Doing this for even a split second can yield more choice about what to say and when.

Your ability to ride a wave of activation depends on your capacity to tolerate discomfort. In contemplative practice, every time you observe an itch, a knee or back pain, without immediately jerking, you are developing the inner balance to respond rather than react. If the wave is too big, step back, feel the energy in your body, and allow it to dissipate.

The paired practices of pausing and grounding are especially helpful in difficult conversations. Pausing—anything from a micropause to a full breath to a break in the conversation—creates the space to recognize activation. Then, grounding in the body (see practice below) provides an anchor to steady your attention instead of losing your center. Whenever possible, do your best to take things slowly so your system can adjust.

Settle Downstream (aka support deactivation)

Just as we learn to recognize and attend to the arousal, we can also train ourselves to notice any calming. This can occur at many points, during and after a conversation. If we're skilled, we're sensing it all along, continually enhancing these naturally occurring intervals in our nervous system.

Deactivation occurs both literally and figuratively as an outbreath. Any shift in the state of our nervous system is reflected in the breath's pace, depth, duration, or rhythm. We exhale. Muscle tension

releases, our jaw slackens, our shoulders relax, our gaze softens, our breathing slows or deepens.

When we give mindful awareness to a feeling of ease or relaxation, it amplifies like a bell ringing, like the stroke of a bow resonating through the body of a cello. Taking small moments to feel the soothing quality of this deactivation nourishes us and strengthens resilience, in conversation and in life. In conversations, find the transitional space between exchanges or phrases, pauses or breaks in the flow of dialogue. Notice any settling when you complete a cycle of communication. In difficult conversations, even the smallest amount of agreement, acknowledgment, goodwill, or concession can provide a raft in the flood of words and emotions. If those moments aren't apparent, seek them out. Shift your attention to any sound or the space itself, or use your creativity to insert a pause or take a break.

Shepherding a challenging dialogue to some resolution relies on our ability to find these moments. We can do this internally, with our own attention, drawing out small successes by naming and appreciating them.

As you practice with these stages—recognizing activation and riding the waves, noticing deactivation and allowing the churning waters to subside—you will learn to use them in other situations and in shorter periods of time. Simply notice what's happening: The seeing itself creates the possibility for shifting the pattern.

Over time, your body will begin to feel the potential for a new way of relating. You may experience a different order of being in tense situations, as new messages flow through your nervous system: *“Ah, maybe I don't need to defend, attack, or try to disappear.”*

In whitewater canoeing, building skill slowly is essential: Start small in class 1 rapids, taking time to learn. When the waters are dangerous or the rapids are beyond your skill level, pull ashore, unload the gear, and portage to safer waters.

The guidelines for difficult conversations are the same: Slowly your capacity to deal with more difficult situations will grow. You can learn to trust your ability to hear someone else without losing yourself and to have a voice without trying to control or overpower another.

And if you find yourself headed for conversational rapids? You'll also have gained the wisdom to know when your best option might be to steer your boat safely to shore, for now.
