Understanding difficult conversations

A practical guide to communicating your needs, preparing at your own pace and finding a way to begin.

Why can conversations feel difficult?

Important conversations can bring uncertainty. You might worry about being misunderstood, have difficulty finding words, need extra processing time, or remember previous conversations that felt uncomfortable.

There is more than one way to communicate

Speaking, writing, using notes, asking for pauses or choosing another communication method are all valid.

Things that may make a conversation harder

- Not knowing how the other person might respond
- Trying to explain feelings or needs in the moment
- Sensory demands, interruptions or limited time
- Fear of conflict, dismissal or being misunderstood

Reflection: What makes certain conversations difficult for me?

You can think about the setting, the topic, your past experiences or how you communicate.

What do I want to communicate?

Organise your thoughts before you decide how, when or whether to begin the conversation.

The conversation I want to have

What would I like to discuss?

Why this matters to me

What has prompted this conversation?

What I would like the other person to understand

What is important for them to know?

What I hope might happen

What would a helpful outcome look like?

A helpful outcome might simply be starting a discussion or feeling heard. Agreement does not have to happen immediately.

Preparing for the conversation

Consider practical details and communication preferences that could make the conversation more accessible.

My preparation checklist

- [ ] Choose a time when I have enough space and energy.
- [ ] Consider a comfortable, private or quieter setting.
- [ ] Decide whether speaking, writing or messaging suits me.
- [ ] Bring notes, questions or a written summary if useful.
- [ ] Allow time to process and respond without rushing.
- [ ] Consider whether a trusted person or other support may help.

My preferred way to communicate

What method or format works best for me?

What would help me feel more comfortable

Think about time, location, breaks or support.

If the conversation becomes overwhelming

What could help me pause, take space or continue later?

Expressing needs and boundaries

Use these optional sentence starters as a guide, adapting them to your own words and circumstances.

Expressing a feeling

I've been feeling overwhelmed by...

Explaining a need

It would help me if...

Making a request

Could we consider...

Setting a boundary

I'm not comfortable with...

Requesting time

I'd like some time to think before responding.

Make it your own

Something I would like to express

A request I would like to make

A boundary I would like to communicate

You can communicate a boundary respectfully even when someone else does not agree with it.

My conversation plan

Use this page as a practical reference before or during a conversation. You can leave any section blank.

1. My opening sentence

How would I like to begin?

2. My three key points

What are the most important things I want to communicate?

1.

2.

3.

3. Questions I would like to ask

What do I need to understand or clarify?

4. If the conversation becomes difficult

How might I pause, redirect or end the discussion safely?

5. My preferred next step

What would I like to happen afterwards?

Reflecting and moving forward

You can revisit this page after a conversation, when you have had time to process the experience.

How did the conversation feel?

There is no right or wrong response.

What was I able to communicate?

What did I share or explain?

What went well or felt helpful?

Notice even small moments of progress.

Was anything difficult or unexpected?

What would I change or approach differently?

What support or follow-up might I need?

Is there another step, a pause or someone I could speak with?

You can communicate thoughtfully without being responsible for another person's reaction. Not every outcome is within your control.