

Managing/Navigating Difficult Conversations

For Sharsheret, January 2021; from Bill Saltzman, Ph.D. and Lisa Blum, Psy.D.

Plan Beforehand:

- Plan time and place (make space for it, privacy, enough time, protect from kids overhearing)
- Make a date to talk about it, with a headline so partner can prepare him/herself
- Allow the conversation to happen in installments; there's no benefit to doing it fast/all at once
- Plan what you want to say
 - Most important message (1-2 at most), stick to that
 - What might derail us, say that up front (agree to sidebar it)
- Plan what you need from this conversation: What you want to have happen by the end of the conversation (what is your main goal here? *E.g., share feelings, ask for support, make a concrete plan to handle something?*)
- Get yourself in the green zone to start and check if your partner is there, too

During the conversation:

- Start with what connects you; end on what connects you
- Say it directly; don't beat around the bush (raises anxiety)
- Use physical proximity and touch if appropriate
- Make eye contact; it helps to calm both of you
- If face-to-face is too intense, walk together if that's available (connects our brains to be in synchrony of walking even if no eye contact)
- If either of you goes into the red zone, stop. Calm, regulate. The conversation can always continue later
- If either of you goes into the yellow zone, pause. Call it out, discuss. Decide how to co-regulate to get back closer to the green. Take a short break as needed.
- Break up the conversation as needed; agree to continue at a later time, and set a date.
- Check for understanding: "Let's just make sure we're both on the same page. What did you understand about what I shared?" "Let me check to make sure I understand how you are feeling."

Afterwards:

- Check in later: "How are you doing?"
- Let yourself have some time, space to process your feelings (cry, sleep, call a friend, veg out). Don't demand more of yourself right away.
- Confirm if/when need next conversation and on what topic(s): "*OK, so we agree we'll talk again on Tuesday after speaking with the oncologist about treatment options?*"
- Ask for help (counselor, friend, trusted friend or clergy) if you keep trying to talk and it is not going well

Tips for Talking to Young Children

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These strategies are relevant for children of all ages, but need to be adjusted for the child's developmental level.

For a very young child, you would use very simple words (e.g., *a bump growing in mommy's breast that shouldn't be there, and the doctor needs to take it out.*)

For a middle age child or a teen, you can likely use more specific language (e.g., *a tumor, which is a collection of cells growing too fast, that the surgeon will remove*).

But whatever language you use, these are important guiderails to use for your conversation:

- Tell them the truth, simply and in a few words
- Say less, let them ask more
- Tell them what's going to happen *next* (one step at a time)
- Tell them *how they will be taken care of*
- Tell them how they can help/be a part of the caring response
- Invite questions, now or at any time (you or other designated caring adult)
- Tell them who else knows about this, so they can talk to those people

Speaker Listener Technique

Rules for the Speaker

- Speak for yourself, don't mindread
- Keep statements brief, don't go on and on
- Stop to let the listener paraphrase

Rules for the Listener

- Paraphrase what you hear
- Focus on the speaker's message. Don't rebut.

Rules for Both

- The speaker has the floor
- The speaker keeps the floor while the listener paraphrases
- Share the floor

Egg Timer Argument

For use when you are too upset to use the Speaker/Listener Technique

1. Set an egg timer for five minutes and allow the speaker to roll out their feelings however they come.
2. The Listener says nothing, emotes nothing, makes no frowns, no rolling of the eyeballs, no visible reaction.
3. When the egg timer rings, switch places and repeat.
4. Do this for as long as needed to settle down and start listening to each other.
5. When settled, use the Speaker/Listener technique to resolve your conflict.

Time Out

If your argument gets too angry or feels out of control, take a Time Out.

Establish a time that you will talk again and keep it.