

Communicating Through Conflict: 5 Keys to Remember



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Difficult conversations seem to be the order of the day. As more and more issues threaten to polarize our workforce, families and nation, we need to find ways to stay in working and living relationships with people with whom we may not ever agree. This is challenging but not impossible.

I can say that there is hope for communication through conflict because my husband and I have been doing it our entire married life. Yes, you heard that right. For the last 34 years we have been living under the same roof while being on the opposite ends of the political, cultural and in some ways, even religious spectrum -- and we are both still living to tell about it!

Here are the top five survival strategies that I have learned over the years that I have found to be key in maintaining a relationship with someone with whom you don't agree on nearly a gosh darn thing:

1) The Goal is not to change the other person's mind

I rarely enter into a conversation with the thought that I need or want to convince someone to "come over to my side." That is because when we enter into conversations "trying to win or win over", we are already doomed for failure. It immediately places the other person on the defensive as we hammer away with our good points and best arguments for change. In fact, the more we talk with this motive, the more likely the other person is to shut down and tune out.

I try to remember that I am not giving a "persuasive speech" but an informational one. In any form of communication, the more effective goal is to achieve greater clarity or understanding for myself and the other person. It is easier to be dispassionate and factual when your goal is to provide information instead of persuade someone to see things your way. People need time to process and think, and rarely change their minds through one conversation. A "teaching moment" is often much better received than a "telling them how they should think or act" moment. (This works better with kids, too.)

2) The Purpose is to connect, not to control

Words are powerful and skillful communication is important for our success and even our survival. How we use our words, and why we are communicating them can have a significant impact on others. Therefore, we need to conscientiously use communication to connect with others and steer clear of entering into conversations, especially difficult ones, with the idea that we need to control them.

People instinctively know when they are being controlled or manipulated. That is why it is so important that we say what we mean, and mean what we say. Threats, passive-aggression, deliberately being evasive, blaming, gas lighting and name calling are all tactics of control and manipulative speech that lead to less intimacy and disconnection.

This takes a degree of self-awareness and restraint because we all know how to manipulate others (especially those closest to us) with our words, and we can do it very subtly with great success (especially with children). But if our goal is greater connection through our communication (instead of alienation) - then we must pursue and practice honesty, vulnerability and humility in our speech to ensure that we are on the path to greater trust with the other person, even though we may still disagree.

3) Listening is a form of respect

We all want to be respected. A relationship that is built on a foundation of respect is likely to withstand great adversity. For many, respect is even more important than love because love cannot grow and mature without respect. Therefore, no matter how difficult it is to listen to what we believe is completely wrong, preposterous or distorted, we communicate great respect when we give someone our full attention, without interrupting.

This very act of listening can be healing and transformative for any difficult relationship. Sometimes, it is all that is necessary. Sometimes our verbal response is not needed. We can simply say at the end:

"I am glad that you shared that with me. I am going to take some time to ponder it now." Or "Thanks for trusting me with that- I can tell it is important to you."

4) Complete Agreement or Understanding are not required

Obviously I love my husband and I married him knowing that he was wrong about a lot of things (LOL) but it has never been my goal to change him (as in the first point). It has never been required that I completely understand where he is coming from

and likewise, I don't need him to totally understand or agree with me in order to feel okay or loved by him. These are unrealistic expectations, yet seemingly, more and more people expect this total agreement to feel validated, affirmed or acceptable. When it doesn't happen, they disconnect and break off important relationships because of a demand for total agreement. This is sad and destructive.

I am not a big fan of the "finding common ground" approach either. Sometimes, that is unrealistic, as well, and not even desirable. However, you can affirm someone without totally agreeing with him or her. I often find myself saying to my husband, and others with all sincerity:

"Now I understand better how or why you came to that conclusion..."

"That is a different way of seeing it and I appreciate knowing that"

"You've given me something to think about..."

"There is a lot of what you said that is worth my consideration."

5) Basic Etiquette and Politeness count

It's easy to forget our manners when we passionately disagree with someone (especially a spouse) but following basic rules of decorum, which means 'behavior in good taste and propriety', makes for good communication and a pretty great marriage, I might add. Politeness ensures good boundaries, and "free speech" doesn't preclude them. In fact, boundaries are necessary for real communication to occur. Truthfulness, goodwill (aka. charity), and self-control are the cornerstones of communication through any conflict.

"Please" - "Thank you" - "You are welcome" - "I apologize" - "Forgive me"

"May I interject?" - "Would you be so kind?" - "Please do me the honor..."

Let's ditch the sarcasm and slang and not make these phrases obsolete.

In conclusion, let me leave you with just a few more thoughts to improve your communication in general:

1) Whenever possible talk in person with all electronics and devices off.

2) Be aware of your countenance (you ladies know what I mean here! Watch those eyebrows, scowls and eye rolls)

3) Tone of voice matters a ton.

4) Always put the conversation in context and perspective

Are you going to remember this conversation in 20 or 30 years- is it going to matter? Chances are the answer is no. Yet, with these tips and strategies, hopefully the relationship, like mine, will still be going strong!