CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN
CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH

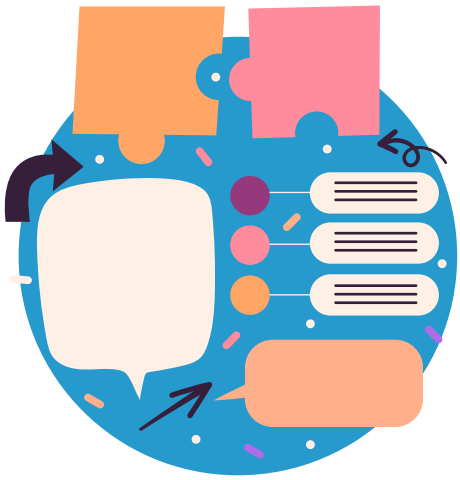
REFERENCES

How to Have Curious and Courageous Conversations

This infosheet aims to support individuals across campuses in learning how to approach and navigate high-stakes conversations in a way that reduces the negative impact on their mental health and advances trust in the relationship.

The Importance of Communication

Communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the foundation of all human interaction. It is essential for building connection and fostering safety. In fact, non-verbal communication often carries more weight than words and can influence the tone and direction of a conversation, even closing it down. Being mindful of body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and the environment in which a conversation takes place helps set the stage for more open and effective dialogue.



While many conversations are positive and straightforward, others can become challenging due to the topic, mismatched goals, individual differences, or external circumstances.[1] The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a significant rise in online communication, and in time of ongoing uncertainty (such as, climate change, political polarization, and international conflicts), meaningful dialogue has become more crucial than ever.[2] Curious and courageous conversations allow us to address problems (such as, misunderstandings, poor performance, unmet expectations, or interpersonal conflicts) and maintain relationships.[3]

Challenges and Consequences of Avoiding Conversations

The absence of such conversations can have serious consequences for individual wellbeing.[4] For instance, in healthcare, research has shown that failure to speak up can lead to medical errors and endanger patient safety.[5]

In a post-secondary environment, tough conversations are an important part of daily life, whether with friends, peers, family, colleagues, staff, or faculty. Sometimes difficult conversations can arise, especially when there is a need to address conflict, give feedback, or discuss sensitive topics. These conversations can be anxiety-inducing. Despite this, open and honest communication plays a role in fostering positive attitudes, lowering stigma, and encouraging students to engage in vulnerability.[6] Such communication practices are not only crucial in building trust and demonstrating empathy but also in supporting mental health.[6]

Conflict is not a sign of failure; it is a normal and natural part of human interaction. Handling conflict with care and courage is a skill that can be developed and can lead to understanding, collaboration, and growth.[7]

Mazzone et al.[8] state that in post-secondary environments, staff often remain silent on workplace issues (such as bullying, harassment, conflict, etc.) due to the perception that the workplace is not sufficiently safe for raising concerns. A 2017 Bravely study[9] found that 70% of employees avoid tough conversations with their bosses, colleagues, or direct reports, particularly around topics about performance, growth, interpersonal relationships, and company culture. Similarly, the inability to have difficult conversations with team members has been identified as the biggest challenge faced by managers.[10] Both employers and employees are often placed in situations where they do not know how to navigate these conversations.

Creating a Psychologically Safe Campus

When students, staff, and faculty learn or work in a less safe environment, it creates a culture of anxiety and fear which inhibits learning and collaboration.[11] This environment can lead to strained relationships, decreased productivity, stress, burnout, disengagement, unresolved issues, and emotional exhaustion.[12] All of these can negatively impact success and morale on campus. Psychological safety, the feeling that one can show up authentically and take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career, is essential for countering these effects.[13] Research by Soares and Lopes[13] demonstrates that instructors who practice authentic leadership and create a psychologically safer environment positively impact academic performance.

Barriers to Holding Curious and Courageous Conversations:

Personal Barriers[14]:

- Fear of emotion, conflict, or saying the wrong thing
- Lack of skills in managing difficult conversations
- Different opinions or perspectives
- Fear of offending the other person, retribution, losing friends, losing position, or academic jeopardy
- Lack of confidence and thinking that one's own perspective is less valid
- Past experiences of racial, identity, ableism and other forms of bias and discrimination

Organizational Barriers[15]:

- Restricted information channels
- Lack of feedback or support
- Culture of not asking questions
- Too much formality in communication
- Hierarchical structure
- Power dynamics

Key Tips to Keep in Mind When Having Curious and Courageous Conversations[2,7]:

- Understand the difference between disagreement and conflict. Both disagreement and conflict arise can be seen to represent a continuum when opinions differ. Emotions and stakes are lower in disagreements and much higher in conflicts. Recognizing this continuum can help you respond more effectively and keep conversations constructive.
- Approach conversations with curiosity and see challenging dialogues as a learning opportunity.
- Don't avoid feelings; they are often at the heart of disagreements. Avoiding feelings might look like changing the subject or minimizing emotions. Embracing feelings means acknowledging emotions with openness and empathy.
- Focus on what you can do and engage in self-awareness by paying attention to your role, managing your responses, triggers, biases, and regulating your behaviour and emotions.
- Prioritize the relationship over being right.
- You know part of the story, not the whole story. Be curious about exploring what you don't know.
- Listen to understand the other person's perspective, not just to respond.

A Step-By-Step Guide To Prepare, Engage, and Follow Up Effectively

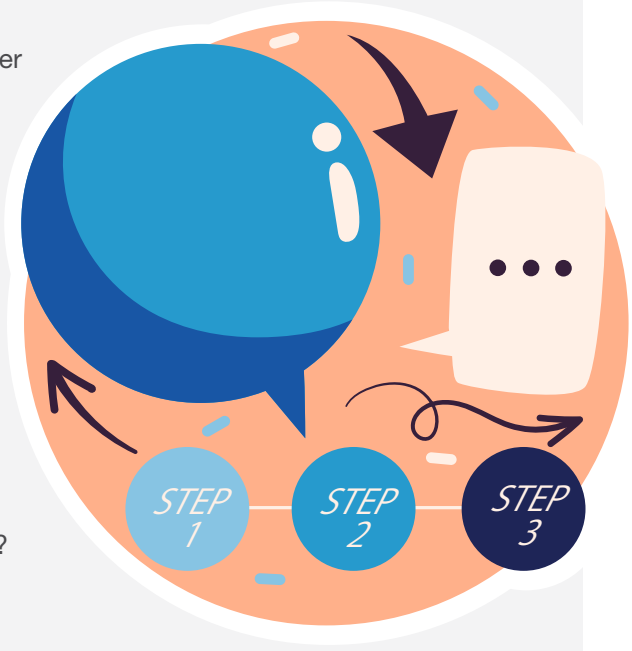
PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION

Prepare mentally and emotionally
How am I feeling right now? Have I chosen a time when I and the other person are feeling calm and able to engage constructively?

Reflect on intentions
Why am I having this conversation and what outcome do I hope to achieve?

Manage your own emotions
How will I manage any emotions that might come up?
What might be triggers for me and how can I manage them?

Choose the right environment
Is this the right place to have an open conversation, or is there somewhere else the other person may be more comfortable meeting?



Be aware of body language and tone
What non-verbal cues might I be sending?
Do I have a calm tone that supports connection rather than defensiveness?

Be ready to listen
Am I ready to listen without judgment and understand the other person's perspective?

Know what resources are available
Do I know what support resources are available on and off campus?

INVITING THE OTHER PARTY TO TALK

Be invitational when asking
What words can I use to show that I want to understand and not blame?

Example: "Last week's group meeting was tense. I wonder if you would be willing to talk with me about it so we can understand each other better?"

Be prepared to accept the other party saying "no"
How will I respond if they don't want to talk right now?

Example: ("Okay, well, if you change your mind, please let me know. Our relationship is important to me.")

DURING THE CONVERSATION

Maintain respect, openness, and engage in active listening (giving your full attention, going beyond simply listening to the other person speaking, and providing feedback)
Am I listening to the other person with an open mind?
Am I paying full attention to the other person's perspective?

Stay calm and composed, using non-violent communication
Can I remain calm right now, or would it be healthier to pause and return to this later?

Use "I" statements
Am I able to express how the situation affected me without accusing?

Be empathetic and seek to understand the other person's perspective
Am I trying to understand how the situation impacted the other person? What information am I missing? What don't I know that can help me understand the other person?

Avoid defensive responses that shut down rather than open up discussion
Am I able to stay open even if I feel criticized?

Stay focused on the main issue
Am I keeping the conversation focused on the matter at hand?

Example: If other issues arise, you can say, "that sounds like it's really important to you. Perhaps we can find another time to discuss that. For today, I wonder if we might stay focused on this issue"

Ask questions to confirm understanding
"I heard you say x, y, z. Did I understand you correctly or am I missing something?"

Paraphrase and seek common ground/something you can both agree on when conversation seems stuck
"I wonder if we have gotten a bit stuck on this point. I hear you saying "x" and I am saying "y". How do you think we might find some common ground here?"

Pause if needed. If you are not feeling like your best self, it may be in everyone's best interest to pause and reconnect another day. It is important to acknowledge your own need for a break and suggest continuing the conversation later.
Is this conversation productive right now? Is there something I can say to help it get back on track, or do I need to ask for a break?

Recognize emotional arousal and discomfort as normal, but if things feel unsafe or overwhelming, suggest postponing
Am I or the other person experiencing overwhelming emotions that suggest we should pause?

HOW TO END A CONVERSATION

Summarize key points and agreements
Have we agreed on any next steps or actions?

Acknowledge the importance of the relationship
How can I express appreciation for the other person's time and willingness to engage in this conversation with me?

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

Follow up and ensure clear communication
Can I follow up to clarify anything or express genuine gratitude? Am I being authentic and sincere in my follow up?

Reflect on discussion, learning, and growth
How do I feel afterwards and what have I learned from this conversation?

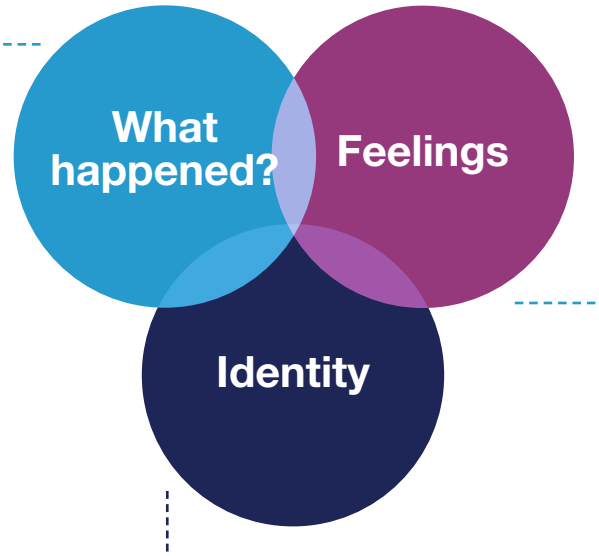
Maintain relationship
How can I continue to deepen trust with this person?

Take care of own wellbeing and practice self-compassion
What do I need right now to care for myself after the conversation?

Seek professional support, if needed
Would talking to a counsellor be helpful?

Based on the book, *Difficult Conversations* by Stone et al.[14], there are three different conversations that may be happening when the stakes are high: the What happened, Feelings, and Identity conversations. The overlap and emphasis between them will change, but it is important to detect which conversation is prominent at any given moment.

What Happened: Instead of thinking you know all there is to know about what happened or have to convince them that you are right, be curious about their perspective on what they think happened. You are bound to learn a great deal!



Feelings: Instead of squashing the discussion of feelings or not expressing them, make space to understand each other's feelings in a respectful, non-judgmental way. You will need to actively address the feelings in the moment before working through the content of the discussion. Expressing how something impacted you can aid in understanding.

Identity: Our identities are the core of who we are. It is important to recognize what we might experience as a threat to our identity or a trigger to push us off balance. The richer and more varied our identities, the more confident and open we will be. The other party will also have different identities. The more respectful we are of what is at stake for each party, the faster we can address concerns.

SCENARIO EXAMPLE:

Imagine a conflict arising over how much each person contributed to a team project. In the discussion, all three conversations: the What Happened, Emotions, and Identity conversations, could be present at different times.

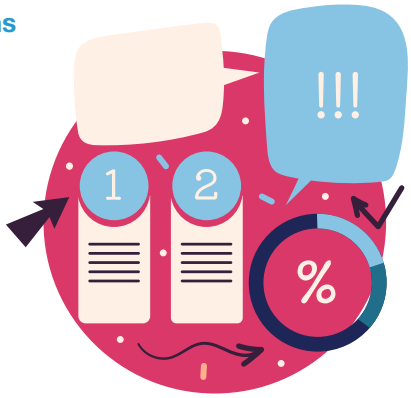
In this scenario, Sophia is angry that Jamal didn't do his share of the work on a team project that was due.

ASPECTS OF CONVERSATION	HAVING A CLOSED APPROACH TO THE CONVERSATION	HAVING A CURIOUS APPROACH TO THE CONVERSATION
What Happened?	Being overly confident that you know exactly what occurred, without room for other perspectives.	Clearly stating what you believe happened but remain open to the possibility that you may not have all the information. Be curious about the other person's experience.
Example	*Sophia: "I did the graph and discussion, and you were supposed to write the first part, but you didn't. I had to scramble late last night to write it and submit it. You don't deserve to have your name on it."*	*Sophia: "Last night I didn't get the first part from you and stayed up late finishing it, after already doing the graph and discussion. Were we unclear on who was doing what or did something come up that made you not able to complete it?"*
Emotion	Thinking that emotions have no place in the discussion or using them to blame/shame.	Being open to expressing emotions respectfully and being willing to explore the emotions that may arise during the conversation.
Example	*Jamal: "You are being hysterical. It wasn't such a big deal. It was only 2% of the grade. Get over yourself."*	*Jamal: "It sounds like you are angry at me and feel let down by me. Is that right? It wasn't my intention to make you mad or let you down, but I can see that I may have."*
Identity	Ignoring potential identity-related issues or using identity judgments to shut down the conversation. Holding tightly onto one's own identity issues to the extent that it closes conversation.	Recognizing that both parties may have identity issues at stake and are open to exploring them tentatively for better understanding.
Example	*Sophia: "I knew I should've asked for another partner. You never complete work. You don't have ADHD; you're just lazy. I am better off working alone because I get things done."*	*Sophia: "I know I tend to submit things early, triple check everything, and that can be hard for others who work differently than I do. Maybe we should've explored our expectations before jumping into the work."*

Want to go deeper? If you would like a hands-on way to work through the steps on how to have difficult and courageous conversations, including reflecting on the What Happened, Emotions, and Identity aspect[14] — you can click here to access a printable worksheet.

Campus Resources

Western University's Guide for Courageous and Respectful Conversations
University of Toronto Tipsheet on Managing Difficult Conversations
Resources from Queen's University on Managing Difficult Conversations



CICMH Resources

More Feet on the Ground – Online Course
Critical Self Reflection in Action - Infosheet
Anger and Mental Health - Infosheet
Emotional Regulation - Infosheet
Boundaries - Infosheet
Working Your Wheel: Indigenous Self Care - Webinar

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