How to Have a Difficult Conversation (Step by Step)

Relationships · about 17 minutes · 2026-11-11

A fully illustrated 28-step guide to having a difficult conversation well: prepare your point and a fair outcome, open safely, work through the issue together, then close on one concrete agreement and follow up.

Phase 1 — Prepare Before You Speak

1. **Name the single issue you need to raise**
   Name the single issue you need to raise.
2. **Decide what a good outcome would look like**
   Decide what a good outcome would look like.
3. **Check your facts and set assumptions aside**
   Check your facts and set assumptions aside.
4. **Write the one thing you must say**
   Write the one thing you must say.
5. **Choose a private, unhurried time**
   Choose a private, unhurried time.
6. **Pick a neutral setting**
   Pick a neutral setting.
7. **Decide your tone before you begin**
   Decide your tone before you begin.

Phase 2 — Open Without Putting Them on the Defensive

8. **Ask permission to talk**
   Ask permission to talk.
9. **State your intention, not an accusation**
   State your intention, not an accusation.
10. **Use 'I' statements about your experience**
    Use 'I' statements about your experience.
11. **Describe the behaviour, not the person**
    Describe the behaviour, not the person.
12. **Pause and ask for their view**
    Pause and ask for their view.
13. **Listen to understand, not to reply**
    Listen to understand, not to reply.
14. **Reflect back what you heard**
    Reflect back what you heard.

Phase 3 — Work Through the Issue Together

15. Ask one open question at a time

Ask one open question at a time.

16. Name the emotion without blaming

Name the emotion without blaming.

17. Find the need beneath the position

Find the need beneath the position.

18. Acknowledge the valid points they make

Acknowledge the valid points they make.

19. Slow the pace when voices rise

Slow the pace when voices rise.

20. Take a break if it starts going in circles

Take a break if it starts going in circles.

21. Return to the shared goal

Return to the shared goal.

Phase 4 — Close Clearly and Follow Through

22. Summarise what you both agreed

Summarise what you both agreed.

23. Agree on one concrete next step

Agree on one concrete next step.

24. Set a time to revisit

Set a time to revisit.

25. Thank them for being honest

Thank them for being honest.

26. Write down the agreement

Write down the agreement.

27. Do your part first

Do your part first.

28. Check in at the agreed time

Check in at the agreed time.

Sources

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2. American Psychological Association
   https://www.apa.org/
3. Psychology Today
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4. USA.gov — official U.S. government services
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Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/How-to-Have-a-Difficult-Conversation. Corrections: https://www.howcompass.