

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Navigating difficult conversations about politics can cause strain on our relationships, particularly when we hold different ideologies from someone we care about in our lives. Dr. Tania Israel, a counseling psychology professor and author of *Beyond Your Bubble: How to Connect Across the Political Divide* shares approaches that can help us engage in dialogue about political differences.

Dr. Israel stresses that engaging in face-to-face conversations with someone we know provides a better context for mutual understanding than engaging through online platforms. She acknowledges that dialogues can be uncomfortable and challenging, and identifies how it's important that we are aware of our own viewpoints, emotional reactions, conflicting motivations and boundaries before making the choice to engage. Dr. Israel's work highlights how dialogues can be highly productive when we approach the conversation with goals of increasing understanding and building connection.

Approaches to increase understanding during a dialogue:

- Employ active listening skills: "listen to understand" versus "listening to respond."
- Offer reflections that summarize what you heard the person say to increase your depth of understanding.
- Ask open ended questions. Be mindful of traps, "gotchas" or statements posed as a question.
- Operate from a stance of curiosity and a genuine desire to understand what is important to the other person.
- Try to take the other person's perspective by drawing from your own past experiences.
- Look for something you appreciate about the other person to help you maintain a balanced perspective.
- Instead of reacting strongly to the areas where you disagree, attempt to identify areas where you agree.
- You may be able to identify a shared value once you obtain a deeper understanding of the other's views.

"Help me understand how you came to that view?"

Ways to express yourself in a dialogue:

- Use assertive communication while maintaining open body posture and appropriate eye contact. Avoid aggressive styles of communication. The goal is to express yourself in an effective, respectful manner.
- Consider sharing the story of how you came to your views. Talking about our experiences and values are much more accessible than informational statistics.
- Approach the conversation with intellectual humility. We all have assumptions about those with differing viewpoints. Remember that it's a human tendency to want to confirm our own beliefs/biases.
- When tension builds, take a few deep breaths with extended exhalation, become aware of your emotional reactions and remember your intentions. Also, remind yourself that you are speaking to another human being who has a deeper context for how their viewpoints have been shaped.
- If the tension becomes too great, you have a choice to change the direction of the conversation or to take a break.
- Remember, the goal is not to convince another person to change their viewpoint. It's ok to agree to disagree.
- Lastly, it's essential to know when to end an unproductive conversation such as if someone becomes disrespectful or unwilling to listen.

After engaging in dialogue, it's important to take time to reflect on your thoughts and feelings and to practice self-care as needed. While it's difficult to share opposing viewpoints with people in our lives, developing a deeper understanding of others' views helps to clarify our own viewpoints and broaden our perspectives. Despite our perceptions of people "on the other side," engaging in dialogue is not about winning or losing, it's about shared humanity. Dialogue creates room to build understanding and enhance relationships, which are the seeds of hope for humanity.