

Conversations we dread

1. Look at the types of conversation in the boxes and discuss the questions.

quitting your job

firing someone

admitting failure to someone

dealing with a very upset customer

refusing to lend money to someone

confronting a friend about their behaviour

negotiating terms of a contract

- Which of the conversations in the boxes would you consider difficult? Why?
- Would it be easier for you to have these conversations in your first language rather than in English? Why/Why not?
- What advice would you give to someone who finds these types of conversations difficult?
- Which of the conversations in the boxes have you had? Choose one and share some details (how easy or difficult it was, what the outcome was, etc.)

[You could also ask students what other difficult conversations they have had recently.]

2. Complete each pair of sentences with a word in the box in the correct form.

defuse

hijack

stabilize

untangle

validate

wrench

- You need to **untangle** your emotions from the subject matter.
I tried to **untangle** the cables on the floor.
- I got **hijacked** by my emotions and overreacted to her words.
The aircraft has been **hijacked**. We've alerted the authorities.
- She didn't feel **validated** by her family because they overlooked her efforts.
The theory has been **validated** by experimental results.
- I'm having trouble **stabilizing** my thoughts after the call.
Water also provides the means of **stabilizing** body temperature.
- She cracked a joke to **defuse** tension.
The road was closed while the police tried to **defuse** the bomb.
- It was a gut-**wrenching** experience.
They tried to **wrench** the bag from him but he managed to keep it.

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3. Look at the first statement in each pair in ex. 2 and say what might have happened in the lead up to them being said.

EXAMPLE: a) You need to untangle your emotions from the subject matter.

Someone had a heated argument with a partner about their financial problems. They ended up saying things they didn't mean.

Possible answers:

- b) The person had an emotional outburst during a conversation with their business partner. They were discussing the company values and it turned out their opinions differ significantly.
- c) She tried hard to progress her career but she didn't succeed. Her family said she should have worked harder.
- d) The person received some troubling news: his flat had been broken into.
- e) She raised her voice at her subordinates and everyone went quiet.
- f) The person told their friend about a recent car accident they had been in.
4. You are going to watch a video about having difficult conversations. Before you watch it, think of two ways to achieve the things below during a difficult conversation.

EXAMPLE: stabilize your thoughts – *go for a walk*

- stabilize your thoughts
- defuse tension
- validate the other person's emotions
- not get hijacked by your emotions

5. Complete the sentences with your own ideas. Then, watch the [video](https://youtu.be/TQ48GVMfvMg) [https://youtu.be/TQ48GVMfvMg] and compare your ideas to the speaker's.
- a) It's important to acknowledge responsibility at the beginning of a difficult conversation because *that way you will defuse the person's emotions and they will be able to listen. [01:31]*
- b) The reason you need a defined outcome before the conversation starts is *that the conversation will be an emotional roller-coaster and the outcome will help you stabilize your thoughts. [01:57]*

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- c) It's a very powerful thing to validate what the other person is saying because **it will make them stop defending themselves and they will be ready to listen to you.** [03:30]
- d) The two most important things to remember during a difficult conversation are **repeatedly validating the other person and achieving the defined outcome.** [04:01]

6. Discuss the questions.

- Which of the tips from the video do you find useful?
 - acknowledge your responsibility
 - define the outcome and restate it throughout the conversation
 - listen and validate
 - rehearse with a friend
- Which of the tips is the most difficult to apply?
- “Difficult conversations come down to the ability to separate your emotions about having it from the things you need to talk about and the outcome that you want to achieve.” – Do you agree? Why/Why not?
- “There is an epidemic right now of people that are unwilling to have uncomfortable conversations.” – Do you agree? Why/Why not?
- “67% of managers are uncomfortable talking to the people they manage.” Is the statistic surprising for you? Why/Why not?
- How can the language we use in difficult conversations affect their outcome? Give examples. **[Encourage students to talk about specific situations and/or specific language, e.g. using polite language will help the interlocutor feel validated.]**



7. Choose two suitable options to complete each sentence.

- a) If there is anything you want to add at any point, feel free to
- 1) kick in 2) **chime in** 3) intercept 4) **interject**
- b) In the spirit of ..., I must admit that I've been feeling quite overwhelmed lately.
- 1) impartiality 2) **transparency** 3) **full disclosure** 4) sensibility

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- c) I feel like my feelings are not being ..., which is making me feel undervalued in our relationship.
 1) **validated** 2) defused 3) **acknowledged** 4) identified
- d) To put it ..., your daughter has been causing some issues this semester.
 1) **gently** 2) **mildly** 3) neutrally 4) frankly
- e) I ... where you're coming from. My marriage fell apart, too.
 1) notice 2) honour 3) **see** 4) **know**
- f) I know you might be mad at me right now, but ..., I think that you are an amazing artist and there is an exciting career ahead of you.
 1) **for what it's worth** 3) as a consolation prize
 2) to my liking 4) **just so you know**
- g) We need to Otherwise, I honestly don't see a future for our friendship.
 1) **find the middle ground** 3) be halfway through
 2) **meet halfway** 4) untangle equally
- h) ..., I've been struggling with workload and could use some support.
 1) With honesty 3) Being brutally honest
 2) **If I'm being honest** 4) **In all honesty**

8. Decide what you might say in the situations below. Use one of the words or phrases in brackets.

EXAMPLE: You told your roommate that you are moving out and they got upset. (middle ground, it's worth, chime)

For what it's worth, I really enjoyed us living together.

Possible answers:

- a) You've been negotiating a contract with a customer and feel like you have offered a lot but they haven't been very flexible. (all honesty, disclosure, meet halfway)

We need to meet halfway or we might not reach a consensus.

- b) You and your family went on a camping trip. Your dog broke a leg, your car was stolen and your tent leaked. A friend has now asked you how the trip went. (interject, mildly, in the spirit of)

To put it mildly, our camping trip was more of an adventure than we bargained for.

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c) Communicate to a colleague that the strategy she presented might not work. (being honest, middle ground, acknowledge)

If I'm being honest, your strategy needs more refinement to be effective.

d) You want to let a friend know that you understand why they quit their job. (just so, in the spirit of, coming from)

I see where you're coming from. I used to have a horrible boss, too.

e) You got angry because your friend bailed on you again. He told you not to overreact. (transparency, gently, validate)

Please don't talk to me like that. I need you to validate my feelings.

f) Your partner has been talking about a problem they have at work. You want to interrupt them to ask about a detail. (gently, chime, acknowledge)

Could I chime in here and ask a question?

g) You are going to quit your job. You weren't going to tell your boss until the end of the month but she has now asked you to participate in a big project. Tell her you are quitting. (disclosure, middle ground, it's worth)

In the spirit of full disclosure, I've decided to leave the company.

9. You are going to role play some difficult conversations. Before you start each role play, choose three phrases in the box that you are going to use.

[Depending on the context (business or general), you might only choose to do some of the role plays. You will find the role plays on the next page. After students have finished their conversations, ask if they were able to reach mutual understanding.]

feel free to chime in / feel free to interject

in the spirit of transparency / in the spirit of full disclosure

acknowledge someone's feelings / validate someone's feelings

to put it mildly / to put it gently

I see where you're coming from / I know where you're coming from

for what it's worth / just so you know

find the middle ground / meet halfway

if I'm being honest / in all honesty

Colleagues (Student A)

You have a colleague you've been working with for several years. They are very friendly and you enjoy their company. You are currently working on several projects together but there is a problem: your colleague doesn't deliver. You usually do all the heavy lifting yourself and they just tell your boss how successful the projects are. Talk to your colleague and explain that you want things to change. The desired outcome of the conversation: your colleague acknowledges the problem and commits to doing more of the work.

Colleagues (Student B)

You have a colleague you've been working with for several years. Currently, you are working on several projects together. The colleague is very competent and you trust their expertise so working with them has been a pleasure. You know that they will always do the best job possible and you've learned a lot from them. They usually feel confident about their ideas so you just agree to whatever they decide to do. Your colleague has now asked to talk to you.

Project management (Student A)

You are the CEO of a construction company. One of the firm's biggest projects is the development of a new residential complex. You delegated the project to an experienced project manager providing them autonomy in handling the tasks. Lately, however, you've sensed a potential issue with the project's progress. The project manager has now asked to talk to you.

Project management (Student B)

As a project manager at a construction firm, your responsibility is the development of a new residential complex. In an attempt to cut costs, you chose to delay the procurement of the majority of building materials, expecting a substantial reduction in prices. Regrettably, this decision resulted in an unforeseen delay and increase in costs as material prices surged unexpectedly. You now need to explain this setback to your CEO. The desired outcome of the conversation: the CEO understands the problem and helps you figure out how to proceed.

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Roommates (Student A)

You've been renting a room to a person whose company you really enjoy. You have spent many evenings talking, cooking and playing computer games together. The person is, however, very messy – they don't clean the kitchen or the bathroom you share even though you asked them to on several occasions. You want to live with your partner now. The desired outcome of the conversation is that your roommate promises to move out at the end of the month.

Roommates (Student B)

You have been renting a room from a person whose company you really enjoy. You have spent many evenings talking, cooking and playing computer games together. The person is, however, a bit fussy – last night they even asked you to wash a single mug that was in the sink. You think they need to be more relaxed about such details. Your roommate has now asked to speak with you.

Problems at school (Student A)

You are a parent of a teenage girl. You know from her secondary school teacher that she has been acting up. For instance, she has been picking fights with other students. You have talked to her, punished her, took her to the beach for the weekend, but it feels like she is completely uninterested in school or in what you have to say. Your daughter's teacher has asked to talk to you again.

Problems at school (Student B)

You are a secondary school teacher. One of your students has been acting up recently. Among other things, she has been caught cheating in tests on numerous occasions and she has been picking fights with other students. You have previously informed the parent about most of the student's issues. You now need to talk to your student's parent and tell them that if the student's behaviour doesn't change, they will be expelled from school in a month. The outcome you expect is that the parent understands how serious the problem is and that they acknowledge their responsibility in the matter.

[This worksheet includes an additional task that you can use as homework or revision. It's only available in the teacher's version of the worksheet. Print it and hand it out to your students.]

Complete the gaps with one word each (in a–g the first letters are provided).

Then, match the comments (a–g) with the responses (1–7).

- a) I detest public speaking. It is absolutely gut-**wrenching**. 4
- b) I thought my being honest would **defuse** the situation. Unfortunately, she didn't take my comments too well. 2
- c) She said she didn't feel **validated** as an employee and she quit. 7
- d) The peaceful demonstration got **hijacked** by a group of aggressive activists, turning it into a chaotic event. 3
- e) The government didn't manage to **stabilize** the prices and the high unemployment rate remains an issue. 5
- f) I'm going to try to explain how the system works. I'm not the best teacher so just **chime** in if you have any questions. 1
- g) This argument has become too complex. We need to **untangle** what's actually important here. 6
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- 1) **Just** so you know, I've had no issues understanding you so far.
- 2) **For** what it's worth, she's not the easiest person to talk to.
- 3) In the spirit of full **disclosure**, I was a part of it.
- 4) I **see/know** where you're coming from. I could share some strategies that have helped me.
- 5) To put it **gently/mildly**, it's rather concerning how ineffective they have been.
- 6) You're right. Let's find the middle **ground** and move forward instead of getting lost in details.
- 7) In **all** honesty, I think it might turn out well for the company.

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