

Worried About a Difficult Conversation? Here's Advice from a Hostage Negotiator.

With chronic stress and flaring tensions, many of us are arguing with family and friends. Here's how to achieve a better outcome.

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Bracing yourself for a tough talk?

There are so many to have right now. Tensions over racial issues, politics and the coronavirus pandemic are provoking arguments within families and between friends: Spouses are arguing about money; siblings are fighting about how to keep parents safe from the virus; some people are confronting relatives about race. Many conversations have the potential to become heated, especially as chronic stress is keeping our fight-or-flight systems activated, making us more likely to react.

Christopher Voss is a former hostage negotiator for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and CEO and founder of the Black Swan Group, which trains companies and individuals to negotiate. He has decades of experience guiding people through conversations that are high tension and high stakes. Mr. Voss is the author of “Never Split the Difference: Negotiating As If Your Life Depended On It” and once did a video series for a website run by Dow Jones, which owns The Wall Street Journal.

I spoke with Mr. Voss about how to navigate a conversation where both parties are worked up and entrenched in their viewpoints. Here are edited excerpts of that interview.

How should you prepare for a difficult conversation?

Mr. Voss: We often prepare but don't realize it. When we think about the conversation, we picture ourselves getting mad. That is preparation. And we default to our highest level of preparation. So if that is all you prepared for, that is what you are going to get.

You need to do what athletes do. They prepare by envisioning their performance, by envisioning themselves doing things right. First, you need to envision yourself taking a different tone. If you use a calm tone of voice, it will actually calm you down.

Then you want to rewire yourself for gratitude. The brain functions more effectively when you are in a positive frame of mind. And gratitude is highly positive. So, tell yourself you are lucky

to be in this conversation or to have this person in your life, that you will miss them when they are gone. If all else fails, remind yourself you're lucky to be on this planet.

A few years ago, we had a colleague who was trying to cheat us. As I was preparing for the conversation, I couldn't stop envisioning myself getting angry. Then I had this thought: "I am lucky to be in this position, because she wouldn't be after us if we weren't so good." Instantly, by shifting into gratitude, I thought of all the things I needed to say to make it an effective conversation.

Should you have a goal?

Yes. You want the other person to get a hit of oxytocin. You're going to get that by getting them to say: "That's right." You do this by listening and then really summarizing their perspective for them. You especially want to focus on articulating any negative thoughts they have. Don't dispute or deny them. When the word "but" comes out of your mouth you are denying and it is time to shut up.

Once you've articulated their perspective for them, they feel understood. And a person who feels understood is getting a feel-good wave of chemicals in their brain. The one you are really going for is oxytocin, the bonding chemical. Once they get a hit of oxytocin, everything is going to change. They'll feel bonded to you. And if they feel bonded, whether it's a little or a lot, that's to your advantage.

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— Christopher Voss

So your power is in making the other person feel heard?

This should be your goal. When people have arguments, they raise their voices because they don't feel heard. Ask yourself to remember what it felt like to feel acknowledged during a disagreement. You'll remember how great you felt. You won't remember what happened afterwards. That means the fight didn't continue.

Ask yourself: What is this person saying about this situation and about me right now? We usually know what people are saying. We just don't want them to say it. Say it out loud and see how they respond.

Some people think that acknowledging how someone is upset allows them to dig in more. But it's the opposite. As soon as you articulate the other side's point of view, they are a little surprised. You've made them really curious to hear what you are going to say next. And you've made them feel that you are in this together.

How do you start the conversation?

You want to start out articulating their negative thoughts about you or the situation. If you've had an argument with someone, what do you know for sure? They probably think you're a jerk. So open the conversation: "Right now, you probably think I'm a jerk."

This takes a lot of courage—until you know how effective it is. When you see how well it works, you're like: "Ooh, I'm going to do it this way every time." It's like a shortcut in a videogame. It accelerates a positive outcome.

This has to do with the emotional wiring in our brain. Brain science shows that every time you identify a negative emotion, that negative feeling diminishes. So if negativity is an obstacle, and just calling it out reduces it, this accelerates the process of defusing the tension. Then from there you are able to talk.

What if a normal conversation suddenly turns heated?

Remember that people elevate their voice because they feel they aren't being heard. So you want to acknowledge: "I am being an idiot." Use the strongest synonym you can: idiot, jerk, something stronger.

You don't want to be sarcastic. You want to demonstrate that you understand their negative perception of the situation. This has an inoculating effect. It doesn't matter whether you think their perception is fair or accurate.

How do you deal with your anger?

The whole process of working to make them feel heard will keep you calm. It puts you in a completely different head space and the anger circuitry in your brain will not get triggered.

What are some pitfalls to avoid?

A common derailment is trying to explain stuff to people. Explanation is a nice word for argument. When you are explaining something, the other side feels you're telling them that they don't understand, that they aren't smart.

Once you've listened to their viewpoint and they feel heard, there's a really good chance you won't need to explain your point at all.

How do you move forward?

Once the person feels heard, you can put it back on them: "How do we move forward?" This makes them take a broader look at the entire landscape. The answer isn't nearly as important as the thought process you forced them to go through. The "how" question is designed to get them to think about negative consequences. And you're defending your line in the sand by shifting the problems back onto the person causing them, without being seen as combative.

What if the other person becomes irate?

If you use a soothing, supportive tone of voice, this will have a neurochemical impact on them that will calm them down. Your tone of voice has an impact on someone's thinking before you finish the sentence.

Should you apologize?

An apology should always precede something negative. The apology is a bit of a warning that bad news is coming. It allows the person to prepare. And it is amazing what people can handle when they are given the slightest opportunity to be prepared, rather than blindsided.

What do you do if there's a stalemate?

Here is the critical game-changing move: Remember that the last impression is the lasting impression. If you are struggling to get the last word in, that's when the last word is a cheap shot. But when your last word is something positive, it seeds the possibility that the other person will think about what you said and come back and propose a resolution.