

# Tips from “Talking About the Tough Stuff”

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Addressing conflict is often uncomfortable. We’re more likely to talk about the other person with our friends than approach them directly. The thought of starting a conversation with a co-worker about irritating behavior, with a sibling about lack of responsibility, or with a parent about questionable financial management can create anxiety and uncertainty. We’re afraid that one of us will “fly off the handle” and say things we don’t mean or that we will talk “around” the problem and make no progress to resolve it. In short, it seems that confronting the problem will make things worse.

The good news is that it’s not too late to learn how to start sensitive, difficult conversations and keep them going in a respectful, positive direction. The shift to a new, more constructive approach begins by understanding and practicing a few simple behavior changes summarized below:

## Tip #1: Set Realistic Expectations

It is unlikely that you can force someone to do your will, so you have to depend upon gentle persuasion. Expect resistance and, at the beginning, set the realistic goal of communication, not victory.

## Tip #2: Make a Smooth Start

Start the conversation with an invitation to the other person to share their views, concerns, or perspective. Express a purpose that both of you share: “I would like us to work this out together . . .” Three valuable words for any tough conversation: *“Help me understand”*.

## Tip #3: Make Listening Your First Priority

Stop talking. Show you are interested by seeking their perspective first. It doesn’t hurt if you *listen to learn – not to re-load and rebut*. Let them know they’ve been heard. E.g., *“So, what you’re saying is. . .”*

#### Tip #4: Speak to Get Your Message Across – “I Statements”, not “You Statements”

Speak from your own knowledge and experience. E.g., *“I am concerned about Dad’s finances.”* Avoid “you statements” that judge, label, and blame the other person. E.g., *“You’ve never been able to manage money.”* An “I statement” has a much better chance of being heard and accepted.

#### Tip #5: Choose How to Respond to Strong Emotion

Strong emotions signal something important. Choose how you will respond to an emotional trigger. Let the rush of adrenaline subside to restore rational thought and goodwill. Acknowledge with a feeling word, the other person’s strong emotion. E.g., *“It sounds like you feel anxious about the future.”*

#### Tip #6: Follow Up and Follow Through

Suggest a specific time to follow up on the conversation, so progress isn’t lost. Follow through – even on small agreements – to build trust and positive experience over time.

#### FURTHER READING

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, Stone, Patton, Heen, (1999)

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High, Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler (2002)

Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard, Heath, C., Heath, D. (2010)

How To Say It To Seniors: Closing the Communication Gap with Our Elders, Solie, D. (2004)

They’re Your Parents, Too!, Francine Russo (2010)

Can We Talk: A Financial Guide for Baby Boomers Assisting Their Elderly Parents, Mauterstock, B., Soar with Eagles (2008)