

A Conversation Guide for Hard Moments

Habits for talking with someone who is hurting.

Sometimes the difficult conversation isn't about politics or policy — it's with someone who is grieving, scared, or in pain. The instincts that work in other settings (making your case, finding common ground, debating ideas) often backfire here. These habits are built for the conversations where the goal is not understanding an issue, but accompanying a person.

What	How	What It Sounds Like
<p>Show Up, Don't Solve When someone you care about is struggling — grieving, scared, anxious, depressed, in physical pain — your job is not to fix it. Your job is to be there. The pressure to say the right thing often pushes us into saying something hollow. Presence is what they remember.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sitting with the person, even in silence.• Resisting the urge to offer advice or comparisons.• Showing up consistently, not just once.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I'm here. I don't need to say anything else.</i>• <i>I don't know what to say, but I'm not going anywhere.</i>• <i>Can I just sit with you for a while?</i>
<p>Listen Without Fixing When someone tells you something painful, the temptation is to jump in with solutions or silver linings. Resist it. They usually need to be heard, not redirected. Listening is the help.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Letting them talk without interrupting.• Following their lead about what they want to discuss.• Saving advice for when they ask for it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Tell me more.</i>• <i>That sounds really hard.</i>• <i>I'm listening — take your time.</i>• <i>Do you want me to listen, or do you want my thoughts?</i>

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<p>Don't Compare</p> <p>"At least..." and "I know exactly how you feel because..." are well-meant traps. Comparing their pain to someone else's, or to your own, often makes the person feel unheard. Even if your experience was similar, this is their moment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding "at least" statements. • Letting their pain be theirs, not a stepping-stone to your story. • Saving your own experience for later, if they ask. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I can't imagine what you're going through.</i> • <i>This is your loss / your pain / your moment — I'm just here for it.</i> • <i>I won't pretend to know how this feels.</i>
<p>Don't Make It About Politics</p> <p>Sometimes when someone is hurting, a political topic comes up — a policy that affected them, a news story they're reacting to, a system they feel failed them. This is not the moment to debate. Hear what's underneath. The argument can wait; their pain cannot.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing when grief, fear, or distress is the real subject. • Tabling political disagreement for another day. • Focusing on the person, not the issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Right now I just want to hear you — we can debate the policy another time.</i> • <i>I hear that this hurts. Tell me more about what you're feeling.</i> • <i>Let's not get into the politics tonight. You first.</i>
<p>Ask What They Need</p> <p>Different people need different things. Some want company; some want space. Some want help with logistics; some want to talk. Don't guess. Ask, and then take their answer at face value.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering specific help rather than "let me know if you need anything." • Asking directly what would be useful. • Honoring the answer, even if it's "nothing right now." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Would it help if I brought dinner Thursday?</i> • <i>Do you want company, or do you want some quiet?</i> • <i>What would actually be useful right now — not a year from now?</i> • <i>Tell me how to help.</i>

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<p>Know When to Bring in Help</p> <p>Some forms of distress are beyond what a friend or family member can carry alone. If someone is talking about harming themselves, has stopped caring for themselves, or is in a crisis you can't safely hold, the decent thing is to connect them with professional support — not to handle it yourself.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing the limits of what one person can do. • Encouraging professional help (doctor, therapist, hotline) without shame. • Staying connected even after the professionals are involved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I love you, and I think we need help bigger than what I can give.</i> • <i>Can I help you make an appointment / a phone call?</i> • <i>I'm going to keep showing up — and I think you also need someone whose job this is.</i>

These habits work best when both people are engaging in good faith. You can only control your own behavior — modeling these habits often invites others to do the same, but not always. If a conversation becomes abusive, dishonest, or unsafe, it is always OK to step away. If someone you know is in immediate danger or talking about harming themselves, contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) or, in an emergency, 911. You don't have to do this alone.

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