

A Citizen's Guide to Difficult Conversations

Practical habits that help citizens talk through hard issues.

Whether you're at the kitchen table, in a community meeting, or chatting with a coworker, these habits are built for the real conversations — political, personal, and everything in between — where staying in the room matters more than winning the point.

What	How	What It Sounds Like
<p>Speak From Your Own Experience</p> <p>Share what you have personally seen, felt, or lived through. Resist the urge to speak for entire groups or to rely on broad generalizations about "those people."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using "I" statements rather than "they" or "those people."• Owning your point of view as your own, not as universal truth.• Sharing a specific story or moment rather than a sweeping claim.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>In my experience...</i>• <i>The way I see it...</i>• <i>Speaking only for myself...</i>• <i>What I've seen in my own life is...</i>
<p>Stay Present and Engaged</p> <p>Take part by both contributing your thoughts and actively listening to others. Keep the focus on the ideas being discussed, not on attacking the people sharing them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Making eye contact with whoever is speaking.• Addressing others by name when you respond.• Putting your phone down and giving your full attention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What I'm hearing you say is... did I get that right?</i>• <i>Can you tell me more about that?</i>• <i>Help me understand what you mean by...</i>
<p>Listen First, Then Respond</p> <p>Treat the exchange as a real conversation, not a debate to win. Instead of preparing your comeback while someone else is talking, focus on truly understanding their view before you share yours.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Resisting the urge to interrupt, even when you disagree.• Pausing briefly before replying so you can respond thoughtfully.• Repeating back what you heard before you respond.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Give me a moment to think about that.</i>• <i>Here is what I heard you say...</i>• <i>Could you walk me through your reasoning?</i>• <i>Before I respond, can I make sure I understand?</i>

What	How	What It Sounds Like
<p>Disagree Without Contempt</p> <p>Decency does not mean avoiding disagreement. It means disagreeing with the idea, not the person. You can hold your ground firmly while still treating the other person with respect.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separating the argument from the person making it. • Sharing your reasoning, not just your conclusion. • Acknowledging what you find true in the other view before naming what you disagree with. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I see this differently, and here's why...</i> • <i>I hear you, and I still think...</i> • <i>We may be working from different information.</i> • <i>I agree with part of that. Where I land differently is...</i>
<p>Pause When Things Get Heated</p> <p>Hard conversations sometimes spike. When emotions run high, the wisest thing you can do is slow down. Naming what's happening is not a sign of weakness — it's a sign you're treating the conversation as important.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking a breath before you speak. • Naming the temperature out loud when it rises. • Suggesting a short break or returning to the conversation later. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I want to keep talking about this, but I need a minute first.</i> • <i>I notice we're both getting frustrated — can we slow down?</i> • <i>I care about this relationship more than I need to be right about this.</i> • <i>Can we come back to this tomorrow with fresh heads?</i>
<p>It's OK to Not Resolve It Today</p> <p>A single conversation is rarely the end of the story. Sometimes you will not reach full agreement, and that is okay. Look for common ground where you can find it, and accept that some questions will need more time, more discussion, or more reflection.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Naming the points where you and others actually agree. • Sticking to facts where facts apply. • Walking away willing to keep thinking, even if no decision was reached. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I need some time to sit with this.</i> • <i>That's an interesting point. I want to think it over before I respond.</i> • <i>We may not agree on everything, but I think we agree on...</i> • <i>Can we pick this back up another time?</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.

Learn more at www.decencyingov.org