
The Art of Conversation

A step-by-step process for talking about even the most sensitive issues without defensiveness or blame.

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INTRODUCTION FOR COUPLES:

The Art of Conversation is a homework tool I developed for couples in my therapy practice. It's a structured exercise in which one person (Person A) gets to talk for 20 minutes about any issue she wishes while her partner (Person B) asks specific questions designed to help her see parts of herself she could not have seen without Person B's help. When 20 minutes are up and the couple has had a chance to talk about their experience, they switch roles and start over again.

The Art of Conversation works as long you're both calm enough to think straight. It will not work when either of you is too hurt, too angry, or too agitated. That's when you'll need to rely on other tools, like The STOP Strategy or The OuchKit. (Both of these tools can be found at: www.theouchkit.com.) The Art of Conversation is the perfect tool to use after you've both calmed down and are ready to talk face-to-face.

HOMEWORK:

Your homework assignment is to practice The Art of Conversation for one hour, at least once between sessions. Be sure to switch so both of you get a chance to be Partner A and Partner B. Use The STOP Strategy or The OuchKit to disengage if things start to heat up, and try again when you're both feeling calmer.

WHAT THIS EXERCISE IS ABOUT:

- Learning how to talk to each other so you both feel cared about and understood at a deeper level.
- Learning how to ask questions that lead someplace new.
- Experiencing the benefits of listening without an agenda, and speaking without fear or anger.
- Learning how to bring out the best in each other.

HOW THIS EXERCISE WORKS:

1. **Choose roles.** Person A will bring up an issue that's important to her (or him), and Person B will ask Person A questions about it.
2. **Pick an issue.** The first time you do this exercise, choose an issue that's important to you personally—something you're struggling with or something you care about that's got you stumped—but not an issue that's particularly touchy between the two of you. Example: "I'd like to talk about my problem with overeating. Every day I say I'm going to do something but I can't seem to follow through."

Save more difficult topics for your second or third round of this exercise, after you've both gotten a feel for how and why this exercise works.

3. **Have a conversation.** Have a different kind of conversation, following the rules on the next two pages. (Sample Questions and Tips for Person B can be found on page 3 of this exercise.)
4. **Debrief.** When Person A feels finished, or 20 minutes are up, the first round ends, and the two of you get to talk about how the process went:
 - A) How did each role feel and what was hard or easy about it?
 - B) What did your partner do or say that you liked, and what didn't you like?
 - C) What did you learn about a) yourself, and b) your partner?
5. **Switch roles.** Switch roles and do the whole exercise all over again.
6. **Write down what you learned.** Each time you do this exercise write down what you learned.

On the surface, this exercise is going to look like two people having an ordinary conversation. What makes this exercise different from ordinary conversation are the rules.

The Rules

RULES FOR PERSON A:

- **Answer questions honestly, with as much openness as possible.**
- **Be gentle**, even if some of your partner's questions seem contrived, provocative or off base. One way to do this is to think of each question as if it's an intriguing clue that may lead to hidden treasure. When you approach questions this way—instead of in a “Why do you want to know?” frame of mind—defensiveness goes down and your search for answers will usually lead someplace new.
- **Set limits.** If your partner slips out of character and starts giving advice, offering suggestions, or making judgments, it's your job to bring them back by saying something like, “Thanks for trying, but that sounded like a judgment. Could you ask me again in a different way?” or “Can we go back to that question about . . . ? I think I was getting somewhere.” The same is true for questions you're not ready to answer or are just plain uncomfortable with.
- **Give positive feedback.** It's important to get in the habit of noticing and telling each other what you like so you can both do more of it.
- **Ask for a time-out if you need one.** If you notice yourself shutting down or getting edgy, don't be shy about asking for a time-out. John Gottman's research has shown that couples who know how to disengage when things heat up and reconnect when both people are feeling calmer, end up staying together, and do less damage to their relationships.

Here's a list of things you can do to calm yourselves down and regain perspective: go for a walk, write in a journal, use The STOP Strategy, or fill out an Ouch card and give it to your partner. After an hour or so, whoever called the time-out should take responsibility for checking back in and restarting the Art of Conversation

***An hour of self-reflection is a time-out.
Three days of door-slamming,
bad-vibing and brooding is abuse.***

RULES FOR PERSON B:

- **Ask questions without an agenda.** In legal terms, this means avoiding leading questions—questions that already contain or imply an answer. Leading questions are conversation stoppers, because your own agenda is always felt even if it isn't always stated. Questions that come from the desire to understand—rather than the desire to influence—are door openers that allow your partner to look at the world with fresh eyes.
- **Listen deeply to your partner's answers.** This will help make the questions you ask more subtle, more interesting, more informed—the kinds of questions that reveal your unique knowledge of your partner and your shared history. Questions that demonstrate this kind of listening often include bits of information that only you—or you and your partner may have. Example: “I'm confused. You say you want more time to paint, but it seems like whenever I suggest it, you come up with reasons why you can't. I'm wondering if you're really okay with the idea of being an artist, or if maybe you don't think I'm really okay with it?”

The goal here isn't to be right, it's to raise issues that show you're paying attention. It's as if you're both detectives trying to figure out which clues are important.

- **Be a mirror for your partner.** Make statements about things you've noticed (as in the example above), offer hunches, or paraphrase what you think your partner has just said. The main thing is that even while your questions start the ball rolling, the direction it rolls should be driven by your partner's needs, not your own.
- **Take correction gracefully.** If your partner corrects or re-directs you, say “Thanks for the feedback.” Period. Correction can be hard to take, but learning to accept feedback cheerfully is critical to learning how to be a better partner, friend, parent, and lover.

RULES FOR BOTH PARTNERS:

- **Be open to learning.** Regardless of which role you're playing, both partners need to come to this exercise with a willingness to: make mistakes, learn something new, give and receive feedback, and take responsibility for their own words and actions. It's okay to say, "That question makes me uncomfortable." It's not okay to say, "You're a jerk for asking it."
- **Let go of being right.** In order for this exercise to work, both of you need to decide that you really do care more about healing your relationship than you do about being right.

***If you want to be right all the time,
live alone.***

- **Assume the best.** Most people are basically good. So when good people act badly, it usually means there's something going on inside of them that feels pretty awful. Assuming the best doesn't mean letting your partner abuse you. It just means trying to understand what hurt or fear might be driving someone you love to act in an unloving way. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- **Pay close attention to your feelings.** If you're unsure about what you're feeling, tune in to cues from your body. Notice when a question or comment generates strong feelings, negative or positive. Tension, nervous laughter, a desire to flee, flushing, all these tell you something. A smile, excitement, tears, sighing, all these tell you something. As soon as you notice any strong feelings, it's perfectly fine to say, "Stop for a second, I'm feeling something." This should be taken as a cue to S-L-O-W down. It means something is shifting. Something worth understanding is happening. Let yourself be curious, and these new sensations will take you someplace new.
- **Don't hammer your partner.** Now that you have your partner's undivided attention, use your time well. If you're Partner B, don't ask loaded questions that demean your partner. Example: "Don't you think you'd feel better if you weren't so fat?" And if you're Partner A, describe a problem once. Don't repeat a point you've already made. Example: "You did the same thing yesterday with the kids . . . and what about on our honeymoon? You did the same thing then, too."

- **When in doubt, try more compassion.**

Whenever communication starts to break down, take a break and ask yourself: What vulnerability is beneath all this anger, frustration, defensiveness, or blame? Then say to your partner: "This is starting to feel really hard. What can I do right now to help?"

***When in doubt, try compassion.
If that doesn't work, try more compassion.***

- **If it feels right to both of you, it's okay to switch midstream.** Sometimes a conversation gets stuck because either Person A wants to know what Person B is thinking, or Person B can't continue until he's had a chance to say what's on his mind. As long as Person A is all right with the decision, it's fine to switch. Just make sure you eventually go back to where Person A left off, so she doesn't get permanently sidetracked.

PRACTICE!

Once you've succeeded in doing this exercise with neutral subjects, try more difficult ones. The more you practice, the better you'll get. The sooner you learn to admit your part in what went wrong in any given interaction, the sooner you'll find this process rewarding, and the better your relationship will feel.

QUESTIONS AND TIPS FOR PARTNER B:

Here are some things you might ask or say to Partner A. Use them to help you get started, help you get un-stuck, help you go deeper, or get you out of trouble if things start breaking down. Other than the first two questions, you can use the questions in any order. Some can be asked several times during a session. And feel free to come up with your own:

- Before we start, let me make sure I understand. You want to talk about _____. Is that right?
- Have I missed anything important?
- What can I do to make it easier for you to talk to me about this issue? (*Examples: Don't rush, don't interrupt, don't try to fix, etc.*)
- Do you know what you'd like from me? (*Understanding? Help? Compliance? Agreement?*)
- Do you need me to feel the same way you do about this issue, or would it be enough for me to understand how you feel?

- What would it look like if you were getting what you need from me? (*Get specifics here so you're sure you know what your partner wants.*)
- You look ____ (*sad, closed off, angry, distracted, etc.*), what are you feeling? (*This combination--guessing what your partner's feeling, followed by a direct question---is a good one to use whenever you sense a shift in mood from your partner. It's a way to make sure you understand, and it gives your partner a chance to tune into feelings she/he may or may not have noticed.*)
- Do you know why this issue is on your mind right now? Did something happen, or is there an upcoming event?
- Does it have anything to do with ____ ?
- Is there something I'm doing that makes you feel bad?
- Does it help when I ____ ?
- If you were a four-year old, how would you express how you're feeling?
- Here's how I'd describe the situation using a metaphor _____. Does this feel accurate to you, or do you have a better one? (*Example: "You feel like I'm a freight train that's moving too fast and you're afraid to jump off or get on."*)
- What would you like me to be doing differently?
- I remember when you _____. Did that feel similar to how you're feeling now?
- Would it help if I did ____ ?
- If I did that, how would it make you feel about us?
- I'm not sure I understand exactly . Could you say more about ____?
- Is there more? Are there other things related to this issue, which are hard for you?
- Is it possible that there is some fear beneath your anger or frustration about this issue? (*Common*

fears: being rejected, losing control, being abandoned, failing, being broke, never being loved or understood, dying, and ending up like a relative that is unwell, cruel, or chemically dependent.)

- What's the worst, or hardest part of this for you?
- Have you tried anything that's worked in the past?
- What have you tried that hasn't worked?
- If I could do one thing to help you right now, what would it be?
- If I did that one thing, what would you take my actions to mean? (*Example: I care. I've heard you. I'm trying.*)
- Is it possible that part of what's going on might be related to ____? (*This question only works if your partner is feeling understood. If not, your question may sound like a judgment.*)
- I'm trying to understand, but I'm feeling attacked. Could you tell me what you don't like without sounding so harsh? For example, I'm fine with you saying: "I didn't like it when you talked to everyone but me at dinner." That's easier for me to hear than when you say: "You were such an arrogant jerk."

Note to Person B: If your partner says something that's inaccurate or accusatory, don't correct them or defend yourself. If you do, your partner will feel defensive and will either launch a counterattack, or shut down. Instead, say: "I understand you felt/feel X (hurt, sad, mad, frustrated, disappointed, etc.) when Y happened." (If you stay away from defending yourself now, chances are your partner will be willing to hear your side of the story later.)

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