

Having Difficult Conversations

What are difficult conversations?

In every college student's life, situations will arise that may be difficult to talk about and involve different perceptions of the same reality. Whether between roommate(s), friends, classmates or even family members, tackling the issues with an open, honest conversation and using some very practical strategies can help identify the conflicts and one can begin to work on solutions.

To navigate through your problem, review these tips and use the checklist on the back

Tips: What happened?

- ◆ Don't assume what happened is obvious. One's view of events depends on past experiences, assumptions, values and information.
- ◆ Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. **AVOID BLAMING THEM.**
- ◆ Ask yourself how each side came to their story of events.
- ◆ Ask yourself what you did that helped cause the situation.
- ◆ Separate intent from impact—just because you feel hurt, doesn't mean it was intentional.

Tips: Deciding to have the conversations

- ◆ **DON'T** initiate the conversation if:
 - ◆ The problem is within yourself, actions are more appropriate than words, it is not important, you just want to vent, or you just want the other person to change.
- ◆ **DO** initiate the conversation if:
 - ◆ You want to learn the other person's story, to share your story, or to problem solve together.

Tips: Problem Solving

- ◆ Timing is often key—no one should feel caught off-guard.
- ◆ Keep in mind the standard of mutual caretaking; relationships that always go one way rarely last.
- ◆ Set ground rules first (e.g. no interrupting, yelling, personal attacks or violence).
- ◆ Long term focus should be on underlying needs instead of specific positions (needing more quiet time to study vs. wanting your roommate on the phone less).

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Using the information above and the checklist, please work through the following example:

You are working in a group project for a class that is very important to your major. One of your group members has started changing your groups work to fit their own opinions as they feel they are right even though the rest of the group has agreed on certain information. The course does not have a structure format for handling these situation, how would you discuss the concern with the rogue group member?

Difficult Conversation Checklist: Use this checklist to map out a difficult conversation. Tips below will help think through some of the steps.

Step 1: Sort out what happened

Describe what happened, recognizing it is *your* description • Reflect on your emotions • What does this mean about your identity and about you?

Step 2: Check your purpose and decide if you should have the conversation

What do you hope to accomplish? • Is the difficult conversation the best way to achieve your purpose?

Step 3: Start from the Third Story

Describe the problem as the **DIFFERENCE** between your stories • Include both viewpoints as a valid part of the discussion • Share your purposes and goals • Invite them to join you as a partner in the conversation

Step 4: Explore Their Story and LISTEN

Listen to understand their perspective • Ask questions • Acknowledge feelings behind the arguments • Share your own viewpoint • Reframe events to ensure mutual understanding

Step 5: Problem Solving

Talk about keeping communications open • Invent options that meet each side's most important concerns

RESOURCES

University Counseling Service

3223 Westlawn South

319-335-7294

ucs@uiowa.edu

<http://counseling.studentlife.uiowa.edu/>

Academic Support & Retention

310 Calvin Hall

319-335-1497

tutoriowa@uiowa.edu

<http://tutor.uiowa.edu>

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