



# HOW TO TALK ABOUT HARD THINGS.

*5 TIPS FOR NAVIGATING  
TRIGGERING CONVERSATIONS*

# HOW TO TALK ABOUT HARD THINGS

Despite the fact that tragically so many people have experienced trauma, it can still feel so daunting to talk about it. Oftentimes we approach these conversations feeling so much shame, fearing that we'll be thought of differently afterwards, or nervous that we'll trigger the other person. Yet so many of us wish we could talk about what we hold inside. So what do we do with that? I truly believe there's a way to have safe and connective conversations, but it can take some intentionality.

Whether you are the trauma survivor or a friend or family member initiating the conversation, below are some tips that can help you carefully set up a challenging conversation.

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## CONSIDER THE COMMUNICATION CLIMATE <sup>1</sup>

The what? In short, a Communication Climate asks the question "Can *this relationship* handle *this hard conversation* at *this time*?"<sup>2</sup> Every relationship has a Communication Climate - some are chilly, others are warm and sunny. Before you initiate, consider the following questions realistically:

- Is this a safe person who has earned my trust (vice versa)?
- Has this person responsibly handled other heavy conversations with me?
- What's our history together?
- Have they shown they are for me and my wellbeing?

2

## CHECK IN ON THE SETTING

Consider when and where this conversation will take place. At the playground with your kids or in a noisy restaurant on a time crunch is probably not the best idea. Before hopping into the conversation, check in on the other person's bandwidth. Are they in a mental or emotional space where they can hold this conversation?

Example: "Hey, I kind of want to talk about something serious and heavy - would you have the bandwidth for a conversation like that right now?"

### 3

## ACKNOWLEDGE POTENTIAL TRIGGERS

We know what they say about assumptions. It can be tricky to assume you know the other person's history with a topic. I find saying aloud the things that we're nervous about can be disarming and helpful. Give the other person permission to tap out based on the topic.

### Examples:

- **TRAUMA SURVIVOR:** *"I never want to make any assumptions about what you feel comfortable talking about. I'm wrestling with some things related to sexual assault. I recognize this could be a potentially triggering topic for any number of reasons. Would you feel comfortable if I talked about it today? If not, I completely understand and won't ask for any further explanation."*
- **FRIEND OR FAMILY:** *"I know you've alluded to having an experience related to sexual assault. I understand talking about it can be triggering, and I want to respect your boundaries. I also want you to know I care about you and am available to talk if or when you need or want to."*

### 4

## ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

With the understanding that these conversations can feel like a lot, agreeing on rules of engagement and a predetermined exit strategy can help both parties feel safe and empowered during the conversation.

### Examples:

- Neither party has to answer any questions they don't want to.
- If at any point it gets to be too much, the conversation can be put on hold.
- What time does the conversation need to wrap up?
- Are there certain topics that either party doesn't feel comfortable talking about or disclosing?

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## COMMUNICATE YOUR GOALS & FEARS FOR THE CONVERSATION

We all know how it feels to vent and have someone give us unwanted solutions - THE WORST. It can be helpful to frame the conversation for the other person - give them some clues for how to respond. (It's also protective for us to clarify for ourselves why we want to talk with this person about this subject. For oversharers like me, this can be a really helpful check point.)

### Examples:

- **TRAUMA SURVIVOR:** *"I've carried this for a long time by myself, and I'm having a hard time holding it right now. Would you be willing to hold space for my story with me?"*
- **TRAUMA SURVIVOR:** *"I'm having a hard time making sense of some things related to my experience and I need help sorting through it and figuring out where and how to get help."*
- **FRIEND OR FAMILY:** *"I care about you and want to check in on you to let you know you're not alone and to make sure you're doing okay. If you are struggling with something I want to be able to help."*

Wow! This can feel like a lot, maybe even robotic. But putting this extra intentionality in on the front end will help set the conversation (and your responses to it) up for success. Remember to be a person as you go through these steps. Interject humor if that's your style, acknowledge that you're gonna be awkward because you don't do this often- saturate the conversation in grace for yourself and the other person.

And, most importantly, take a moment to consider a time when someone you love was considerate and confided in you- how did it make you feel? Keep that in mind as you approach these conversations. And remember, this will feel less intimidating each time.



# RESOURCES

1. Wood, J. T. (2015). *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* (Eighth ed.). Cengage Learning.
2. Muehlhoff, T. (2010). *Marriage Forecasting: Changing the Climate of Your Relationship One Conversation at a Time*. InterVarsity Press.
3. Muehlhoff, T. (2014). *I Beg to Differ: Navigating Difficult Conversations with Truth and Love*. InterVarsity Press.
4. Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., Switzler, A. (2012). *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. McGraw-Hill.