

Difficult Conversations

Why We Avoid Them and How to Start Them

BY CLAUDIA SIX



Difficult conversations are those that we all put off—sometimes for a long time. The conversations we'd frankly rather not have because they'll make the other person uncomfortable. Truth is, they'll make us uncomfortable. These are the conversations that we hope we will never need to have because the problem will magically go away. I call that waiting for divine intervention—and it's not going to happen.

Sometimes married couples who have been raising young children can find lots of reasons to put off talking about why there is distance between them. Sometimes the kids are grown and have left the nest, and the parents realize they have nothing left to talk about. We shouldn't wait that long. Sometimes one or both partners are angry but conflict avoidant, and things fester. Sometimes people avoid real conversations because they assume that the other person will disagree, and they're not confident in their conflict resolution skills. But the conversation doesn't have to be a confrontation; it can be a clearing, an inquiry, a curiosity, and the hope of creating a win-win and reconnecting.

Examples of situations that may lead to difficult conversations include a couple whose common activities and interests have dwindled to a point where they do little together except eat and sleep. It may be a wife who realizes that

in propping up her husband's ego for years and not telling him how she likes to be made love to, she has lost herself and sold herself short. It may be someone who wants to try something new with their beloved but is afraid the other will judge and reject them. It may be a man who takes on a lover and realizes that the sex he has been having with his wife holds no emotional contact and leaves him yearning for something deeper. It may be a man who feels emasculated because his wife insists on controlling everything around the house. It may be a woman who feels that she doesn't have a voice so she abdicates, leaving her partner feeling unmet or

with the illusion that all is well. Sometimes it manifests as affairs, lack of intimacy, passive-aggressive behavior. We've all seen that silent couple in the restaurant; they've said all the easy things, and all that's left to talk about is the harder stuff, so they don't talk. The volume of the unspoken conversation is louder than the spoken one.

A note here on the term *intimacy*: Americans use the term as a euphemism for sex. I mean it as "into-me-you-see," revealing your vulnerable underbelly, letting yourself be known, showing up authentically—which may or may not involve sex. *Difficult conversations require intimacy*. But intimacy can be daunting, which is why people often avoid it while claiming to want more of it; humans are ambivalent creatures.

If we want things to be different between us and our partner, we have to show up differently (you know the definition of insanity: doing the same thing again and again and expecting different results). We have to push beyond our comfort zone, go a little beyond what we've always done, and get out of our own way. *We have to want to be known*. And we can't assume that our partner will thank us for sharing. Our doing things differently may make them uncomfortable. But if we lead the level of conversation, we might be surprised by how willing they are to respect us for it and to follow.

It takes two people to keep the status quo—it only takes one person to create change.

So we take a deep breath and ask our partner if this is a good time to talk. If our partner is male, we follow this request by assuring him that we are not upset with him. When you ask a guy to talk, he immediately thinks he's in trouble; reassuring him insures that he is receptive. We start with a positive, thanking our partner or appreciating them authentically for something, and then we say what's on our mind. It is crucial to not make the other person wrong. That will only make them defensive and push them away, rendering the conversation unproductive. We must make "I" statements, express our feelings, and say what we are struggling with. What have we noticed, what is troubling us, and what would we like? It also helps to be curious about the other's experience.

Most of us value comfort over honesty, at least in our actions, though most of us know that honesty is the true basis of an intimate relationship. Most of us sacrifice real connection when the conversation becomes difficult.

It is counterintuitive that having difficult conversations actually has the most potential to increase intimacy, connection, and eroticism in a relationship. Self-confronting and saying those things that we thought were the most risky is what reduces the risk of the relationship deteriorating. It can feel like the beginning of the end, but it is more likely to be the beginning of a deeper and more satisfying phase of the relationship. We will feel relieved. When uncomfortable issues are expressed, there is more space in the relationship. Shift happens. Doubt decreases, and the chains around our unspoken thoughts are released.

If we're not in the habit of having difficult conversations, a place to start might be during daily rituals of connection. We must make the time for a 15-minute cup of tea together every day, to have the "Honey, how was your day?" conversation, to ask, "How are you, really?" We must prioritize the relationship, and if we have to, schedule regular time together. Celebrating anniversaries with a check-in, a relationship state of the union, a clearing of withholds is helpful. We must want more for ourselves and not let our relationship die a slow death. And if we need extra support, finding a couples therapist who can help us get our cards on the table and feel empowered about tackling issues is an option. Let's not wait until we're in crisis. I'm a strong advocate of regular relationship maintenance. 🐾

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