FREE GUIDE

The Difficult Conversation Planner

Plan what to say, and how to listen, before a hard talk.

Ask Dr. Penny
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START HERE

How to use this planner

Hard conversations rarely go perfectly. But a little preparation can help you stay calm, say what matters, and actually hear the other person. This planner walks through five steps, then gives you a worksheet to fill in before you talk and another for afterwards.

1. **Get clear on what you want.**
2. **Choose the time and place.**
3. **Open gently.**
4. **Listen to understand.**
5. **Know what to do when it gets heated.**

A note on safety

This planner is for everyday conflicts between people who care about each other. If you are afraid of how someone may react, or there has been violence, please talk with a counselor or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 before planning a conversation.

STEP ONE

Get clear on what you want.

Before you say anything, it helps to know what you are hoping for. Not what you want the other person to admit, but what you would like to be different afterwards.

- **Name the issue in one sentence.** "I feel left out of decisions about the kids' schedules."
- **Name the feeling underneath.** Hurt, worried, lonely, overwhelmed, unappreciated.
- **Name what you need.** "I would like us to plan the week together on Sundays."
- **Name what you can let go of.** Being right, winning, or solving everything in one talk.

> *The goal of a hard conversation is not to win. It is to understand each other a little better than before.*

STEP TWO

Choose the time and place.

The same words can land very differently depending on when and where you say them. A little planning here can prevent a lot of hurt.

- **Avoid the HALT moments:** when either of you is hungry, angry, lonely or tired.
- **Give a heads-up.** "There is something I would like to talk about. Is tonight after dinner a good time?"
- **Pick a private, calm place.** Not in front of children, guests, or in the middle of a rush.
- **Allow enough time.** Starting a big talk ten minutes before work rarely ends well.
- **Think about side-by-side.** A walk or a drive can feel less confrontational than sitting face to face.

Try this

Write down two possible times this week, and one place, before you ask.

STEP THREE

Open gently.

The first minute often sets the tone for the whole conversation. A soft start, focused on your own experience rather than the other person's faults, makes it easier for them to listen.

Opening lines that help

- "I care about us, and something has been on my mind."
- "I would like to understand your side, and share mine."
- "I have been feeling ___ when ___, and I would like us to find a way through it."
- "This is hard for me to say, so I may not say it perfectly."

Openings that tend to backfire

- "We need to talk." (It sounds like a verdict.)
- "You always..." or "You never..."
- "Everyone thinks you..."

STEP FOUR

Listen to understand.

Most of us listen while planning our reply. Listening to understand means slowing down long enough to really hear what the other person is saying, and letting them know you heard it.

1. **Let them finish.** Resist the urge to correct details while they are still talking.
2. **Reflect back.** "So what you are saying is... Did I get that right?"
3. **Ask curious questions.** "What was that like for you?" "What would help?"
4. **Validate before you explain.** "I can see why that hurt." You can understand someone without agreeing with them.

> *People soften when they feel heard. It is hard to argue with someone who is genuinely trying to understand you.*

STEP FIVE

When it gets heated

Even well-planned conversations can get tense. When your heart is racing, your thinking brain goes offline. That is a sign to slow down, not push through.

- **Notice your body.** A tight chest, raised voice or clenched fists are your early warning signs.
- **Call a pause.** "I want to keep talking about this, and I need twenty minutes to calm down first."
- **Actually come back.** Agree on a time to return, so a pause does not feel like walking away.
- **Calm your body during the break.** Walk, breathe slowly, drink water. Avoid rehearsing the argument.
- **Repair when you can.** "I am sorry I raised my voice. I want to try that again."

It is all right to get help

If the same conversation keeps ending in the same place, family or couples counseling can give you a safe space to try again with support.

BEFORE YOU TALK

My conversation plan

The issue, in one sentence:

What I feel, and what I need:

When and where I will ask to talk:

My opening line:

What I want to understand about their side:

How I will pause if it gets heated:

AFTER THE TALK

Looking back

Fill this in a day or two after the conversation, once things have settled.

What went better than I expected?

What did I learn about the other person's side?

What would I do differently next time?

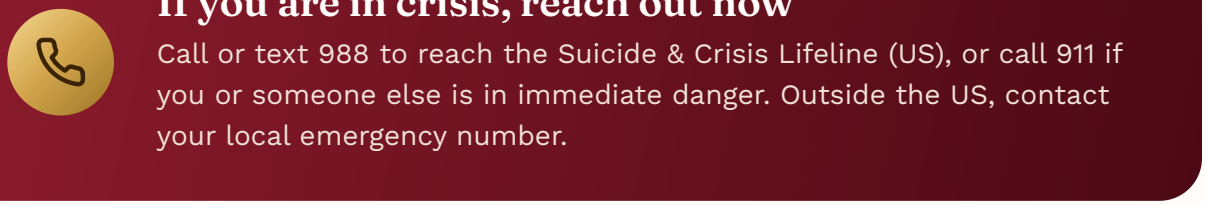
Is there anything we agreed to? What is my part?

WHEN YOU NEED MORE

You do not have to do this alone.

Some conversations are too heavy to carry on your own. Family and individual counseling can help you prepare, practice, and find new ways through. Consider reaching out if:

- The same argument keeps coming back, no matter how you approach it.
- You avoid important conversations because they always go badly.
- Conflict at home is affecting sleep, work, or children.
- You feel unsafe, or someone has been hurt during an argument.



About Ask Dr. Penny

Ask Dr. Penny Counseling offers individual, grief, family, and faith-based counseling, in person and by video. Sessions move at your pace, and most first appointments happen within a week.

Book a session at askdrpenny.com

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