

HOW TO HAVE FRAUGHT CONVERSATIONS, or: what to do when your partner has feelings

Every partnership, whether it is a business partnership, friendship, family relationship, or especially romantic partnership, will encounter situations that necessitate fraught conversations. Bad news has to be reported, difficult decisions must be made, feelings get unintentionally hurt, and crappy stuff has to be got through. But though these discussions may be fraught, they can go well. Both people can come out of these moments feeling heard and appreciated and, even if they're not happy, understanding that they and their partner will get through the trouble together. Trouble is not quite so bad when it can be tackled by two people who trust each other's competence and respect (or even love) for each other. So, when you must have a fraught discussion, follow these guidelines for making it as productive and painless as possible (they are designed for romantic partnerships, but you're smart and can adapt them if you have to).

1. Think about time and space.

Some conversations can't wait. Some can. Ask yourself, do you have time to do this conversation justice? If not, communicate the essential information and let your partner know you value their input and want to hear it later (eg: the house is on fire and I am leaving it. Later, we should talk about how this makes you feel). Also think about where you are. If you're trying to do this over the phone, can it or should it wait until you can be face to face with your partner? Pick a spot to have this conversation where both people feel comfortable. My husband once told me that he had had all his difficult conversations with his last girlfriend in bed, and that they never went well. So now, we never talk seriously in bed. If we have to have a discussion, we go sit on the couch or the porch or at the table. **Try to have these conversations relatively sober, alone, and when everyone has taken care of the basic elements in their hierarchy of needs.**

2. Is this a discussion you really need to have? And what is it really about?

Figure out if there really is something you need to communicate, or that your partner needs to communicate. It is important to be open and honest about emotions, patterns of behavior, and decisions. But avoid petty drama. Learn what to let go. But also remember that you are entitled to talk about your feelings, and so is your partner.

Healthy relationships don't end because one person sometimes gets sad or angry, frustrated or insecure. One thing to avoid is taking out unrelated frustrations on your partner or making excuses for your behavior toward your partner. Try not to see your partner as one more thing on the list of obligations or frustrations. Instead, remember that your partner is there to support you when things he or she has nothing to do with go wrong. Don't get yourself into a position where you end up saying, at the end of a difficult discussion, "sorry, it's just that my boss was yelling at me today and I have to get the car fixed, and my best friend is going crazy." None of those things excuse being short with your partner, nor can your partner do anything about those things, except provide a sympathetic ear (and she is unlikely to want to do that if you are short with her).

3. Listen.

You have feelings. Your partner has feelings. Feelings can be exhausting and icky. But you are strong. You can take it all in and make it through. It just takes practice: it's all about establishing good habits, just like when you're at the gym and you think you can't do that elliptical torture machine for one second past fifteen minutes, until you go every day and it just becomes normal to do thirty. **Establish the habit of really listening to your partner. Work hard to become aware of the kind of language that makes you angry, defense, sad, or panicky, and the kind of language that does the same for your partner.** Once you have identified the kind of language that sets you off and makes conversations more difficult, you can talk to your partner about this and use this dialogue to make communication easier. For example, my partner has a very complicated schedule, and when he talks about changing our plans, I get very nervous. It is okay for me to feel this way, but I have identified this as a negative trigger, so I now know that my response in these situations is out of proportion to the problem. I spent some time really thinking about why this is. Once I had determined that these situations upset me disproportionately, I started to understand that sometimes, it's not about the situation at all. My response is related to anxieties left over from my childhood, and a fear that my partner will not have time for me. Now that I know this, and my partner does too (because I told him about my anxiety), when we have to have potentially fraught conversations about scheduling, I can calm myself down before I respond by telling myself "it's okay. Sometimes I need to be flexible about my schedule. My partner and I have plenty of time. He loves me. This is not about that." And then I can respond calmly. My partner also can change his behavior by being sensitive and supportive when it is time to have these conversations. I do the same for him when conversations must touch on things that tap into his anxieties.

4. Use those "I" statements. But also remember that it's not all about you.

When discussing icky and complicated emotions, it is important to frame the way you feel as personal, rather than as the only possible response to your partner's actions. "I am scared that you'll leave me" is much easier to be empathetic about than "You are ignoring me and because you suck." One expresses a valid emotion. The other makes an accusation and attributes a (perhaps inaccurate) reason behind your partner's behavior. If you can identify where your feelings come from, it is important to communicate that. So, you might say, "I feel ignored, and some of that probably comes from the fact that my father was absent. But I can't help becoming frightened when it seems to me that you're emotionally unavailable. Maybe that's just my stuff, but have you noticed any shifts in our relationship?" **Healthy people look for patterns in their past actions and experiences to help them understand their current feelings and to avoid re-enacting bad behavior.** And good partners are interested in understanding the origins of deep emotions and in seeing things from the other's point of view. But these kind of "I" statements can be overused, too. **Remember that while it is important for your partner to understand your emotions, it is not always her responsibility to care about the minutia of why you have behaved badly.** Sometimes, we all just have to say: "I have behaved badly. I am sorry. I will try not to do it again." Sometimes, no one cares if your daddy treated you wrong. Don't be a victim, and don't see your partner

that way all the time either. Listen carefully to your partner's "I" statements, and expect that he will do the same. And remember, one person is not usually "right" and the other "wrong" --though that does happen on occasion.

5. **Never say "but."** This one is simple. Try not to use the word at all. People anticipate it, and if you don't deliver, they not only feel better, but you have probably done a better job of communicating. Consider this example: "I love you, but you're being really clingy right now." Vs. "I love you, and I wish I could give you more time. Unfortunately, I just can't right now." Or: "Maybe you're right, but I don't think we should risk buying the TV from that sketchy guy." Vs. "You might be right. On the other hand, are we sure it's worth the risk of jail time?"

6. Restate what you have heard, and be willing to see misunderstandings clearly. **Another helpful listening skill is repeating back what you hear your partner say before responding.** It sounds artificial, but it is often helpful to make sure you have not misunderstood your partner, and for your partner to hear what he has said and how it sounds. You might be surprised, once you start using this technique, at how much of what you "hear" your partner "say" is actually what you *think* your partner *means*. **If it becomes clear that a misunderstanding has occurred, do not get frustrated with your partner's inability to communicate effectively, or the anxieties or anger that may have filled her ears with garble when all you tried to do was stuff sense into her head-holes.** Rather than getting defensive when you have been misunderstood, try to see it as an opportunity to clarify an important point. When you have misunderstood your partner's words or intentions, own up to it. Say, "I thought you meant something else." And if what you "heard" was worse than what was actually said, say "I'm so relieved." Most of all, be willing to change your point of view on a subject. If your partner is telling you that he didn't mean to indicate that he hates your mother or he couldn't give a shit about your Pilates class, and that in fact he respects your mother deeply and appreciates that you need two hours a week of organized stretching to make you feel okay, give him the benefit of the doubt. Believe your partner when he says "this is what I really meant," and expect him to do the same for you. You have to have faith and hope.

7. Don't always make a plan. And if you have to make a plan, make it clear. Some fraught conversations will be resolved simply when everyone has been heard, even if that has to happen without a concrete plan for future action. **Often, a difficult conversation between two partners is more about expressing relevant emotions, and less about reacting to or planning for actual action.** In fact, sometimes ending a conversation with "well, I guess I should get rid of the motorcycle" is not only unnecessary, but counterproductive. It can feel good just to be heard, and situations involving emotions are most often resolved by making sure everyone is respected and understood. For example, "I hear you, and I understand now how worried you are when I ride at eighty miles per hour on fourteen-inch wheels" can sometimes be a resolution. However, there are some times when changes to behavior or new ways of moving forward are imperative. If the conversation is more along the lines of "what the fuck are we going to do?" than "sometimes I just feel so sad," that does call for a plan. In that

case, make the plan together. **Try to reach a consensus, or at the very least, a compromise. And make sure the plan is clear.** Restate the action to be taken at the very end of the conversation. Say, “I will work on being punctual, and you will try not see my lateness as a reflection of my level of interest in you,” or, “Okay then. We’ll sell the house.” Once a decision has been reached, let go of the process that got you there. Forgive yourself for not having been on your best behavior, and forget that your partner initially tried to manipulate you through passive-aggressive silence. Give the purported solution an honest-to-god try. And later, evaluate the decision you’ve made, but don’t come back to the process unless it is absolutely necessary.

8. Be honest.

There are three kinds of lies. There is Lying with a capital “L” in order to illuminate the Truth with a capital “T.” There is telling the truth with a lower-case “t” in order to obscure the Truth with a capital “T.” And then there is just flat-out making shit up. All of these types of prevarication have their place. But if you are having a fraught conversation, and you have followed tip number two and determined that this is an Important conversation (rather than a petty grievance), then **now is not the time to obfuscate. First, be honest with yourself.** Run a worst-case-scenario in your head. Ask yourself what the worst possible outcome of this situation could be. Then ask yourself how likely that outcome is. If the worst possible result is, in actuality, unlikely to occur, remember to keep your response proportionate to the real situation, rather than to an ill-defined unlikely potential disaster. Do some soul-searching. If you are being honest, is there something in your recent behavior toward your partner for which you should make amends? If there is, do so. Now be honest with your partner. Express your real emotions. Get the details of the situation right. Don’t be afraid to ask hard questions. And be open to her response. Be willing to hear things that make you feel bad. Be willing to listen without getting defensive or going on the attack. Make sure that the conversation doesn’t end with important things left unsaid by either party.

9. Sometimes people just need reassurance.

Sometimes it is your job as a good partner to simply say: **“I know, I know. I love you and I will never leave you. You are a good person and the world is a beautiful place. It will be okay.”** Exactly those words. Sometimes it is your job to say this even when you have doubts yourself.

10. Learn. Don't be afraid to do an autopsy on the conversation when it's ended.

When your fraught conversation has ended, use what you have learned to have less-fraught conversations in the future. That’s not *fewer* of these types of conversations, just more pleasant ones. Tell your partner what she did well in this conversation, and show appreciation for the effort she put in to making it as comfortable and productive as possible. Talk about what you would have done differently if you could start the conversation again from the beginning. Think about the kind of language you want to make a custom of using, and the thought processes that work best for you and your partner. Establish and maintain good conversational habits.