

Leading Difficult Conversations with Emotional Intelligence

Yale *Center for Emotional Intelligence*



In a time of many strong emotions, it is more important than ever to give ourselves permission to feel and then to use the wisdom of our emotions to guide us forward. Part of that way forward may include personal reflection and difficult conversations about the emotions related to the complexities of our world right now. We created this set of reminders around engaging in these difficult conversations, both in reflection with ourselves, and with others in our communities. These conversations may take the shape of self-talk, journaling, or actual discussions with colleagues, friends, or family members, either virtually or in person.

- ***Acknowledge and validate our own and others' emotions and/or experiences.*** In just a few short months, many of us have experienced a wide range of emotions. As our nation is faced with a variety of traumatic events, many of us are experiencing overwhelming stress, wherein the intensity of our emotions is compounded. In order to heal and create change, we must bring awareness to these emotions that we and those around us are experiencing, and listen to the information emotions provide.
- ***Seek to understand the impact of emotions.*** We can ask how our emotions are affecting our own and others' lives. How are they hindering us, and how can they help us?
- ***Consider the difference between intent and impact.*** An important aspect of emotionally intelligent communication is being aware of how our messages are received by those around us. Sometimes, in spite of our best intentions, the impact of our words and actions can be negative. When we get feedback about our impact, it can be tempting to explain or defend. But listening empathically and validating others' feelings will keep communication open. Empathy and perspective taking can help us create a new awareness around the impact of our emotions.
- ***Start with self-awareness.*** We can be aware of our own power, privilege, shortcomings, and strengths, as well as what we know and what we don't know. We can examine our own thoughts, words, and actions, and how they are received.
- ***Educate ourselves.*** We can look at history, learn from it, and consider historical context and tragedy as a catalyst for change.

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- **Analyze the data.** We can examine our own belief systems and behavior. We can ask: Am I assuming the other person is feeling a certain way? What might have shaped my beliefs and behavior? Do my thoughts and actions align with how I want to think, how I want to act?
- **Really listen.** We listen with our whole selves when we try to avoid planning what we'll say and instead focus on who is speaking, what is being said, how it's being said, and what it means. We must be willing to be patient, to be surprised, to learn something new.
- **Identify what we need to heal. It is important to practice self-care and consider what we each need right now.** This may be people, activities, conversations, or simply space to reflect or rest. We can consider and honor the requests we each need to make of ourselves and others in order to have our needs met.
- **Envision the change we want to see.** We can ask: What do we want to change? What does that look like? When we create a clear picture of what that looks like and feels like, we can begin to imagine actionable steps to create those changes.
- **Identify what we need to move forward.** When we focus on learning, growing, changing, and rebuilding, we can ask: What do we need in order to get there? How can we get what we need?
- **Build a repertoire of strategies.** As we identify and try out strategies that help us manage our emotions and work toward solutions to move forward, we can record our triumphs and challenges, revise our plans, and share what works with others.
- **Consider what is realistic.** We can ask: What variables can we accept as beyond our individual control right now? What is within our reach? What can we actually do individually, collectively, and over time?
- **Celebrate successes.** In times when struggles are many and victories are few, the celebration of small successes becomes critical. Being an educator is one of the strongest sources of activism. As district and school leaders and as educators, we've already been doing the hard work. We know how to cultivate social and emotional skills, compassion, and empathy. We can ask ourselves: How can we continue, and perhaps deepen, the work?

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- ***Express gratitude.*** We can reflect on who we're thankful for and why. We can connect with them to show how much we appreciate and value them.
- ***Hold onto our values.*** When we are shaken, we can hold on tight to what matters. We can ask ourselves: What do we value the most, and how can we keep these values close? How can we live our values in our actions?
- ***Take our time and respect that others may be moving at a different pace.*** We all need to go through our emotions and our situations at different speeds. Some people will need to focus on healing. Others will be ready to move full speed ahead with change. When in conversation with groups of colleagues or friends, it's important to remember this, allowing people to choose to just listen, pass on participating actively in the conversation, or engaging in a more active way.
- ***Feed what we want to grow.*** Though we must give ourselves time and space to work through whatever we are feeling, at some point, there will come a time to focus on our hopes, our vision for change and a better future, and the opportunities and steps we can take to get there.
- ***Commit to action steps (when ready).*** When we're ready to do the hard work of creating change, we can ask: What is one thing we/I can do differently today, this week, right now to move forward?

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In particular, in conversation with our children and students, we also can:

- ***Process everything that is happening, letting them be our guides.*** Between distance learning, the reopening of schools with masks and different schedules, to new fears about violence and curiosities about the divisions of our nation, we can discuss these changes, how they feel, and how we can manage these feelings in helpful ways. We can let our children and students guide these conversations with us, ask questions about their needs, and create calming spaces for students to reflect and/or communicate with us.
- ***Honor all feelings.*** Explain that we have emotions for a reason, and that sometimes we just need quiet space to gather ourselves, grieve, and feel what we feel. It may be difficult for most parents and teachers to see our children in pain, or to let them see us hurting. Yet, when we give ourselves permission to feel the full force, depth, and range of our emotions, and we put names to those feelings, it can help us come to understand more about ourselves – what we fear, what we avoid, what we value, what we hold dear. Naming what we feel also helps us manage what we feel. Consider asking children or adolescents to journal about or paint their different emotions, or write a poem, and to explore what those emotions might be telling them about themselves. Exploring and understanding how we feel in a deeper way can be both empowering and lead to positive action.
- ***Discuss the challenges.*** Talking to our children and students about a range of challenging topics, even when they are young, can help prepare them for the trials that will inevitably come their way in life, and actually foster resilience. When we have conversations about challenging topics, young people learn that they can come to us, and they begin to learn about the skills needed to navigate adversity. They learn that we are comfortable discussing uncomfortable topics. We can consider the key messages we want them to take away from the conversation. Even if they have no direct experience, exploring challenging topics can foster empathy by helping them understand other people's life experiences better.
- ***Model the behavior and skills we want to see.*** As the adults in their lives, we can look at every interaction with our children and our students as an opportunity to teach empathy, compassion, and hope, and to work toward positive change and meaningful connections. As we engage in conversations about emotions and actions with our classroom, friends, and community, we are modeling courage and conversations for our students.

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In particular, in conversation with our children and students, we also can:

- ***Pause to do something meaningful.*** We can ask ourselves as educators and parents: What can be folded into academics and other priorities that can heal our children and provide meaning to the times? How can we connect what is happening around us with school work and other routines? Where is there room for relevant, helpful readings and discussions? Where in our daily routines can we infuse more meaning?
- ***Give them their wish in fantasy.*** Even if the world is not as we would like, we, and especially young people, can imagine a kinder and more beautiful world. If we sense our children or students are feeling unhappy about the world as it is, we might ask, “What kind of world would you create if you were in charge?” Then, we can meet them at the place of their vision and say yes to their feelings. We might build upon what they say, and have fun giving them their wish in fantasy in drawing, music, art, or just a detailed visualization. Who knows, it may even ignite an idea or a plan for a brighter future.

