

MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Everyone knows the phrase 'we need to talk' is usually the start to a tough conversation. Here are tips on how to handle them effectively



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WE ALL need some help in starting conversations we would rather not have – whether it's to confront a sibling who borrows your stuff without asking, a noisy, rude neighbour or a colleague who has a body-odour problem.

Let's be honest, we avoid having these talks because they're a challenge. We're afraid of being too blunt, of speaking too carelessly and making the situation worse. So you keep quiet, hoping things will improve or the situation will resolve itself.

But when you don't speak up, the other person carries on, oblivious to how you feel, while your frustration, irritation and anger levels rise and eventually you explode, with disastrous consequences.

There is a better way, says author Maureen Collins. In her book, *Straight Talk: How to Manage Conversations that Scare You* (Zebra Press, R150), Maureen gives step-by-step coaching on how sensitive and personal issues can be discussed safely and constructively without damaging your relationships. Here are some of her tips.

THREE THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU START TALKING

1. How high are the stakes? (Does the conversation have the potential to end a career or personal relationship?)
2. Is there a positive outcome for both of you?
3. Can you make the conversation safe? You can't take back the words or undo any damage done.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

PROBLEM: A friend who talks too much

His or her problems are so much bigger than anyone else's. They are good at drawing others into their problems and stress, and you end up exhausted just listening to them.

Straight-talking tips This is best tackled while the other person is talking.

- Q Start by asking a question that will attract their attention, such as "Can I say something?"
- Q Tell the person how much you appreciate their friendship.
- Q Be very careful and specific in describing their behaviour in the current conversation. For example, you could say, "There are things I'd like to tell you and often try to. You ask me a question but before I can answer, you start telling me about something else."
- Q Explain how you feel without blaming your friend. For instance say, "I feel I'm not really part of the conversation."
- Q Try to defuse the person's defensiveness by acknowledging your own share of responsibility. You could say, "It's partly my fault. I don't like pushing myself into a conversation."
- Q End the conversation with an apology and reinforce your feelings about your friendship.

PROBLEM: Confronting a noisy neighbour

Whether the problem is loud music and parties that go on until the early hours of the morning or the revving of a car or motorbike, it's best tackled as soon as you become aware of it.

- Straight-talking tips** Think of the outcome you want from the conversation. You don't want to alienate your neighbour but need to be firm about stopping the noise.
- Q Draw attention to the current noise by saying something like: "I'm sure you're aware of the noise from your party last night/your car/your dog barking".
 - Q Explain how you feel about the situation. "It's not reasonable as it kept me awake."
 - Q You can make a suggestion but let your neighbour come up with a solution, such as: "Maybe we can end the party by 11 pm". That way you get a commitment out of them.

HAVING EFFECTIVE TALKS WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

PROBLEM: Negotiating with family who overstay their welcome

Setting boundaries before any family member settles into your home is vital in maintaining good relationships.

Straight-talking tips

- Q Confront the family member about the length of their stay as soon as you're aware of your own family having a problem.
- Q Open the conversation with a direct question: "So what's the story with your travel plans/house that's being built?" Be direct and honest: "We have a bit of a problem."
- Q Share responsibility for the problem by not discussing the length of their stay at the start. Say, "My children are sharing a room to make space for you but now they're getting on each other's nerves because it is very cramped. Can we make a plan?"
- Q Let the person own the problem and offer to make alternative arrangements.
- Q Put a follow-up conversation in place by asking them to let you know what they plan to do so you can tell your own family.

LEARNING TO SAY NO

PROBLEM: Friends or family who want to borrow money/car/clothes

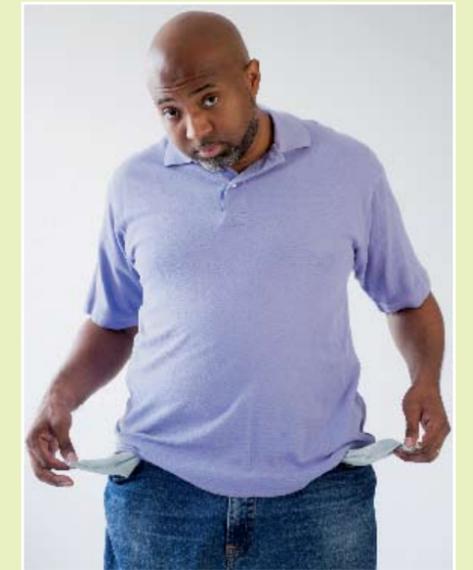
Your sister wants to borrow your new clothes, you get up at 5 am to finish a presentation a colleague has asked your help with or you go out of your way to give a friend's child a lift to school and in the process get stuck in traffic on the way to work.

Very often you say "yes" when you mean "no" because you fear others will criticise you for being selfish or uncaring, or to hold on to the illusion that you can be there for everyone.

Being able to say "no" is an important skill you need to keep yourself in a good space and give you more time to pursue what's important to you.

Straight-talking tips

- The way you say it matters. Be brief, honest and don't apologise or explain unnecessarily. Simply allow the person to see that you have made your decision thoughtfully and carefully.
- Use the acronym CARE to plan your conversation when saying no:
- Q **C**lear – Start by finding out exactly what the person wants from you. Get details of what, when, who, why and how much.
 - Q **A**cknowledge the request. This way the person knows you heard and understood what he or she wants. You may say, "So, let me check: you want me to . . ." or "Okay, you're asking if I can . . . Is that right?"
 - Q **R**ecognise your own needs. Do you have the time to do this? Would you enjoy doing it?
 - Q **E**ffect. If you say no, will this have a negative effect on an important relationship or your career?



MANAGING A BODY-ODOUR PROBLEM

PROBLEM: A colleague, friend or family member has bad body odour

Instead of avoiding the person or dropping hints, ask yourself: "If I had a body odour problem, how would I like someone to speak to me about it?"

Straight-talking tips

- Q Try to find the right words to describe the problem. Say, "There's something I need to talk to you about and I'm not sure how to put it."
- Q Describe the problem gently: "I can't help noticing your body odour. I have a sense others might also have noticed."
- Q Invite the person to propose a solution – maybe they are taking medication or don't have proper washing facilities. "What do you think is the best solution?"
- Q Acknowledge the change in what the person has done as soon as possible.



For more tips on how to have better conversations, visit www.straight-talk.co.za