

# VOICE UP:

## *Your Five-Step Guide To Having* DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



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**Speaking up can be scary.** The simple act of saying “no,” for example, can prove anything but simple, and trigger a list of fears that run the gamut from judgement and retribution to hostility, ugly social media rants and everything in between. *If I say no, people might not like me. They’ll think I’m difficult, selfish, unwilling to help, lazy, or that I don’t like them.* How many times have you blurted out a lie when invited to join a group of people you don’t particularly like...then made up an excuse to avoid disappointing them?



*What fear prevents you from speaking truth?*

What would it feel like if you could **unpack the fear and learn from it** so you could lean into your courageous self and decline the invitation with kindness and honesty?

These are questions many people grapple with and that I have grappled with myself. I’ve created this guide to serve as a roadmap to deal with those uncomfortable moments, to discover and unpack what we fear in difficult conversations, to embrace the fear as a useful tool, to **enlighten it and empower ourselves** to choose courage and trust, and to develop the ability to take up space.

Try applying this **Five-Step Guide to Having Difficult Conversations** the next time you’re facing a potentially dicey chat. Each step is followed by a **Fear-Finding Exercise** intended to develop your skills and establish muscle memory on the strategies.

You might be surprised at how much easier it becomes to move through these conversations. You might also be surprised at *how good it feels*.

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# YOUR FIVE-STEP GUIDE TO HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS

## Step One: Unpack the Fear

It's natural and understandable to want to avoid disappointing others, but all too often it can become a knee-jerk tendency rather than a choice that serves us. If you're invited out to dinner with a less-than-favorite group of friends, why not just kindly bow out? Why do we so often feel compelled to make up a story?

## Step Two: Fear-Fact, or Fear-Fiction?

The human brain is a meaning-maker that creates stories to explain its experiences. It then falls victim to a host of tendencies--science calls them cognitive biases--to convince itself that the stories are true. But our internal narratives about what's happening in the world around us don't necessarily reflect the facts. It's important to discern between **fact** and **fiction**, between what is actually true compared to what could be a story our brain is spinning.

## Step Three: Do Your Job

Particularly when approaching an uncomfortable exchange, keep the focus on communicating **your** thoughts and feelings, not predicting the reaction of the other person. Stay on task--it's not your job to speculate about how your words will be interpreted, only to deliver them in an honest and compassionate way. Focus on the "I" instead of the "you". It's not that you're being inconsiderate---on the contrary, you're making courageous choices in how you conduct the discussion so that you're both well-served and respected.

## Step Four: Don't be Sorry

There's no reason to apologize for being open and honest, unless addressing something you've done wrong. If you're choosing to be transparent about something that you think is worthy of that effort, there's nothing to be sorry for. Apologizing can become a crutch, a knee-jerk action used to rid ourselves of guilt or shame, even when there's nothing to feel guilty or shameful about. Besides, constant apologizing only dilutes the meaning of any one apology.

## Step Five: Say it, Then Wait

When having a difficult chat, *conversation* is the operative word. If you make the courageous choice to communicate with respectful candor, say your piece and then give the other person the opportunity to process and respond. Honor the silence rather than fill it. Expect to be heard when you're speaking (interruption and over-talking is a **no-no**), then let your words sit. If you don't get a response right away and you're uncomfortable with the silence, ask whether the other needs time to process.



# Step One — UNPACK THE FEAR

It's natural and understandable to want to avoid disappointing others, but all too often it can become a knee-jerk tendency rather than a choice that serves us. If you're invited out to dinner with a less-than-favorite group of friends, why not just kindly bow out? Why do we so often feel compelled to make up a story?

Because it's easier, that's why. But *easier* isn't necessarily *better*.

And, in the example of turning down a dinner invitation, it serves neither of you particularly well.

*"Discovering the truth about ourselves is a lifetime's work, but it's worth the effort."  
~Fred Rogers*

So, before you blurt out that you can't make it because your hair caught fire and your cat tried to put it out...unpack why you're considering the fib in the first place.

**Consider a few possible reactions** to a kind yet honest response and see what fears bubble up.

## **Hurt feelings.**

**What's the fear?** If it's that whoever extended the invitation will be disappointed by your absence, that's an understandable feeling. Would you prefer that they were happy you declined? Probably not.

The fact is, they might appreciate knowing the reason you're choosing not to join and your feelings about the others on the invite list. They might even propose an alternate date for the two of you to get together, affording the opportunity to explain your feelings and deepen your bond through openness and honesty.

***They'll get angry.***

**What's the fear?** The inviter could respond negatively because you've gone places with them before without mentioning your discomfort. But that would provide yet another **opportunity** to develop a deeper and more authentic bond—perhaps by explaining that you've tried to navigate through your issues in the past but realized that you'd rather be honest about it then accept an invitation you weren't looking forward to.

Both cases create opportunities for more honest communication and deeper connection as well a chance to practice focusing on what you *can* control versus what you *cannot*. You can control your approach and what you choose to share. By being open, honest and kind, you're providing important information that will build a stronger bridge of communication.

You *cannot* control how others receive or process the information you choose to share. But if you show up with integrity and honesty, you can feel good about your courageous choice and resist attaching to how the information is received on other end. It's not being callous or disinterested. On the contrary, it represents progress and growth toward clear and powerful communication.





# Step Two —FACT OR FICTION?

The human brain is a hard-wired meaning-maker that constantly creates stories to explain its experiences. It then falls victim to a host of tendencies—neuroscience calls them *cognitive biases*—to convince itself that the stories are true. One such tendency is confirmation bias, or the tendency to look for evidence to confirm our beliefs. In his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, economist and Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman explains:

*“Contrary to the rules of philosophers of science, who advise testing hypotheses by trying to refute them, people (and scientists, quite often) seek data that are likely to be compatible with the beliefs they currently hold.”*

*~Daniel Kahneman*

The problem with confirmation bias, Kahneman writes, is that it “favors uncritical acceptance of suggestions and exaggeration of the likelihood of extreme and improbable events.” Simply put, it's human nature to conjure up stories, then work hard to believe them.

Unfortunately, our internal narratives about what’s happening in the world around us don’t necessarily reflect the facts. So, it's important to discern between fact and fiction, what is true and what could be a story that your brain is spinning.

## ***Sarah, Michele and the Migraine***

Let’s take a hypothetical situation in which Sarah invites her friend Michele to dinner and a movie. Michele accepts at first, then ends up canceling at the last minute because of a migraine. Sarah later finds out that Michele went out on the same night with a guy she met online. Although Sarah feels hurt and betrayed, she is afraid to confront the issue since Michele experienced a rough breakup six months ago and has been feeling sad and lonely.

## What are the facts?

- Michele cancelled because she felt ill.
- Michele went out with someone else on the same evening.
- Sarah felt hurt when she discovered that Michele went out with someone else.

When Sarah broaches the subject with Michele, she can focus on the **facts** and her feelings about those facts by saying something like: “I felt badly that you told me you had a migraine and then went out with someone else.” By speaking truth about her feelings without creating narratives which may or may not be accurate, Sarah can approach the subject in an honest way.

If Sarah were to let her meaning-making brain take over, she might say something like: “I felt badly that you faked a migraine and cancelled with me when you really just wanted to go out with someone you met online.”

**The difference is subtle but important:** In the second example, **Sarah is acting based on a narrative that her brain created which may or may not be true.** She presumed what Michele's motivations and thoughts were and made a judgement based on that. While Sarah may have had good reason to believe her own story, it is still a story. Fiction, not fact. There are countless other, equally probable stories that Sarah could have concocted, and while perhaps none of them would have excused the last minute cancellation, the salient point here is that Sarah **did not have all the facts.**

The additional layer that Michele experienced an unhappy breakup six months ago doesn't alter the fact that Sarah is entitled to express hurt feelings to Michele. Of course, she wants her friend to be happy and to emerge from her post break-up funk, but Sarah is entitled to whatever feelings she has about Michele's cancellation and the events that unfolded that evening.

The goal here is for both parties to speak truth, cultivate understanding, and build organic connection. Both are entitled to any and all feelings they have, but behaving based on potentially fictional narratives can create a minefield of misunderstanding.





# Step Three —DO YOUR JOB

Particularly when approaching an uncomfortable exchange, keep the focus on communicating your thoughts and feelings rather than predicting or judging the reactions of others. Do YOUR job—which is to explain your reaction to a situation or event. Stay on task—resist the urge to speculate about how your words will be interpreted and instead focus on delivering them in an honest and compassionate way. Humans are notorious predictors—we like to know how things are going to turn out. But this is often a futile exercise.

No one has a crystal ball, and passing judgements on what someone else is thinking or feeling is a recipe for misunderstanding and conflict.

Keep your comments focused on the “I” instead of the “you.” It’s not that you’re being inconsiderate or self-centered. On the contrary, you’re making courageous choices in how you conduct the discussion so that you’ll both be well-served and respected. Once you communicate your thoughts and feelings, allow the other person to communicate without interruption or over-talking.

Think about tough conversations you’ve had in the recent past. Specifically, try to recall how many times you’ve heard yourself saying: **“you acted like X”** or **“you thought Y.”** We can’t possibly know what someone else’s thoughts or intentions are--- we can only observe what they *actually* do and say, and then express how we feel about that. But we tend to draw conclusions about others’ words and behaviors—which may be completely false.

Then there’s the ubiquitous phrase **“you made me feel Z.”** This statement is a fallacy. **No one can make us feel any particular way.** We react to the actions and words of others based on our own life experiences and our unique fear relationship, but no one else can control or dictate our reactions.

Let's go back to the example of Sarah and Michele from Step Two above. Suppose Sarah said to Michele: *"You made me feel awful and betrayed because you lied to me and kicked me to the curb for a guy."*

Such a statement is a landmine of judgement, assumption and potential misunderstanding. Sarah may have felt horrible and betrayed in the wake of Michele cancelling the movie date, but Michele didn't **make** her feel that way. In an honest and courageous discussion, Sarah would say to Michele: *"I felt awful when you cancelled our date. Then I felt even worse when I found out you went out with a guy you met online. It left me wondering whether you were being honest about your migraine in the first place."*

Again, subtle but meaningful differences. The first statement could come off as argumentative and judgmental, while the second is merely a statement of fact—how Sarah felt about Michele's actions. So then, **why do we so often focus on the "you" and not the "I" when we're having a difficult conversation?** It has a lot to do with our own fear-based thoughts. We experience life through the filters of all of our past experiences and imprinting. Whatever fears we have accumulated along the way tend to rear their heads when we find ourselves in a rough patch.

Sarah's first hypothetical statement may reflect fear-based thoughts she has around abandonment or unworthiness. Perhaps she had been betrayed by friends or family members in the past, maybe even in a similar way. The possibilities are as endless as they are unique to each individual—which is why it can be problematic to let them seep into our dealings with others.

While it might seem that the more courageous choice is to unleash a rant on a friend that has upset you, the opposite is true. The courageous choice is to stay in your lane and express your feelings in the hopes of building a stronger bond of communication.

I'm not suggesting this is easy road to travel—it takes a lot of self-awareness and practice to implement these strategies, particularly when things are emotionally charged. But it's worth the work as it lays the groundwork for more transparent and healthier exchanges.



# Step Four —DON'T APOLOGIZE

There's no reason to apologize for being open and honest unless you've done something wrong. If you're choosing to discuss something that's presenting a challenge for you, there's no need to be sorry about it. Apologies can sometimes become a knee-jerk behavior used to rid ourselves of guilt or shame, even when there's nothing to feel guilty or shameful about. And constant apologizing can dilute the perceived meaning of any one apology.

**A 2010 study by the Association for Psychological Science found that women apologize more than men do.** Interestingly, however, the study also found that this wasn't because men chose not to apologize when they felt they did something wrong, but rather that women have a lower threshold for behavior that constitutes an apology.

In other words, **women *think they should* apologize more often than men do.**

I observed this first hand during a recent session with my physical therapist. At an adjacent table, a female PT intern was delivering treatment and I couldn't help but notice how many times she apologized for the discomfort she perceived it was causing her patient. In the span of five minutes, I heard her apologize at least 6 times. She was very knowledgeable and good at her job, and was performing the treatment with care and professionalism. But she was clearly uncomfortable with her role in causing any discomfort, even though that often goes with the territory of physical therapy. I had never heard any of the male therapists in the practice apologize in this way---maybe because they didn't consider the work they were doing worthy of an apology.

If you're having a difficult conversation with a friend and feel compelled to apologize for your feelings, ask yourself these questions before you do:

- Am I doing something wrong?
- Am I expressing myself with respect, kindness and compassion?

If you answer "no" to the first question and "yes" to the second, then an apology is not required. If you're sensing tension or hostility in the discussion, there are plenty of other ways to express care and support.

Here are a few examples:

- “Your voice sounds a little tense. Would you like to come back to this discussion at another time?”
- “I hope you know that I wanted to have this conversation because I think it’s important and I always want to be honest with you.”
- “I’d like to know how you’re feeling about this talk and hear how you’re processing what I’m saying.”





# Step Five —SAY IT, THEN WAIT

When having a difficult conversation with a friend, *conversation* is the operative word. It's important to leave space and opportunity for both of you to speak openly. If you've made the courageous choice to communicate your honest thoughts with respect and candor, give the other person the opportunity process and respond to your comments. **Honor rather than fill silences.** Expect to be heard when you're speaking (interruption and over-talking is a no-no), then let your comments sink in.

Silence isn't something people necessarily know what to do with, and the tendency to avoid it is common. Getting comfortable with it might be a tall order, but definitely something worth exploring. The first step may be to raise your awareness around it. **Notice how often you allow yourself to sit in silence.** Do you always need background music or television noise? Try to allocate a small chunk of time each day to sit silently, and notice how it feels. Learning about your own relationship with silence can inform how you conduct yourself in interactions with others.

*“All profound things and emotions of things are preceded and attended by silence.”*  
~Herman Melville

## The Science of Silence

In 2015, the National Institute of Health published the results of a study on how different types of noise and silence affected the brains of mice. Although silence was intended to be the control in the study, the researchers were surprised to discover that when the mice were exposed to two hours of silence each day they developed new cells in the hippocampus—the region of the brain associated with memory, emotion and learning.

They discovered that **silence supports brain growth.**

Keep this in mind the next time you're having an awkward conversation. **Allow moments of silence** where you can give the other person the opportunity not only to process what has been said, but to formulate clear thoughts and comments.

A 2018 article in *Psychology Today* said, "To be silent in someone else's presence is a mark of trust. We know this to be true in other relationships; mature romantic relationships are marked by the ability to simply be in the beloved's presence. **To be alone and silent with someone else is to take them seriously as an independent person.**"

There are few things more maddening than engaging in any type of discussion with someone who interrupts or "over-talks"—speaks over your words before you've finished. Besides being dismissive and disrespectful, it's downright rude.

In deep or difficult discussions, it's essential to hold space and offer silence when someone else is speaking. Let the other's comments sit in an untouched pause. If you're uncomfortable with it, you might ask, "Have you finished your thought? I don't want to interrupt you." If you're speaking and the other person begins talking over you, say, "I want to hear your thoughts, but please let me finish." Or, my personal favorite, "*I'm almost finished, so please hold your thought.*"



# Find your fear. Find your way.

I hope you find these concepts and strategies helpful.

If you're feeling stuck in fear-based thinking that's affecting your communication skills, you may benefit from my online course, **The F.E.A.R. Formula: How To Get Unstuck and Lean Into Courage**. This six-module, self-paced course teaches actionable, concrete strategies for shifting fear-based thought patterns and is available **here**.

If you would like a complimentary discovery call with me, you can schedule one **here**.

Please participate in my **Fear Finding Survey** by clicking **here**. It provides valuable data that informs my content and offerings.



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