

## **Free Speech, Fighting Words, and Violence**

### **Overview**

In Living Room Conversations, a small group of people (e.g. 4-7) people come together to get to know one another in a more meaningful way. Guided by a simple and sociable format, participants practice being open and curious about all perspectives, with a focus on learning from one another, rather than trying to debate the topic at hand.

### **The Living Room Conversation Ground Rules**

#### **Be Curious and Open to Learning**

Listen to and be open to hearing all points of view. Maintain an attitude of exploration and learning. Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking.

#### **Show Respect and Suspend Judgment**

Human beings tend to judge one another, do your best not to. Setting judgments aside will better enable you to learn from others and help them feel respected and appreciated.

#### **Look for Common Ground and Appreciate Differences**

In this conversation, we look for what we agree on and simply appreciate that we will disagree on some beliefs and opinions.

#### **Be Authentic and Welcome that from Others**

Share what's important to you. Speak authentically from your personal and heartfelt experience. Be considerate to others who are doing the same.

#### **Be Purposeful and to the Point**

Notice if what you are conveying is or is not "on purpose" to the question at hand. Notice if you are making the same point more than once.

#### **Own and Guide the Conversation**

Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation by noticing what's happening and actively support getting yourself and others back "on purpose" when needed.

Though feedback is consistently positive, some people are concerned about managing people that dominate the conversation as well as off-topic, or disruptive situations during the Living Room Conversation. We offer these tips:

- Everyone shares responsibility for guiding the conversation and is invited to help keep the conversation on track.
- The group can decide to keep track of time in some way to help people remember to keep their comments similar in length to others. Soft music when the time is up is a great reminder.
- If an area of interest has arisen that has taken the group off topic, ask the group if they would like to set aside the new topic for a separate Living Room Conversation.
- If someone is dominating, disruptive or has found their soapbox, respectfully interrupt the situation, refer to the Ground Rules and invite everyone to get back on track with the current question
- If the group opts to shift from the format of the Living Room Conversations, please provide us with feedback for future learning. There are many ways to have a great conversation! Thank you!  
[feedback@livingroomconversations.org](mailto:feedback@livingroomconversations.org)

## **Rounds/Questions: The Living Room Conversation Starts Here**

Some Americans feel violated by flag burning; some by racist rallies. As extremist groups use violence to gain media attention, most Americans oppose the use of violence. "Fighting words" against individuals in public are not protected free speech ([see 1942 SCOTUS decision](#)), but the definition of "fighting words" is unclear and has led to inconsistent court decisions ([Wikipedia](#)). Should the government restrict the freedoms of speech and assembly of any groups or individuals, and if so, under what circumstances? Is too much tolerance dangerous, or is giving an authority the power to restrict freedom of speech and assembly even more dangerous?

### **Round One: Getting Started / Why Are We Here?**

- What interested you or drew you to this conversation?
- What are your trusted news sources?

### **Round Two: Core Values**

Answer one or more of the following:

- What sense of purpose / mission / duty guides you in your life?
- What would your best friend say about who you are and what makes you "tick"?
- What are your hopes and concerns for your community and/or the country?

### **Round Three: Free Speech, Fighting Words, and Violence**

Remember that the goal for this Living Room Conversation is for all of us to listen and learn about where we have different opinions and where we have shared interests, intentions and goals.

Answer two or more of the following questions:

- How do we protect free speech and ensure public safety despite ongoing threats of violence?
- Have you had a personal experience where free speech was inhibited? Or have you ever felt harmed by the speech of others?
- How do we decide what our collective, social morality is? What is the federal government's role?
- How do we allow for nuanced beliefs within each larger group without labeling everyone in the group as bigots or zealots?
- How do we make space for honest yet nuanced discussion in a public space?

### **Round Four: Reflection**

Answer one or more of the following questions:

- In one sentence, share what was most meaningful / valuable to you in the experience of this Living Room Conversation.
- What learning, new understanding or common ground was found on this topic?
- Has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?

### **Round Five: Accomplishment and Next Steps**

Answer both of the following questions:

- What is one important thing you thought was accomplished here?
- Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?

**Closing** – Thank you! Please complete the feedback form to help improve Living Room Conversations.



## Host & Participant Feedback Form

Please complete following the form, AND TAKE PICTURES OF YOUR GROUP!

Turn into your host or take pictures and email them to [feedback@livingroomconversations.org](mailto:feedback@livingroomconversations.org)

Host, Location & Topic:

<p><b>1. Before it took place, how did you feel about this conversation? (check all that apply)</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Nervous</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not worried at all</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Excited</p>	<p><b>3. Did you learn or become aware of something valuable during the conversation?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>
<p><b>2. How do you feel now that the conversation is over? (check all that apply)</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> My fears were confirmed</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I am relieved it's over</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> It was more enjoyable than I expected</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I was grateful to be a part of it</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I really enjoyed the conversation</p>	<p><b>4. How do you feel about these kinds of conversations in the future?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I want to co-host with my friends.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I would enjoy doing another in the future.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I would enjoy getting involved in lots of them.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I would rather not have these kinds of conversations again.</p>
<p><b>5. Which of the following statements apply to your relationship with other participants after the conversation? (Check all statements that apply)</b></p>	
<p><input type="checkbox"/> I feel closer and more connected to them</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> I feel more distance between us</p>
<p><input type="checkbox"/> I know them more personally</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> I don't know them any better</p>
<p><input type="checkbox"/> I like them more</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> I like them less</p>
<p><input type="checkbox"/> I see more goodness in them than before</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> I don't see any more goodness than I did before</p>
<p><input type="checkbox"/> I see more common ground now</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> I see less common ground now</p>
<p><input type="checkbox"/> I understand where they are coming from more</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> I am more confused at where they are coming from</p>

Comments \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for helping us learn about how the Living Room Conversation process worked for you! If you have any further feedback or a quote we can use, please write them on the back side or send us a note at [info@LivingRoomConversations.org](mailto:info@LivingRoomConversations.org)

We are conducting research on the impact of Living Room Conversations. May we contact you for more information?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

- Yes! Keep me updated on Living Room Conversations. We will only send you email updates if you check the box.
- You have permission to use my photo in materials for Living Room Conversations.
- You may share my email with CivilPolitics.org so I can participate in an online survey about my experience here.

*Privacy statement: Your contact information, including name, email and phone number will be used only for the purpose of gathering your feedback, unless boxes are checked above to receive additional communication.*