



Home for the Holidays: Dialogue Across Divides Among Family and Friends

This year we've been hearing from all sorts of people that they want to use Living Room Conversations skills to help heal family relationships. People have experienced loss of or harm to treasured relationships because of politics. And now with the holidays coming up they are considering how to navigate. Does love supersede politics? For most people it does. But there is still confusion and hurt to manage. How do we do this? How can we listen to each other and hold the tension of our differences?

People have reported going home and having better conversations with relatives and friends they disagree with after having Living Room Conversations. **There are skills that we get to practice in Living Room Conversations that are easy to take home.** Some have invited relatives to join them in Living Room Conversations. Like with any Living Room Conversation you only invite people you believe will be able and willing to abide by the conversation agreements and follow the structure. People have a natural intuition about what friends and family to invite. We all know family members that aren't good at taking turns being curious or listening with respect. We also tend to know when family is good at it, or might be, with gentle reminders of the conversation agreements.

For years we've told people that family is one situation where we are not fully confident that Living Room Conversations will work. Why? Because **family is known for breaking host and guest social norms.** Because family knows each other's triggers and because family relations often require more of us. Emotional stakes tend to be higher, conversations are colored by history and it can feel easier to take the proverbial gloves off and fight dirty, unconstrained by the politeness we give others. But we love our family, even when we don't like what they believe!

We are thrilled to have more and more people doing the [Relationships First](#) and other Living Room Conversations in order to hone their relationship skills and thinking. **Some people come away with a new appreciation for the power of listening or new curiosity about why people they love think the way they do or new insights about the power of asking questions without judgement.**

There are very few quick fixes in the world of relationships. Building trust and understanding takes time. This is slow and satisfying work.

INTRODUCTION

It's no secret we sometimes disagree with families and friends. What *seems* secret is how to handle it when we do! At Living Room Conversations, we specialize in structuring challenging conversations so they are safe and enjoyable using our Conversation Agreements and Conversation Guides.

Wouldn't it be great if we could talk to family and friends as respectfully as people in Living Room Conversations talk to strangers? We realized it could be useful to share our Conversation Agreements more broadly for the holidays. They are good to keep in mind for kinder dinner-table conversations. True, others may not be following the Conversation Agreements but sometimes good practices can be contagious and you can have the satisfaction of feeling better about your own part in the conversation.

CONVERSATION AGREEMENTS

These are the Living Room Conversation Agreements:

- **Be curious and open to learning.** Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. Enjoy hearing all points of view. Maintain an attitude of exploration.
- **Show respect and suspend judgment.** Human beings tend to judge one another; do your best not to. Setting judgments aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated.
- **Find common ground and note differences.** Look for common ground you can agree on and take an interest in the differing beliefs and opinions of others.
- **Be authentic and welcome that from others.** Share what's important to you. Speak authentically from your personal experience. Be considerate of others who are doing the same.
- **Be purposeful and to the point.** Notice if what you are conveying is or is not pertinent to the topic at hand.
- **Own and guide the conversation.** Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and that of the conversation. Be proactive in getting yourself and others back on track if needed.

THE BASICS

Listening is powerful. It doesn't mean you agree. Just giving someone your full attention is a valuable gift. People *rarely* change their beliefs in a conversation; but people *often* expand understanding through conversation. Focus on learning and sharing rather than debating or convincing. To do so you can:

- Ask thoughtful questions, inspired by whatever honest curiosity you feel
- Try to understand, not convince or persuade
- Share personal stories and experiences, not data points
- Notice if there are areas of agreement.
- Assume good intentions and extend the benefit of the doubt
- Thoughtfully end the conversation when you are triggered or tired
- Share appreciation for having the conversation

CORE SKILLS

- *Generous listening.* Listen deeply, without an intention to respond, refute, or defend. Just listen.
- *Assume good intent.* Give the person the benefit of the doubt.
- *Genuine curiosity.* Show curiosity by asking questions and learning more about the person's life experiences that have shaped their perspective.
- *Respectful engagement.* Showing respect and kindness can diffuse a great deal of tension and it's often contagious.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

- *Insults or name-calling.* Using unflattering names or making derogatory remarks about people that the other person cares about (including political leaders) are fighting words.
- *Overgeneralizing.* Beware of using words like "you always" and "you never." They are seldom true, and these words tend to feel attacking.
- *Leading questions.* Steer clear of asking questions designed to "trap" the person or lead them to a pre-determined answer you want to hear.
- *Talking more than listening.* It is rare to make progress on understanding a different perspective while doing the majority of the talking.
- *Facts, figures, and data-points.* Few things shut down a good conversation faster than cold, hard, facts...and alternative facts! Focus on concerns and experiences rather than data.

Additional Skills to Build Connection

- Set the stage. Establish your interest in an enjoyable, productive conversation rather than a debate or argument.
- Listen for values and desired outcomes. Most of us have core values that overlap (health, safety, prosperity). Identifying these can help strengthen the relationship.
- Verify and acknowledge feelings. Ask about, and seek to understand what the other person is feeling about the topic. They may have very personal experiences that shape their perspective. Be aware of these feelings and acknowledge them.
- Use humor, if possible. Be willing to laugh at yourself when and where appropriate. Humor can lighten the mood and make the conversation enjoyable.
- First-person language. Own your feelings and express them as “I felt _____ (feeling) when you _____ (describe specific behavior and when it occurred). For example, “I felt frustrated when you said I was unrealistic this morning.”
- Explore and reflect rather than disagree directly. For example, starting sentences with “I am wondering....” can be very productive if it is sincere.
- Find common ground. Look for and acknowledge areas of agreement.
- Use engaging language. See how often you can replace "but" with "and"
- Ask open-ended questions. This allows others to think out loud and may offer a better path for understanding their perspective.
- Keep a light tone. When judgement creeps in, your tone will give you away! If this happens, own it, apologize and ask another question.

FIRST AID

Families know where all the buttons are. What happens if you get triggered? Avoid responding when you know you are triggered and feel yourself being defensive and/or needing to be right. Sometimes, letting go of the conversation is the best course of action. A break for a short walk or new activity or change of subject can help restore equanimity. Try the following to change the direction of a conversation and/or mend a conversation that has turned destructive:

- Let's change the topic. Tell me, how is your garden (or other hobby)?
- This is a heated conversation. Our relationship is more important to me.
- I feel bad when we argue. Let's stop for now.
- I'm sorry we argued. I care about you.
- Our relationship will always be more important to me than our differences.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

When we stand in self-righteous anger, i.e. “how can you believe THAT?” we find ourselves separated. Some people -- including family members -- would prefer to be right than to be connected.

Sometimes we see family as a reflection of ourselves. We may feel an obligation to make them see "the error of their ways." And we may want to be clear that we are not flawed in that way, too. It can be much harder to **avoid judging** and **remain curious** with family--even when we know this is the most effective way for us to connect with them.

With family, not arguing and not pushing back can feel like a betrayal of our own beliefs. It can feel like selling out just to keep peace at the dinner table. But listening with genuine curiosity is not selling out or taking the easy road. There is deep value in taking a more respectful and curious approach. When we connect in this way mutual listening is far more possible. And remember: again and again we hear from Living Room Conversation Guide users who have friends and family with very different views that **love comes first**. Let's let it!

Some family and friends may not be ready for a thoughtful conversation and that is perfectly ok. At Living Room Conversation we choose conversation partners based upon their ability -- and commitment - to abide by the conversation agreements and enjoy an exploratory conversation. At a holiday gathering you may be the only person following conversation agreements. Choosing who to engage with, in what setting, and at what level is wise. For some people listening might be the only thing you want to do with them...moving on to others where you believe some mutual curiosity and appreciation might be productive. Also, recognize that a family gathering might be a place where some topics are simply not welcome. Be gentle with yourself and others. Sometimes the simple act of breaking bread together is enough.