



Guide to Difficult Conversations

Listen

You can't expect someone to hear you out if you don't repay the favor in kind – upfront, with interest. In other words, listening for 20 minutes and talking for 2 may be the appropriate way to reach someone. Active listening is important, too. Ask for clarification, ask why questions, and you will discover the unique perspective from where they are coming from.

Respect

Avoid name calling. If you think what they are saying is racist, evidence shows that calling them a racist or xenophobic **does not lead them to question their prejudices**. Remain calm, continue listening, and when it's your opportunity to speak, make your point.

Captivate

When you do speak, make it memorable. Your family member or friend is more likely to remember your point if it's part of a story involving a person. Visit [DefineAmerican.com/stories](https://www.defineamerican.com/stories) for hundreds of stories that can be used as a part of your conversations.

Reassure

A conversation about group identity can digress into an argument. Don't fall for it. Reassure your family member or friend that you care about what's happening in your neighborhood. You need to convey that you don't blindly care about your side "winning;" rather, you care about your shared quality of life.

Agree

Emphasize any point of agreement that you can find. Show that you are listening by referencing what they've said earlier, or challenge them to think about a topic in a new way by agreeing with part of their statement. Any kind of agreement relieves tension, and encourages future discussions, even if, at the end of the conversation, you remain far apart. You may still have to talk to them 4-5 more times before they start to get it. It's best to keep that door open, even if it doesn't go as you hoped the first time.

This guide is a starting point for understanding people, not for pushing an ideological agenda. Use it with the intention of connecting with your family and friends. Trust that they will listen to you too, and that they will respond thoughtfully when enough time and patience is given.

Say nothing. Hold back your urge to respond to everything immediately. Then ask them, "Why do you feel that way?" or "Why do you think that?"

"I understand when you say you wish immigrants today would 'just speak English.' But I think we could use some historical perspective. According to the **U.S. Census, 22% of white immigrants** (Italians, Germans, etc.) did not speak English in 1910. What has changed, the people coming here, or your expectations?"

"An immigrant like **Giovanni** is called one of the 'good ones' because he has DACA and works at a bank. What about his parents, who brought him here and are ineligible for DACA? Are they 'good ones' or 'bad ones'? What do you think Giovanni would say when he hears people like you talking about his parents in this way?"

"How will a group of asylum seekers affect you? What changes will happen in our neighborhood if a refugee family moves in? How did large groups of refugees, like the millions of Irish who came here after the Great Famine, or the **tens of thousands of Hungarians** who came here in 1956, affect average Americans?"

"You said that you feel like 'it's not right that people come here illegally and then their kids get citizenship just because they're born here.' You know what, I agree! You and I also have our citizenship just because we were born here. Maybe that's not a great system. Do you think citizenship should be something we earn? I think when people actively participate in their community for years, no matter their immigration status, they should be recognized as Americans."