

## How to Make Your Conversations Safe with Family Members



A family member asked about a conversation they had with a fellow family member and how they should've responded when the other person became angry in the conversation.

***Last week, my sister and I were discussing who should be responsible for our parents when they can no longer take care of themselves when unexpectedly my sister became angry and started yelling at me. I didn't know how to respond to her outburst, so I stopped talking and wanted to leave the room. I want to resolve the issue but don't know how I can speak with my sister when she responds like this. What could I have done differently?***

Although it is not uncommon for sensitive topics to trigger emotional responses from family members, we know it can be difficult to handle emotional outbursts during a conversation.

In your case, when your sister became angry and started yelling, that was a sign she no longer felt the conversation was emotionally safe for her. There was something said that triggered her, causing her to respond in anger. Not surprisingly, anger is one of the two most common responses when someone doesn't feel safe during a conversation. The other common response is to become silent or withdrawn, which is what you did in response to her anger. Neither of you felt comfortable or emotionally safe enough to continue the conversation.

So, what could have been done differently?

In the middle of a heated conversation, the key to continuing the conversation is bringing the conversation back to a place where both family members feel safe enough to continue the conversation.

To do this, you would:

1. Identify when the conversation turned heated. For instance, what was said when your sister became angry? Her angry response, either verbally or non-verbally, is the best indication of when her emotions were triggered. Likewise, when did you become silent and stop talking? How did you feel when she became angry?
2. Take a step back. Apologize for any discomfort you may have caused by what was said and tell her that you were in no way trying to offend her. A good way to do so is using contrasting statements (also called don't/do statements). For instance, "I didn't mean to upset you with what I've said. I do want us to work this out. Can we talk about this again?"
3. Take ownership of your part. Use "I" statements to indicate what part of the conversation you could have responded better in.
4. Build mutual purpose by discussing the issue in mutual terms, such as "How can we work together to resolve this?"
5. Continue to share your mutual respect and emphasize your desire for mutual purpose until the other party is open to continuing the conversation.