How to Have a Therapeutic Conversation:

Talking with People About Difficult Things

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**Therapeutic Conversations**

One thing you learn doing counseling is how to talk with people about difficult things.

Here are **ten general guidelines** for doing that, followed by some specific examples of phrases.

1. Always treat what the other person is thinking, feeling, or saying with respect.
2. Always treat yourself with respect – it is appropriate to set respectful limits on a conversation and refuse to continue if the other person is being abusive.
3. Assume that there is a very good reason behind whatever behavior is happening, and ask the question: “Why would this seem to be the very best possible choice to take or the very best reaction to have?”
4. NEVER assume or say that you understand what the other person is feeling or thinking because of your own experiences. Instead say “I had a similar experience and for me I felt XXXXX – is that what this is feeling like to you?”
5. Remember that pain and failure are very often helpful – that we can learn as much (or more) from these as we can from happiness and success. Don’t assume the best result is for this to end with everything feeling good.
6. Don’t try to avoid or minimize things commonly seen as “negatives” – anger is often useful, as are guilt and shame. Blame is often appropriate. Being judgmental is something we do all the time, because if we didn’t we couldn’t decide anything. Having **thoughts** of “ending it all” is reasonable under unremitting duress (even if making that choice is unreasonable).

The “negative” part of these is when they are misused. We often overlook that we misuse “positives” as well: for example, when we feel joy when someone we dislike experiences pain or harm, or feel love for things or behaviors which are corruptive or addictive, or experience satisfaction when we benefit from an unfair stroke of fate in our favor.

1. Ask the other person what you need to in order to understand what they mean by what they say or do. Bluntness in pursuit of understanding is not rude or intrusive. You often will do more harm by NOT asking an “awkward” or uncomfortable question than by asking it. Sometimes the other person achieves great relief because you asked the question, because they did not know how to bring it up.

Err on the side of asking, not on the side of avoiding.

As part of this, BE SPECIFIC.

1. Ask permission to discuss anything you believe might be difficult for them.
2. Emphasize that you do not know what their “answers” to problems should be, but you will help them all you can to make their own best choices.
3. Express hope but be realistic. It’s not helpful to distort reality – be careful to avoid the “pendulum swing” approach to balance (don’t counter too much negativity with too much positivity). There are usually plenty of good realistic reasons for hope.

Here are some specific phrases and examples:

* *You say you want to (“feel better”/work this out/be more assertive/etc.) What exactly do you mean by that? What would it look like, how would things change? Can you give me a specific example?*
* *You say that the experience was a disaster for you. I know that if I went through it I’d likely feel the same. But what parts of it were the hardest for you? What specifically made it so bad?*
* *When you were just talking about your experience I suddenly realized that I’m not sure I’m really understanding it the way you do. Did you mean XXXXX?*
* *I know you see it that way and that’s what’s real for you. If I’d lived the life you have I probably would see it that way, too. But the way I’ve experienced life so far is different, and I have a different take on this. Can I tell you how I’d interpret that same event? Can I tell you why it’s hard for me to see it the way you do, and what would help me better understand it?*
* *I understand that you are really upset by this and you want to talk about it. I’m happy to do that, but I’m not willing to do it if you’re being verbally abusive and yelling or calling me names. I just don’t choose to talk with anyone when that’s happening. If you can stop that now, we can keep talking. If you can’t or don’t want to, that’s OK – do what you need to. But if that’s the case I’m going to hang up/leave/stop responding to your texts. When you’re ready to talk without doing those things just let me know. I’d be happy to talk with you then.*
* *Before we go any further I just want to say that even though I may disagree with what you’re thinking, I really value you and this relationship. I really like how we XXXXXXXXXXX. And even if I disagree with you I’m not saying “I’m right and you’re wrong.” Maybe we’re both right, we’re just seeing it from two different ways. I really believe that we can find a way to work together to find a way to deal with this that will be good for our relationship, and that’s my goal. Okay?*
* *Hey, I just realized that I reacted kind of strangely back then and you may not have known what was really going on. Geez, I don’t know WHAT I would have thought if I’d been in your position! It’s kind of embarrassing, but here’s what I was thinking/feeling/reacting to …*
* *When XXXXX happened yesterday I realize now that I got mad and automatically was thinking that you meant XXXXX by what you did. That’s why I did XXXXXXX in return. Now I’m wondering if that’s really what was going on with you. Maybe I just got caught up in my automatic thoughts and feelings and wasn’t really seeing it for what it was. Was I right or was I wrong?*
* *I really want to talk about XXXXXXXX, because I don’t want it to become/grow into/stay a problem for our relationship. I really like so much of what we have; I don’t want this to get in the way of that. Is this a good time for us to talk about this, or can you think of a time we could do that in the next day or two?*
* *[After asking permission to have a difficult talk] I’m embarrassed. There’s something I’ve needed to talk with you about and I’ve been putting it off because I feel pretty certain that you (will feel hurt by what I say, will feel I really messed up/let you [us] down, will see me as having failed, will think I might be unfair or too critical). But I really value what we have together; I think me putting this off is hurting our relationship, and I don’t want to do that. So I’m sorry if this hurts or makes you feel less of me, but please just hear me out on this, OK?*
* *I know we both have a common goal here in our relationship of XXXXXXXX. When you (did XXXXX) my brain just freaked out and started saying you were tossing that goal aside. That just doesn’t seem right, so help me understand this. How do you see what you did in terms of us doing XXXXXXXXXX?*
* *Hey, hold on a minute. I don’t have some switch in my head that just automatically changes all my thinking and feeling. This is what I think and feel, and based on my experiences it makes sense. I get it that you think and feel differently. It’s OK that we think differently. Your way is as right for you as my way is right for me. The point is, what’s the right way for the relationship? Can we work together to find some way for the relationship to handle this that works for both of us?*
* *Hey, I was thinking that for XXXXXXXX we could do (specific thing). To me that’s would take care of XXXXX, XXXXXXX, and XXXXXX (different meanings it has for me). How does that sound to you?*
* *This thing we’re doing tomorrow – it’s one of those things where sometimes we get into trouble afterwards because we seem to see it in different ways. Could we talk about that now, ahead of time, and see what each of us can do to help prevent the relationship getting banged up? Maybe we can try something new that would work better for BOTH ways we look at these situations.*
* *I’m starting to feel (angry, upset, sad, etc.) and that’s making me less able to listen to what you’re trying to say. I think I need to (stop for a minute, clarify something you said, talk about this using a Meeting of Two, go clear my head). I’m not using this to stop us talking about this – how about we start again (in 20 minutes, after the kids are in bed, tomorrow after dinner, etc. SPECIFIC TIME). Since I’m the one asking for the break I’ll take responsibility for making sure we start again at the time we agree to.*
* *Before we get started I want to say that I’m really thankful you’re in my life. One of the things I really value is that you’re willing to talk about these differences and conflicts we have. I really appreciate your courage and commitment. Thank you! I have great respect for you and your way of doing things – please believe me that it isn’t my intent in bringing this up to hurt you, make you feel bad, or say you’re not doing the best you can. All this is about is that I think that what’s going on is hurting our relationship and I want us to see if we can work together to make it better. I’m not against you in this, I see it as us being in this together.*

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