

# Approaching Challenging Conversations

## When Navigating Differences in Background, Identity and Perspectives

This resource offers suggestions for approaching conversations with others in your community across differences in background/identity, perspectives and/or experiences. These may be useful in a range of settings, including residential spaces and in class, and across both formal and informal settings.

### Preparing for the Conversation

- **Reflect** on your goals and intent for the conversation. What are you hoping to gain or learn on an individual level? On a communal level?
- **Consider your capacity** for the conversation. Try to ensure that you're in a space (mentally, emotionally and holistically) to be able to effectively engage in a potentially challenging conversation. Additionally, consider what aspects of your identity feel closely tied to this conversation and how that might impact your engagement.
- **Expand the conversation** as needed. Seek out an external facilitator (such as a trained peer or a professional staff member) to guide the conversation as helpful.

### During the Conversation

- **Set up the conversation.** Consider establishing community norms, articulating community values, and/or expressing mutual intent for the conversation.
- **Actively foster mutual feelings of safety.** As trust grows, so does the capacity to connect across difference. Work to actively foster feelings of safety and trust. One way to do this is to honor the space and time in which the conversation is being had (e.g., *what's said here stays here*).
- **Leverage storytelling to explore differences.** Invite others to share something meaningful about their experience. Narratives can be a powerful tool to learn from and connect with others, especially around differences in identities or perspectives.
- **Affirm inquiry.** Assume positive intent and curiosity. Ask non-judgmental questions that seek out the nuances of someone's perspective or experience. Listen to understand, not to respond.
- **Speak from experience, not of experience.** Speak from the "I" (versus the "you," "they" or "we").
- **Find commonality.** Big or small, what you share in common with another (e.g., a hope, a value, or a part of your identity) can serve as a tether to constructive conversation when conflict arises.
- **Pay attention to how you're feeling and what you may need.** If at any point you feel distressed, take steps to take care of yourself. This might look like taking a quick break, getting a drink of water or some fresh air, offering to reschedule the conversation if you'd like to continue but don't feel you can in the moment, or leaving the conversation entirely.
- **Expect that closure may not happen**, and that's okay. Take into account that change – this includes learning, communication across difference, and community-building/restoring – can take time and steps.

#### Examples of Community Norms

- What's said here stays here;  
what's learned here leaves here
- Challenge ideas, don't attack people
- Intent and impact. (We seek to acknowledge both – assuming the best intent AND honoring the impact of our words and actions.)

## After the Conversation

- **Engage in self reflection.** Set aside space and time to reflect on the conversation. What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about the issue/topic at hand? What did you learn about the experiences and perspectives of others? What do you wish to learn more about? How will you learn about it?
- **Take care of yourself.** After a challenging conversation, it is natural to feel drained, agitated, or uneasy. Try to take care of yourself. Some helpful options might be getting some rest, getting outside, spending time in person or on the phone with a close friend or family member, or seeking out resources.

## Other Resources

- [Mental Health Resources at Stanford](#)
- [Stanford Against Hate](#)
- [Constructive Dialogue Institute](#)

## About This Resource

This guide was created by the Office for Inclusion, Belonging and Intergroup Communication (IBIC). IBIC works to build communication and understanding across difference among members of the Stanford community. [To get in contact with a staff member, email: \[ibic-office@stanford.edu\]\(mailto:ibic-office@stanford.edu\).](#)

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