

After You've Had a Difficult Conversation...



The Aftermath

Phew: You're done. You summoned your courage, consulted our guide, "The Three Ways to Make Difficult Conversations Productive", and finally tackled the tough topic that has been weighing heavily on your relationship. You've done the asking, talking and listening. Now it's time to process and recover. Depending on the topic and how the conversation went, working through the outcome may take time and effort from both sides.

Whatever happened or was said can't be undone, so the goal now is to incorporate what you learned into your relationship going forward. These are some of the best ways we know how to do it with the most efficacy and kindness:

Sleep On It

All conversations benefit from marinating. Don't jump to conclusions or rush decisions (unless you have to) and always give yourself time to process what's been understood. Most difficult topics—opinions about having children; shared life goals; things that involve extended families—take more than one round, so be willing to open up again (and maybe again) until you both have the same understanding. This doesn't necessarily mean you both have to agree, but that you each recognize the other's perspective and accept the outcome. Giving yourself time to accept how the conversation made you feel, and then being able to find the words to articulate how you feel, will set up your next conversation for success. You can't effectively move forward if you are still looking backward.

Apologize (if appropriate)

If you messed up, own it. But, don't just say "I'm sorry" and leave it at that. A true apology has to take full responsibility, demonstrate understanding, and show a commitment to correct (or at least not repeat) the offense. The more thoughtful you can make your apology, the more meaning it will have and better it will be received. Don't underestimate the power in this; showing vulnerability and remorse will initiate and accelerate the recovery. It also reduces lingering fear of repeat actions which could weigh silently on your partner.

Acknowledge and Appreciate

Regardless of the outcome, always acknowledge your partner's participation in the conversation. It takes two to tackle tough conversations, so no matter what was revealed, the beauty of consciously exploring compatibility is that *there is no wrong answer*. The result of the discussion may have brought incredible joy or sadness...but at minimum, your partner's answers should give you clarity and understanding that will help you make the best decisions possible. If emotions are still high wait until you can be sincere, or risk being misinterpreted as being sarcastic.

Challenge Assumptions

Often, in the heat of the moment we're less articulate than we'd like. (*Did I really say that?*) But after a little space, our minds sharpen and we reflect on what's been said. (*Did they really say that?*) This is where your follow-up questions are so useful: If points need clarification—maybe you moved through them too quickly—follow-ups ensure that neither of you is misunderstanding or making assumptions. Don't risk building unnecessary, festering resentment because you haven't clearly understood what was said.

Talk About the Talk

Demonstrate your comfort with the outcome of your discussion (good or bad) by having the courage to revisit what you talked about at a later date. Once tough topics are addressed, they're often packed up in emotional boxes and locked away in deep storage, never to be seen again. And that may be okay for some topics. But those conversations can then become forbidden areas—and off-limits in the future—for fear that unpacking them will raise scary emotions. But if you can revisit them without dwelling on them, and then gracefully acknowledge their part in your journey, you'll avoid collecting too many forbidden boxes in your relationship's closet.

Often, it's not just how we behave during a difficult situation, but how we recover from it after the fact that carries the most meaning. We can't prevent difficulties from occurring in life, but we can control how we carry ourselves before, during and after. Behaviors speak louder than our words, and showing this kind of emotional maturity will give your partner great comfort that they can tackle future tough conversations with you, without falling apart. That knowledge gives relationships powerful strength and resiliency.