

How to Control Your Emotions During a Difficult Conversation

by Amy Gallo

DECEMBER 01, 2017



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It's hard not to get worked up emotionally when you're in a tense conversation. After all, a disagreement can feel like a threat. You're afraid you're going to have to give up something – your point of view, the way you're used to doing something, the notion that you're right, or maybe even power – and your body therefore ramps up for a fight by triggering the sympathetic nervous system. This is a natural response, but the problem is that our bodies and minds aren't particularly good at discerning between the threats presented by not getting your way on the project plan and, say, being chased down by a bear. Your heart rate and breathing rate spike, your muscles tighten, the blood in your body moves away from your organs, and you're likely to feel uncomfortable.

None of this puts you in the right frame of mind to resolve a conflict. If your body goes into “fight or flight” mode or what Dan Goleman called “amygdala hijack,” you may lose access to the prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain responsible for rational thinking. And making rational decisions is precisely what you need to do in a difficult conversation. Not only are you losing the ability to think clearly but chances are your counterpart notices the signs of stress – your face turning red, the pace of your speech speeding up – and, because of mirror neurons that cause us to “catch” the emotions of another person, your colleague is likely to start feeling the same way. Before you know it, the conversation has derailed and the conflict intensifies.

Luckily, it’s possible to interrupt this physical response, manage your emotions, and clear the way for a productive discussion. There are several things you can do to keep your cool during a conversation or to calm yourself down if you’ve gotten worked up.

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


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Breathe. Simple mindfulness techniques can be your best friend in tense situations and none is more straightforward and accessible than using your breath. So when you start noticing yourself getting tense, try to focus on breathing. Notice the sensation of air coming in and out of your lungs. Feel it pass through your nostrils or down the back of your throat. This will take your attention off the physical signs of panic and keep

you centered. Some mindfulness experts suggest counting your breath – either inhaling and exhaling for a count of 6, for example, or just counting each exhale until you get to 10 and then starting again.

Focus on your body. Sitting still when you’re having a difficult conversation can make the emotions build up rather than dissipate. Experts say that standing up and walking around helps to activate the thinking part of your brain. If you and your counterpart are seated at a table, you may be hesitant to suddenly stand up. Fair enough. Instead, you might say, “I feel like I need to stretch some. Mind if I walk around a bit?” If that still doesn’t feel comfortable, you can do small physical things like crossing two fingers or placing your feet firmly on the ground and noticing what the floor feels like on the bottom of your shoes. Mindfulness experts call this “anchoring.” It can work in all kinds of stressful situations. For example, for a long time I was afraid of flying, but I found that counting while touching each of my fingers with my thumb helped to get me out of my rumination mode.

Try saying a mantra. This is a piece of advice I've gotten from Amy Jen Su, managing partner of Paravis Partners and coauthor of *Own the Room*. She recommends coming up with a phrase that you can repeat to yourself to remind you to stay calm. Some of her clients have found "Go to neutral" to be a helpful prompt. You can also try "This isn't about me," "This will pass," or "This is about the business."

Acknowledge and label your feelings. Another useful tactic comes from Susan David, author of *Emotional Agility*. When you're feeling emotional, "the attention you give your thoughts and feelings crowds your mind; there's no room to examine them," she says. To distance yourself from the feeling, label it. "Call a thought a thought and an emotion an emotion," says David. *He is so wrong about that and it's making me mad* becomes *I'm having the thought that my coworker is wrong, and I'm feeling anger*. Labeling like this allows you to see your thoughts and feelings for what they are: "transient sources of data that may or may not prove helpful." When you put that space between these emotions and you, it's easier to let them go – and not bury them or let them explode.

Take a break. In my experience, this is a far-underused approach. The more time you give yourself to process your emotions, the less intense they are likely to be. So when things get heated, you may need to excuse yourself for a moment – get a cup of coffee or a glass of water, go to the bathroom, or take a brief stroll around the office. Be sure to give a neutral reason for why you want to stand up and pause the conversation – the last thing you want is for your counterpart to think that things are going so badly you're desperate to escape. Try saying something like, "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I'd love to get a quick cup of coffee before we continue. Can I get you something while I'm up?"

Keep in mind that you're probably not the only one who's upset. Your counterpart is likely to express anger or frustration too. While you may want to give them the above advice, no one wants to be told they need to breathe more deeply or take a break. So you may be in a situation where you just need to let the other person vent. That's usually easier said than done though. It's hard not to yell back when you're being attacked, but that's not going to help. Jeanne Brett, a professor of dispute resolution and negotiations at Kellogg School of Management, suggests visualizing your coworker's words going over your shoulder, not hitting you in the chest. But don't act aloof; it's important to show that you're listening. If you don't feed your counterpart's negative emotion with your own, it's likely they will wind down.

Let's face it. Conflicts with coworkers can be tough. But you're not going to solve the underlying issues or maintain a positive relationship if you barrel through the conversation when you're completely worked up. Hopefully, these five tactics will help you move from angry and upset to cool as a cucumber.



Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict at Work*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Follow her on Twitter at @amyegallo.

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