

# 20+ phrases to de-escalate tension in a difficult conversation

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One big reason people dread a difficult conversation is that they think it will go badly—spiral off topic, devolve into name-calling and accusations, lead one person to dominate and drown out the other, or change the relationship for the worse. When stakes are high, it's easy for emotions to hijack our ability to think clearly, raising the defenses of even well-intentioned people.

When you notice rising emotions—in yourself or the other person—try one or a combination of these phrases to decrease tension so that you both stay engaged and working toward a good outcome. Choose the phrases that seem best for your situation.



## 1. Suggest a pause.

This simple tactic can create just enough space amid the intensity of the discussion for a mental reset and to refocus on the topic at hand. Try it when you or the other person is:

- Feeling upset or misunderstood (“You just don’t get it!”)
- Overwhelmed by too much information
- Getting sidetracked (“That’s only one of the problems here!”)

### Examples:

- *Let’s step back for a minute ...*
- *I need a moment to gather my thoughts.*
- *How about we take a short break and come back to this conversation?*

## 2. Make a factual observation.

Stating a fact can help you both shift from making assumptions to thinking more objectively about the situation and even find points of agreement. If it’s appropriate, ask for clarification of your observation so the other person can agree or correct your understanding. Try it when:

- You notice unhelpful patterns when talking (such as raising your voices, repeating yourselves, etc.)
- You’re having trouble finding common ground
- You or the other person are making judgments, rather than stating facts (“It was so irresponsible ...”)

### Examples:

- *I notice that we keep repeating ourselves.*
- *I understand that we received the order two weeks ago. Is that right?*

- *When I said X, you seemed [frustrated/sad/uncomfortable/confused]. Do I have that right?*

### **3. Ask about the other person's perspective.**

Learning more about the other person's point of view could change how you perceive them or their behavior. And understanding their perspective can help you tailor your approach to the conversation and look for an outcome that benefits both of you. Try it when you:

- Don't know how the other person feels about the situation or don't have all the information they have
- Aren't sure what the other person means and need clarification
- Sense that the other person is not feeling fully heard

#### **Examples:**

- *I'm curious to hear your perspective on X.*
- *When you say X, what do you mean?*
- *What's your biggest issue with X?*
- *What do you most want to happen with X?*

### **4. Acknowledge the other person's point of view.**

Stating that the other person's feelings and perspectives are *valid*—whether or not you agree with them—can help the person see you as empathetic and be more willing to work with you on the issue. Try it when the other person:

- Shares their feelings about the situation
- Talks passionately or sends other signals that an issue is important to them (such as raising their voice or talking faster)

#### **Examples:**

- *It's totally understandable that you feel X.*
- *You're right—this is a tough situation.*
- *I can see how important this is to you.*

### **5. Calmly express your needs.**

You also need to express *your* needs clearly—and have the other person hear them—in order to make progress on the issue. Speak calmly so they don't just react to your emotions. Try it when the person:

- Isn't seeing the situation from your point of view
- Interrupts you or misunderstands you

#### **Examples:**

- *I'd like to share my perspective on X.*
- *When you say Y, I feel X because ...*
- *My ultimate goal is to X because I want or need ...*
- *Could you hold on for just a moment? I'd like to finish my point.*

## 6. Reiterate your positive intent or mutual goals.

Hopefully you shared this information at the start of the conversation—but you may need to revisit it. Pointing out a shared interest or goal can help remind the person that you're actually on the same side of the issue and put you both in a more collaborative state of mind. Try it when:

- The other person gets defensive or stubbornly holds to their position
- The conversation wanders off topic—to refocus it on what you both want to work better

### Examples:

- *My intent with bringing this up is to help you/the team do X.*
- *I'm not trying to [be difficult/make your job harder/place blame]—what I'm trying to do is X.*
- *In the end, we both want X.*
- *Given how important X is to both of us, what are some ideas for how we can work toward it?*

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