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University
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Handling Difficult Conversations Toolkit



Contents

Introduction	3
Why have a difficult conversation?	4
What prevents us from having the conversations?	5
Reasons for a difficult conversation	6
Having a difficult conversation	7
Key Skills	8
Points to note	9
Manager Resources	10
Support	11



Introduction

Knowing that there is a need to have a difficult conversation, whether this is with a colleague, an employee, or a manager can be daunting. However, if these conversations don't take place the situation can escalate.

- This toolkit is a guide to help staff at UHSussex to feel confident and comfortable in having any difficult conversations.
- A difficult conversation is a conversation where the subject matter is seen as contentious and/or sensitive and may elicit strong emotions which will need to be managed.



Why have a difficult conversation?

It is common to want to avoid these conversations, however doing so can lead to stress, resentment toward others, and an escalated conflict that becomes harder to resolve.

By being able to have a difficult conversation it sets the tone that there is nothing we can't discuss and or handle together. They also set the foundation for an honest, open, non-toxic work environment that thrives on focusing on the goals, not the problems.

What are the risks of not having the conversation?

- Low self-esteem.
- Poor climate - low morale.
- Superficial relationships.
- Issue worsens.
- The "other" believes all is okay!
- Violation of personal values.

Maintain staff morale.

Create a culture in the workplace that thrives on positive outcomes rather than disgruntled employees.



Resolve issues before they hinder the productivity of the team.

Make employees who may not have noticed an issue, to address it if it affects the organisation.

What prevents us from having the conversations?

- Not knowing how to start.
- Fear of the response.
- Fear of an overly emotional response.
- Anxiety about damaging the relationship.
- Lacking in skills.
- When you don't agree with the message you have to give.
- Left it too long it has become worse.
- Not wanting to hurt their feelings.
- Not the right time to deliver the message.



Reasons for a difficult conversation

You may be approached for help when a colleague, or employee has a concern. There may be times when this is not the case, and you notice that something is wrong and so you will need to open the discussion.

Signs someone may be experiencing difficulties

- Behaviour which is out of character or disruptive.
- Poor hygiene.
- Visible emotion or distress.
- Depression.
- Anxiety.
- Poor and/or unpredictable performance.
- A drop in productivity.
- Poor timekeeping.
- Absenteeism.
- Withdrawal.

Situations which require a difficult conversation

- Resolving conflict.
- Under performance.
- Standing up to a colleague or senior manager.
- Wellbeing.
- Managing unprecedented crisis situation.
- A problem which is impacting on your work.
- Asking more of a colleague or staff member.
- Inappropriate behaviour.
- Communicating a change/decision.

Having a difficult conversation

Before

- If the problem does not require immediate action watch to see what happens over time.
- Keep an open mind.
- Understand the facts, make sure you have all relevant information.
- Check any policies and guidelines.
- Consider potential solutions.
- Choose a private place to speak.

During

- Remain calm, this will allow you to manage your emotions.
- State the issues clearly, sticking with the facts.
- Listen to the person.
- Don't interrupt.
- Agree next steps or way forward.
- If the conversation becomes emotive take a break.
- If appropriate take notes.

After

- If appropriate provide a written summary.
- Arrange a further meeting to review progress and/or check in.
- Do you need to seek further advice or guidance?
- Do you need to speak to other individuals?

Key Skills

Active Listening



- Clarify technical terms, codes and jargon, as well as ensuring the understanding of the word is the same.
- Repeat back what the other person is saying, using some of their words and interpreting their feelings.
- Be alert to how language or body language can indicate feelings.
- Use non-verbal behaviour to support and enhance that you are listening.
- Don't rush to fill silences it can enable the speaker to think through or reflect more deeply on what they are telling you.
- Feed back impressions, you can check observations with simple assumption statements.
- To develop trust, show genuine interest, provide a safe environment and listen openly.

Emotional Reactions



- Be calm, do not raise your voice or respond in an argumentative way.
- Allow them time to control their emotions.
- Don't take the reactions personally.
- If it becomes too emotive or it is felt that safety may be a concern then end the meeting.
- Be sensitive and willing to pause or offer sympathy if the person becomes distressed.
- Acknowledge their view.
- Ensure you are supportive and non-judgemental in your actions and response.

Feedback



- Feedback must be factual and constructive.
- Treat the person how you would like to be treated.
- Any feedback should be given in person.
- Feedback should be given as soon as possible.
- Don't focus on past events but move on to working out how to improve the situation.
- Take a joint approach to solving the problem.
- Provide support.
- Be willing to accept feedback in return.
- Avoid generalisation of problems with behaviour or performance.
- Don't blame or make judgements.
- Ensure that the feedback is on something that can be resolved.

Questions



- Open Questions – Encourages the individual to speak freely and to open up on any topic, opinions or feelings. Useful to use at the start of the conversation.
- Ensure that the individual does not drift away from the topic.
- Closed Questions – effective in verifying specific information, re-focusing the conversations or emphasising a point.
- Are not helpful in trying to understand the depth of feeling.
- Reflective Questions – seeks depth and detail.
- May cause the individual to feel threatened.
- Avoid using leading questions and multiple questions.

Points to note

- A lot of the key skills necessary to facilitate difficult conversations may be skills that neurodiverse individuals may struggle to process intuitively, or that they may execute in a way different to neurotypical individuals. Differences may include: ways of interpreting others' feelings due to differences in cognitive empathy processing; ways of processing paraverbal (messages we transmit through the tone, pitch, and pacing of our voices) and non-verbal communication; impulsivity or processing differences causing a neurotypical individual to 'interrupt'; sensory processing and modulation of spoken word. These differences in interpretation may cause conflict between individuals where these differences are not recognised or accounted for.
- Some neurodiverse individuals may also struggle with understanding, processing, and experiencing their own emotions (interoception) – this could impact the emotional level of the conversation.
- Some of these differences may also extend to cultural differences e.g. discriminatory and unconscious bias and/or perceptions about "Angry Black Woman" ([The "Angry Black Woman" Stereotype at Work \(hbr.org\)](https://hbr.org/2017/06/20/the-angry-black-woman-stereotype-at-work)) linguistic discrimination etc.
- Regarding open questions, it is important to be mindful that neurodiverse individuals may struggle with an open-ended approach, and may require more focused and specific questions.



Manager Resources

- [Autism and Neurodiversity Toolkit | DWP](#) Guide originally created for government departments on supporting neurodivergent employees.
- [Neurodiversity at work \(cipd.co.uk\)](#).
- [\[ARCHIVED CONTENT\] UK Government Web Archive - The National Archives](#) ACAS 2019 guidance on neurodiversity in the workplace.
- Managers should encourage staff to complete the staff Health Passport (available here: [BSUH info-net - Health Passport](#)) – this will help identify individual needs, strengths, preferences, and challenges with regards to, among other things, communication;
- UH Sussex’s Equality and Diversity team can offer individual advice to managers requiring support, and can be contacted via uhsussex.equality@nhs.net



Support

Support can be accessed via:

Human Resources Department

You can contact the Employee Relations team on uhsussex.employee.relations@nhs.net or ext. 67611, 85722 or 32605.

Staff Psychological Support Service

We offer free confidential, one-to-one Counselling, Psychotherapy, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation & Reprocessing) and CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) to staff.

Our dedicated team work face-to-face across Brighton, Princess Royal, St Richards and Worthing sites, and provide therapy over Microsoft Teams and telephone.

For self-help guides, leaflets & worksheets please access: [Mental wellbeing support for staff](#) If you have been experiencing anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, grief, trauma, or other distressing life events, please self-refer to the service.

Alternatively, contact:

Worthing, St Richards, Southlands Hospitals: **01243 788122 ext. 31624**

Royal Sussex County, Brighton General, Princess Royal Hospitals: **01273 696555 ext. 63692**

Email: uhsussex.staffpsychologicalsupport@nhs.net

ViVUP Employee Assistance programme

The Vivup team are there to listen and support with all personal issues from day-to-day challenges at home, to mounting pressures in the workplace.

This is a 24/7 counselling and online support service where staff can access up to six sessions including the provision of online CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) workbooks and additional support.

To access the service call **0330 380 0658** or go online:

[Access for staff at Worthing, St Richard's, Southlands Hospital.](#)

[Access for staff at Royal Sussex County, Brighton General, Princess Royal Hospitals.](#)

