

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

A little guide



“Difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values.”

Douglas Stone



INTRODUCTION

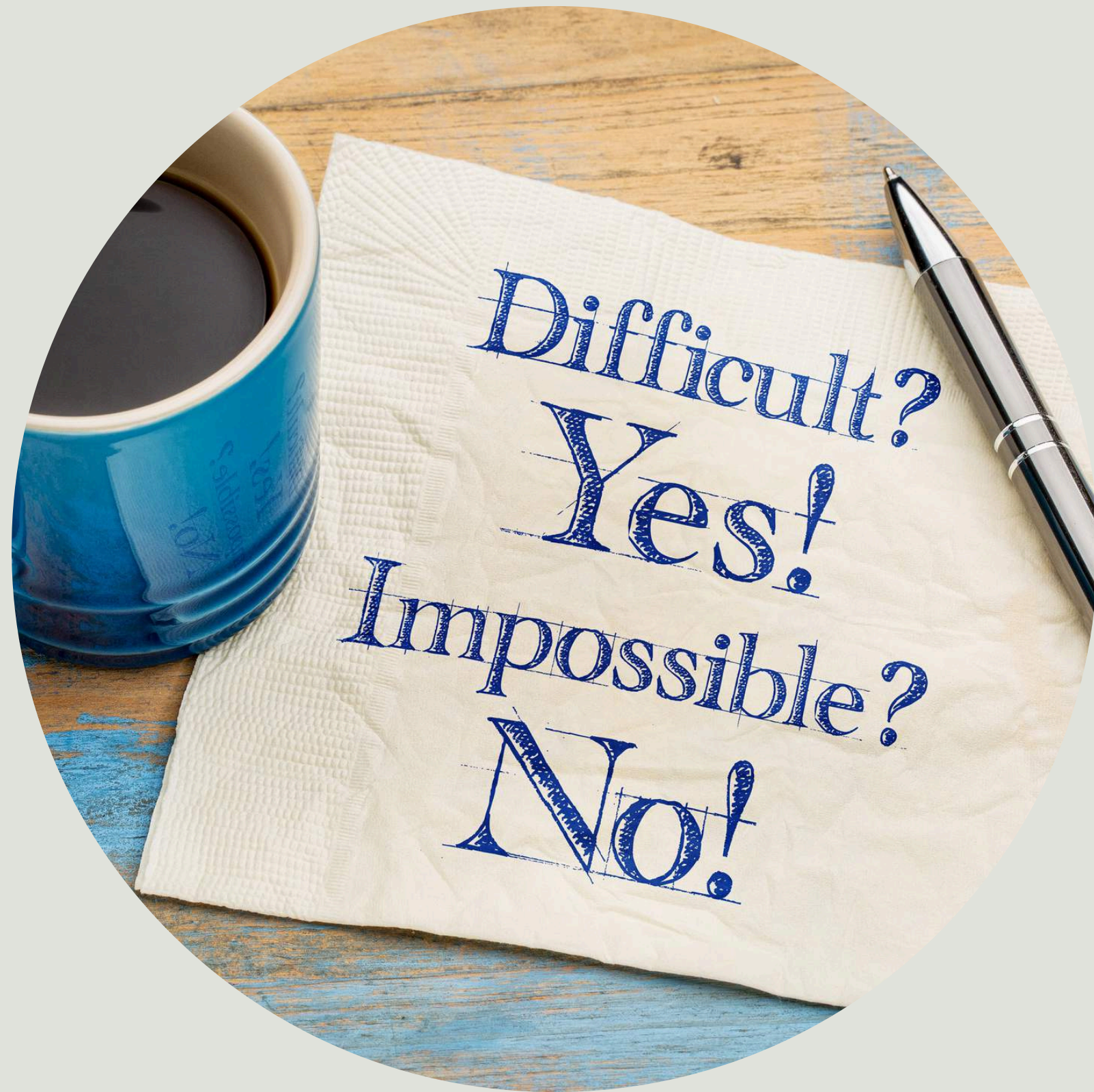
I've always avoided conflict. I would rather walk away than feel the discomfort.

And that's how I felt about difficult conversations too – they were something to walk away from, not engage with.

However, having started on my journey of holding space and facilitating circles, I realised that the process of circles is one that could work well for those difficult conversations.

And what could be a more difficult conversation of talking about the final chapter of parents' lives, making sure that all their needs are met and that their wishes are followed as much as possible.

I'm hoping that this final chapter is a long one. No one knows that but what I do know is that my knowledge of circle supported me to have the conversations that had never been broached before – about care, and funerals, and finances, and what happens if or when . . .



Now the roles have reversed, I'm no longer the 'child', my parents are no longer the ones in control, I feel grateful that I've been able to have those conversations.

Many of use have 'family chat' WhatsApp groups or Teams channels in our workplaces but these communication mediums only support a series of monologues or broadcasts. There is no dialogue, there is no depth to the conversation. To get that we need to have more meaningful verbal conversations.

I believe that what I have learned in this process of using a circle process for difficult family conversations could also be applied in the workplace.

I hope some of the ideas in this little guide will help your conversations too.

Sarah
May 2024



WHY USE A CIRCLE PROCESS?

The circle process provides a framework that supports meaningful dialogue rather than everyday functional conversations.

A circle has an intention/objective and the group agreements tell people what they can expect from each other and what is likely to happen in the exchanges between them.

A circle provides a collaborative, brave space - a container - where everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

The triangle archetype of hierarchy has no place in circle. People face each other and all voices are of equal value.

The circle is an opportunity to listen to understand with curiosity and compassion.

A circle can consist of two people or a small group.

“One of the gifts of circle is to slow us down and provide a place to stop and listen, to take a breath and consider the fullness of what we want to say to one another.”

Christina Baldwin & Ann Linnea



INTENTION & INVITATION

INTENTION

What is the purpose of this conversation? What do you wish to accomplish? Who needs to be there?

Write a short statement of intent to give yourself clarity on the reason you are hosting this conversation and the outcome you are hoping for.

INVITATION

Having a clear intention will help you to issue a clear invitation so people know why they are being invited to the 'meeting' and what they should expect.

Make sure you let them know where it will be held and give them a rough idea of how long it will last.

In a family context, a verbal invitation works well.

*“Take the reasons you think you are gathering
... and keep drilling below them. Ask why
you’re doing it. Every time you get to another,
deeper reason, ask why again. Keep asking
why until you hit a belief or value.”*

Priya Parker



LOCATION

Where you choose to hold your 'meeting' is very important.

Try to choose a neutral location, one where everyone will feel comfortable. Avoid using your office or home, or somewhere you know well but the others don't.

It can be indoors or outside, somewhere where you can speak without fear of others overhearing. Perhaps a corner table in a cafe or a clearing in woodland.

Somewhere you can gather in a circle shape. It doesn't have to be a perfect circle but make sure there's no 'head of the table' and that everyone is able to see everyone else. For odd numbers of people a circular table works best but you could use a square table for an even number of people.

Make sure the space is welcoming and think about whether there will be refreshments.

“By its simple shape, circle includes everyone without distinction, welcomes and invites all to participate, and creates equality among those gathered.”

Christina Baldwin



AGREEMENTS

In all circles, but especially in a family context where there are long engrained beliefs and expectations, agreements for the 'meeting' help to make sure everyone feels brave enough to participate in the conversation and knows what to expect.

Some agreements for difficult family conversations may be:

- We will leave the past outside the circle and focus on the intention/objectives of this gathering.
- We will listen to each other without interrupting.
- We will treat each other with respect and without judgement.
- We acknowledge that there will be discomfort in this conversation but it is welcome and we will sit with it.
- Silence need not be immediately filled.

“In a group, if everybody thinks about the other person’s needs, everyone’s needs are actually fulfilled in the end. But if you only think about yourself, you are breaking that contract.”

Priya Parker



You may choose to put an object in the centre of your circle.

Perhaps something that has meaning and helps people focus on the reason for the gathering. A simple object can be a powerful focal point, a common ground.

In difficult conversations, the object can help people to place their comments in the common ground at the centre of the circle rather than directing them at another person facing them. It can help to soften the energy of the space.

Remove all phones from the table and turn them to silent. Avoid placing them in the centre as this conveys the message that anything on the phone is more important than the conversation.

“A circle is the only geometric shape defined by its centre. No chicken and egg about it, the centre came first, the circumference follows. The earth, by definition, has a centre. And only the fool that knows it can go wherever he pleases, knowing the centre will hold him down, stop him flying out of orbit. But when your sense of centre shifts, comes whizzing to the surface, the balance has gone. The balance has gone. The balance my baby has gone.”

Sarah Kane



Often when we meet, there isn't really a beginning. Everyone files into the room, gets themselves a coffee, sits around the table and then at some point the first agenda item is introduced.

However, when we use a circle process to meet we are creating a container in which the difficult conversation can take place. And a container has a distinct edge, a boundary, that we must cross to enter. So we need to start our circle - our conversation - intentionally.

For a family meeting, you may choose to open the 'meeting' with a question that ties in with the purpose of the gathering.

"What do you love best about being part of this family?"

"What about this current situation can you imagine being grateful for in the future?"

Crafting a good opening question takes some thought. Perhaps it garners commonality or exposes assumptions.



THE MIDDLE

USING A TALKING PIECE

Depending on the usual dynamics of the group, you may choose to use a talking piece to give everyone the opportunity to speak.

The talking piece can be as simple as a smooth pebble or a stick.

When someone has the talking piece in their hand, it's their turn to speak without interruption. Once they have finished, they can place it back down on the table for the next person to pick up when they are ready to speak.

The use of a talking piece can also help to facilitate pauses. If someone wishes to pause, they can pick up the talking piece and not say a word – but as they are holding the talking piece no one else can either.

You may wish to add the use of a talking piece to your the agreements.



ACTIVE LISTENING

聽 I love that the Chinese symbol for active listening (ting)

has four parts:

- ears to listen
- eyes to see
- engage the mind
- engage the heart

In a circle space, all these aspects are so important as we are coming together with intention to listen to understand, rather than to listen to respond.

If there are silences, this is a time for gathering thoughts and processing, it doesn't need filling. Take a pause and allow the conversation to naturally begin again when it is ready.

Start difficult conversations by exploring commonality rather than difference. And never try to convert people to your way of thinking otherwise the conversation is doomed.

“Set your mind to receive and not to broadcast.”

John Sutherland



THE ENDING

As we started the circle with intention, so we end the circle with intention.

In a family context, you may wish to summarise the outcome of the 'meeting' and offer a simple question to bring the conversation to a close.

Perhaps something like, "What are you taking away from our time together today?"

And then maybe a short silence before the energy changes as you open up a more social time.

“Crucible moments ... are challenging moments in our lives that shape us in some deep way and shift our lens on the world. They are stories that define us in our own minds - and that, nevertheless, seldom come up in the ordinary course of conversation.”

Priya Parker