

DCI Guide to One-on-One Conversations

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

2020 - 2021 | www.deliberativecitizenship.org

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Checklist

- Identify someone for a one-on-one conversation
- Select a topic on which you may have different perspectives
- Decide if the conversation will be structured or open-ended
- Contact the person for your one-on-one conversation, sharing information about the topic, how the conversation will proceed, and a time, date, and location
- Have the conversation – either follow a Living Room Conversations Guide, or start your open-ended conversation by listening and asking good questions
- Follow-up with the person after the conversation is over, and consider setting up a time for another conversation

Before Your Conversation

Okay, you've decided that you would like to try to engage with a friend or family member who you disagree with on political issues. But you are not sure where to start, and are worried the conversation might go poorly, as perhaps it has in the past. This guide is designed to help you and your conversation partner navigate through this opportunity to re-connect with one another and deepen your relationship – by listening and sharing honestly and respectfully. It pulls from insights from Braver Angels, Open Minds, the Dialogue Company, Living Room Conversations, and more.

Choose Who to Engage, and On What

First, you must decide who to engage with, and on what topic. Some critics argue that civil discourse necessarily provides a platform for those with abhorrent views to spread hate speech and traumatic language. This is not the case. A vital first step in deliberative conversation is gathering individuals who are prepared to act in good faith to listen and understand one another's perspectives. You should never feel as though you have to engage with someone who has demonstrated a desire to troll the conversation, launch personal attacks, or act in bad faith to undermine the conversation.

However, it's important to recognize that your perception of fundamental disagreement on an issue with someone does not necessarily constitute bad faith motivations. Disagreement should not automatically shut down conversation. If that were the case, there would be no point in a parent ever speaking to a disgruntled teenager, or coworkers addressing differences in opinion on how to handle a new project. There is a level of intellectual humility and resiliency required of those who would pursue dialogue. We must learn to acknowledge that though differences exist, someone with an opposing perspective can be just as willing as we are to enter a conversation about those differences. So, choose to engage someone who would be receptive to a non-confrontational, open conversation on a set topic.

Equally important, you must select a topic or issue that is "ripe" for conversation. That is, a topic that is important to both participants, is not too polarizing, is timely and relevant, and that both participants are able to engage on with sensitivity and resilience. For example, it might be fruitful to engage a family member on a topic that was brought up at the dinner table, or a topic in an article you saw a friend share on social media. However, it might not be productive to engage a family member on a topic that is at the heart of an intense family divide, or a friend on an issue you know is particularly emotional for them. Start small and know that over time you can build towards more contentious issues. See the Appendix (p. 8) for specific topic ideas.

Choose How to Engage

For some, an informal conversation is the best mode for dialogue. Both participants may feel comfortable talking over coffee or a meal, with no set agenda or structure for the dialogue. For others, a structured format with a pre-identified scope may be a better starting point for discussing a difficult topic. The DCI has utilized a variety of models and recommends beginning with Living Room Conversations for structured one-on-one dialogues before moving on to more open-ended conversations.

[Living Room Conversations](#) has a broad selection of free conversation guides that allow participants to share their responses to different prompts uninterrupted. Adapting this format to allow time for sharing and questioning is a great way to ease into more open-ended one-on-one dialogues.

Set Expectations

It is important to set expectations for these conversations. These are great opportunities for you to learn about the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people that are different from your own. You can also look forward to representing your own perspective, feelings, and experiences, and potentially discover some areas of agreement. But at least initially, neither of you should expect to change the other person's beliefs or stances on issues. And don't be surprised if you disagree about some basic facts and don't understand one another's logic. Such shared understanding takes time, and likely won't come with one conversation.

During Your Conversation

Please note, some of the recommendations below may be more applicable to open-ended conversations. When using a structured approach like Living Room Conversations, the conversation guide will take you through the conversation step by step.

Set the Tone

Braver Angels suggests that it is important to set the tone of these conversations early and often. Suggest that you want to understand other perspectives better – that you are open to learning. Similarly, the DCI has identified several “[deliberative dispositions](#)” that can help make these conversations easier if both of you try to adopt them. They include open-mindedness, curiosity, and charity towards who you are talking with. They also include a sense of anticipation that you might encounter novel ideas and want to qualify or amend your own ideas in light of good reasons. Likewise, the DCI encourages an emphasis on providing evidence – broadly defined – to support one's positions. Such evidence may be experiential, factual, emotional or descriptive, and provides a window into why you believe what you believe.

As the [Dialogue Company's](#) David Compt says, we need to shift from looking for what is wrong in what the other person is saying to looking for what might be right about they are saying. Similarly, he suggests that we move from reciting facts and beliefs to sharing our stories and experiences. You can then begin to find common ground that you can build upon.

Start by Listening

In a world where unproductive crosstalk dominates most political conversations, creating a space where people can share perspectives without being talked over is a refreshing way to approach difficult conversations. By adopting a posture of active listening, both participants are more likely to move beyond their regular talking points to the underlying values and ideas that inform an opinion.

However, active listening may not come as naturally as you might think. Rather than listening to understand, we often use another person's speaking time to formulate our own response or identify a key word or phrase we can attack with a rebuttal. Don't be discouraged if this takes time and practice. It may be helpful to take notes during your conversation to process the information you're hearing and focus your mind on what the other person is actually saying. It can also help to paraphrase what your friend or family member has said so they know you were indeed hearing them ("So just to confirm, what you're saying is...").

Ask Good Questions

Just as important as listening is asking good questions. We are far too familiar with leading questions or questions that do more to insert our opinion into the conversation than demonstrate genuine curiosity. These questions often bear the hallmarks of straw man arguments, where we mischaracterize what someone has said, or ad hominem attacks, where we question the person rather than the opinion they are offering. Instead, try asking questions that may reveal deeper values or experiences that are informing an opinion. [OpenMind](#) recommends remembering the five "Ws" when asking questions:

- *"Who in your life had the most impact on the way you think about this issue?"*
- *"What life experiences might have led you to develop this view?"*
- *"Where do you see this issue playing out in your life?"*
- *"When do you think your view applies? Are there any exceptions?"*
- *"Why is this issue so important to you?"*

Share Honestly and Respectfully

[Braver Angels](#) suggests that when it comes time for you to speak, share something about how you would describe yourself politically and what personal experiences have influenced your beliefs. Use "I" statements as opposed to broad generalizations ("I think President X..." vs. "President X is definitely...") and identify areas of similarity or agreement. When you do

disagree, try to soften the difference by first acknowledging where the other person is coming from and signaling your disagreement first (“I hear you, and you might not be surprised that I completely disagree”). Try to use “yes, and” statements as opposed to “yes, but” ones. And note too if the issue makes you emotional. Recognizing and acknowledging an emotional response to an issue can help you and your partner navigate the conversation effectively and prevent the conversation from doing more harm than good.

Focus on Values

When we engage in conversation by listening and asking good questions, we may notice words or phrases that can clue us into the values or worldviews that are informing the other person’s perspective. Identifying the underlying values driving their concerns can also help the other person know that you are really listening (“It sounds like equality is really important to you in this context”).

People may have shared values that inform their preferred outcomes for a given issue, but different ideas about the strategies that should be used to accomplish that outcome. By focusing on values instead of the specifics of strategic differences, you may be able to more quickly find common ground between two opposing positions.

Practice Pausing

It may be inevitable that you encounter difficult moments in these conversations. Something your partner says really angers you. Something you say really hurts your partner. A surge of emotion may understandably well up in you. Social psychologists have a useful metaphor for thinking about this phenomenon – the elephant and the rider. We can think of emotion and instinct – and unconscious thinking and intuition more generally – as an elephant that determines what we do most of the time. Our conscious mind – the rider of the elephant – sometimes steps in and systematically thinks through a decision but generally has much less influence on our behavior.

The challenge in these conversations is to activate your inner rider and control your inner elephant, even if just for a moment. When you feel yourself becoming charged with emotion, try pausing. Take a breath, count to three, and try to give your partner the benefit of the doubt. You can still express how strongly you feel about the topic, but without saying things you might regret later. Rather than reacting in kind to provocative statements, you can respond with a more balanced and respectful response. You can try to redirect the conversation towards more productive areas. If the other person jumps from topic to topic, you can suggest staying with what you had agreed to talk about.

Remember the Goal

The goal of a one-on-one dialogue is not always to change someone’s mind or “win” the conversation. Those zero-sum, adversarial outcomes are more often associated with debate,

not conversation, dialogue, or deliberation. The goal of your one-on-one conversation is to listen to, share, and consider different perspectives on the topic, and potentially identify positive actions that can be taken after the conversation.

Show Grace

Talking about difficult issues is hard. Communicating one's ideas about politics clearly and effectively is not always easy. Taking the step to enter a conversation with someone who has a different perspective on a topic takes courage. Be sure to extend grace to both yourself and your conversation partner. Avoid snap judgments and assume the best – and not the worst – about the intentions and meanings of your conversation partner. Ask your partner to give you the same courtesy.

After Your Conversation

Follow Up

Be sure to follow up after you have a one-on-one conversation with someone. Whether it is a simple, "Thank you for engaging," or an offer to continue the conversation or discuss a new topic, it is important to acknowledge the other person's participation. Following up can also establish a valuable open line of communication that can be a resource for future questions and conversations.

Appendix

Sample Email for a Living Room Conversation

Feel free to adapt the emails below as appropriate to your situation.

Dear _____,

I hope this email finds you well. I know we have different thoughts about [e.g. politics, immigration], and it makes me sad that we haven't been able to connect on this issue. I just attended a forum where I learned about some interesting ideas from the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) about bridging these kinds of divides – particularly with people you care about.

Would you be interested in joining me for a one-on-one conversation about _____? The DCI directed me to a conversation model called Living Room Conversations that would allow each of us uninterrupted and equal time to share our perspectives and experiences. I think it could be fun! Here is a link to the Living Room Conversation guide on _____: (insert link). And the DCI also has a great resource that could help guide our conversation: (attach this guide or insert link to this guide).

If you're interested in doing this with me, that would be great! Just let me know some times that would be good for you. We can meet somewhere at a social distance, or we could have this conversation over video conference. I hope to hear from you soon!

Sample Email for an Open-Ended Conversation

Dear _____,

I hope this email finds you well. I know we have different thoughts about [e.g. politics, immigration], and it makes me sad that we haven't been able to connect on this issue. I just attended a forum where I learned about some interesting ideas from the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) about bridging these kinds of divides – particularly with people you care about.

Would you be interested in joining me for a one-on-one conversation about _____? The DCI has a great resource that could help guide our conversation: (attach this guide or insert link to this guide).

If you're interested in doing this with me, that would be great! Just let me know some times that would be good for you. We can meet somewhere at a social distance, or we could have this conversation over video conference. I hope to hear from you soon!

Topic Ideas

[Living Room Conversations Guides:](#)

Below are a few Living Room Conversation Guides that might be great starting points for your conversation:

General Topics

- Politics in Faith Communities
- Tribalism 101: Next Door Strangers
- Anxiety and the Election
- What Are American Values/Ideals?
- Media and Polarization
- Free Speech, Fighting Words, and Violence

Specific Topics

- Coronavirus – Information in the Time of Corona
- Race and Faith Communities
- Resilient Schools, Resilient Kids
- Immigration
- Voting Rights
- Guns and Responsibility
- Abortion: For, Against, or Somewhere in Between

Other Resources for One-on-One Conversations

- [Living Room Conversations Friends and Family Guide](#): A general guide that provides some general advice on how to engage your friends and family effectively.
- [Braver Angels](#) offers online training and practice opportunities for those wanting to practice these conversation skills before diving in with people you know. It also organizes parliamentary debates on a wide range of issues.
- [Constructive Dialogue Institute](#) provides an online learning platform based on insights from psychological research. It helps people learn essential ideas and skills for engaging constructively across differences.
- [“Your Angry Uncle Wants to Talk Politics. What Do You Do?”](#) This article includes an interactive tool that allows you to learn about strategies to make difficult conversation easier and more productive.
- [“How to Have a Disagreement Like an Adult, According to Deepak Chopra”](#) This article provides a 9-step framework for engaging with people we disagree with from wellness and spirituality author, Deepak Chopra.
- [“A First Step Toward Loving Our Enemies”](#) This article by ordained Episcopalian former Senator John Danforth (R-MO) and Jesuit priest, Matt Malone, asserts that “we could transform the tone of American politics by greeting each other in peace.”
- [I Think You’re Wrong \(But I’m Listening\): A Guide to Grace-Filled Political Conversations](#) is a book published in 2019 by two working moms from opposite ends of the political spectrum who contend that there is a better alternative to the today’s polarization and acrimony.