



SAY YOUR PEACE

HAVE THOSE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH LOVED ONES WITHOUT HURTING YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

By Andrea Kirk

Most of us struggle with conflict and confrontation, preferring not to rock the boat by speaking up. It may seem like the easiest way to keep everyone happy, but it can lead to resentment over time.

'It's always better to raise issues rather than sweep them under the rug,' says Andrew Burnard, a counselling psychologist in Durban. When an issue is not dealt with directly, it can manifest in other ways, such as arguing about petty issues or being cold towards each other.

'Where there is a relationship, there will be conflict,' says Joburg life coach Telana Simpson, who advocates that this isn't necessarily a bad thing – it is about how you address the conflict that counts. If there's an issue you need to tackle with someone, it is best to plan your approach carefully. Whether it's your boss, lifelong friend, husband or teenager, the following strategies will help you build authenticity, trust and, ultimately, a more joyful and constructive relationship.

DEFINE YOUR PURPOSE

What do you hope to achieve by speaking about the issue? What would be an ideal outcome? If your ideal outcome isn't achievable, decide on a middle-ground decision that you would be happy with.

WHEN AN ISSUE IS NOT DEALT WITH DIRECTLY, IT CAN MANIFEST IN OTHER WAYS

TAKE STOCK OF YOUR EMOTIONS

Are you more emotional about this than the other person might expect? Is there something in your personal history that is making this particularly difficult for you? Before you approach the other person, examine your emotions and understand what is driving your desire to address the issue.

CONSIDER THE OTHER PERSON'S EMOTIONS

How do you think they feel about this issue? How will they feel when you address it? Think of the emotions you can expect from them during the discussion so you can be empathetic instead of defensive.

PLAN YOUR CONVERSATION

Given that emotions are likely to run high, it can be easy to lose your train of thought or your original

objective. Getting sidetracked and bringing in other issues, especially from the past, is counterproductive. 'Write down what you want to say and rehearse how you want to say it,' advises Andrew. 'This will make it much easier to stay focused, even if emotions are running high.'

WAIT FOR THE RIGHT TIME AND PLACE

Don't simply broach a difficult topic in the heat of the moment, cautions Joburg-based psychologist Claudia Abelheim. Wait until you are both feeling calm and relaxed, and choose an environment that supports a positive interaction.

BE POSITIVE

Your attitude towards the conversation will influence the outcome. Bringing a positive energy will also encourage the other person to view the resolution in the same manner.

PUT DOWN YOUR BOXING GLOVES

Confronting someone should not be about judging them or trying to win a battle, where you are right and they are wrong, says Telana. It is about airing your thoughts and asking them about theirs, to try finding a win-win solution for both of you.

JUST LISTEN

We have been well trained to talk, but not really to listen, explains Cape Town clinical psychologist Mari van der Merwe. We often hear that, in order to resolve problems, we need to speak about them. In fact, psychology was originally called the 'talking cure'. 'People often walk out of my office and say they feel much better because they could talk and they knew someone was listening,' she says. Be the kind of partner, parent or friend who listens without interruptions or judgement.

BE EMPATHETIC

Empathy is the cornerstone of communicating successfully, says Andrew. Recognise that you might be saying something difficult or painful for the other person to hear, and be sensitive to their reactions. Acknowledge that their view is valid, even if you don't agree with it.

PAUSE FOR THE CAUSE

If the conversation gets heated, slow down and take a time out, says Telana. Share your emotions and ask how the other person feels. This puts the relationship above the issue and shows you value them.

AVOID ASSUMPTIONS

Don't assume you've understood what the person is saying. Ask questions to clarify and check that you have received the right message. Many arguments are based on misunderstandings because someone has jumped to inaccurate conclusions. ■

IT'S ALL RELATIVE

Most happy and healthy families have one thing in common: effective communication. Family members share their experiences and emotions, and are sensitive, attentive listeners. Open, direct communication allows them to resolve issues that arise, rather than letting them fester. Here are a few key points to help improve your family's communication skills:

Be clear and direct Don't be vague or drop hints, as this can be confusing.

Teach your kids that it is okay to address issues directly, without fear of judgement or anger. 'To encourage honesty, be honest,' advises Claudia. Talk to your children openly, and share your fears and concerns with them in a mature manner. When they have fears and concerns of their own, they'll come to you.

Communicate often Finding time to talk is a challenge when everyone is busy, but use the opportunities where you can. For example, turn off the radio in the car and use this time to connect, sit down for a meal together once a day (even if it means missing out on TV time), or schedule a weekly family meeting where everyone is encouraged to open up about what's happening in their lives.

Stay positive Research shows that happy, stable couples have a ratio of five positive interactions for each negative one, while unhappy couples have a ratio of slightly less than one positive interaction per negative one. The best thing you can do for your family is make a conscious effort to increase the positive interactions shared daily.

