

Your Essential Guide to Civil Political Conversations

THIS HOLIDAY SEASON



Around many dining tables this holiday season, there'll be an extra guest in the room. The elephant, of course. Politics, and all the differing opinions about the tumultuous events of 2020.

We live in divisive times, and unfortunately, our difficulty reaching across the aisle can extend to reaching across the table. Whether or not your gatherings this year include extended relatives, conversations even among immediate siblings, parents, and significant others can cover a lot of rocky terrain over a long day and evening.

This year might seem a lot more fraught than most.

But the same guidelines for civil conversations apply, even leaving room for constructive disagreement. Let's have a look at the attributes of folks who seek to meet on common ground, rather than simmer in the far corners of the room.





#1 | IDENTIFY AND SET ASIDE PERSONAL BIASES

It's tempting to stay steeped in our own beliefs. There's a reason, after all, why we hold them strongly. Instead, look across at this friend or relative with whom you disagree, and think for a moment about the reasons and experiences behind why they might hold their beliefs strongly, too. This is the basis of finding empathy. And before you make assumptions about their motives, ask sincere questions that give them a chance to explain their reasoning and intentions. There's a chance they'll surprise you.



#2 | SEEK AGREEMENT RATHER THAN "WINNING"

It's difficult to achieve a balanced conversation based on connecting with someone if you're constantly formulating your next retort. You have to actively listen to their points, rather than crafting your own retaliation. You never know — you might even find yourself swayed a bit by their insights. Don't aim to end the night by winning or losing but rather seek elements of the issue on which you agree - and don't compromise on your core principles while you search for that common ground. If you can't find it then you just have to get to a civil place where you can agree to disagree, and pass the cranberry sauce with a pleasant expression.



#3 | IT'S POSSIBLE FOR GOOD PEOPLE TO DISAGREE

We all have very different backgrounds that make us who we are, and have shaped the principles we hold firm. But different values and beliefs aren't synonymous with good and bad. Very different formative experiences can create strong, fundamental differences. If you sense you aren't going to be able to find common ground with this person, perhaps it's best to find a pivot to another aspect of the conversation.



#4 | USE FACTS, NOT EMOTION

Emotional arguments aren't a great basis for a conversation, because if both people are speaking from the heart in heated opposition, it's hard to arrive at the conclusion that it's possible for good people to disagree. If you have good facts, figures, and statistics, open your toolbox and use them. But let the other person do the same — and if theirs are solid, acknowledge that, even if it doesn't fit well with your narrative.



#5 | BRING DOWN THE TEMPERATURE

If you find the conversation becoming too heated, do whatever you can to de-escalate a potentially hostile situation. Name calling and tossing around stereotypes are indicators that the conversation is traveling in the wrong direction. If you find the conversation becoming too heated then express empathy for why someone may feel passionate but don't give in to the temptation to reciprocate with pejorative terms of your own. Storytelling is one way to grab attention — just make sure the takeaway is one of neutrality, or learning something unexpected.

Want more tips on healing the divide over Thanksgiving or any gathering? Watch our webinar *"Ten Ways to Heal the Divide"*, with Living Room Conversations founder Joan Blades and founder of Bridge USA, Manu Meel, moderated by Common Ground Committee co-founder, Bruce Bond.