

From Psychology Today: “6 Safe Sentence-Starters for Sensitive Discussions”

To speak up effectively on tough topics, use these six simple starter-phrases.

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Starter #1: I feel/felt _____.

For example, *"I feel confused about what happened last night."*

Note: feelings are one word or phrase. More than one word or phrase is probably a thought, not a feeling. If you have begun "I feel that...", you are sharing information but you are not sharing a feeling.

Note also that some feelings will be received more easily than others. Vulnerable feelings like *confused*, *anxious*, *concerned*, or *sad* have higher odds of engendering cooperation than threatening words like *angry*, *mad*, or even *frustrated*.

To add more information about the situation that triggered the feeling, add a *when you*. The *when you* can be added at either the beginning or the end of the sentence.

I feel/felt _____ when you _____.

Or

When you _____, I feel/felt _____.

"I felt hurt when you left the house instead of being happy to see the new sofa."

"When you left the house instead of being happy to see the new sofa, I felt hurt."

Starter #2: My concern is/was _____.

"My concern was that I wanted to prepare a nice surprise for you. I felt really bad that my surprise seems to have backfired."

Understanding each other's concerns sets you up to find good solutions, solutions that work for both of you.

Starter #3: I would like to _____.

"I would like to understand what you were thinking when you looked distressed by the new sofa I bought instead of excited."

Note: Be sure to avoid *I would like you to...* Telling each other what to do is a losing strategy, likely to engender resentment rather than cooperation.

Sentence starter #4: How/What do you feel/think about that idea?

"What was your reaction to the sofa? I'd been so sure you'd love it, since we've talked so long about trying to find one in this color and fabric, and the price was quite modest."

Symmetry is vital in sensitive conversations. The fourth starter, a question, invites the listener to share his/her perspective.

SENTENCE STARTERS FOR RESPONDING TO SOMEONE ELSE

The following response sequence enables conversations to flow smoothly. The sequence begins with listening to learn, not to dismiss or negate.

Starter #5: Yes. I agree that _____.

"Yes, I agree that the sofa is exactly what we'd talked about, and I do think it's perfect for the room."

Starting with YES establishes that you are collaborative--on the same side, against the problem. Explaining what makes sense about what you heard tells your conversation partner what you are digesting from what was said.

Be specific. Avoid generalities like "I agree with what you said." Generalities tend to convey that you are being patronizing, that you did not really listen or digest what you claim to have heard.

Tell the speaker what you agree with, giving specifics. Digesting what you heard aloud in this way clarifies what you took in so the speaker feels that his/her contribution has been entered into the shared data pool.

Starter #6: And at the same time _____.

"And at the same time, I felt a surge of panic when I saw the sofa. The panic had to do with something that happened yesterday at work. My new boss, the guy I've disliked since he arrived, told me that my job may end. That's why reacted with panic instead of pleasure. I walked out of the house because I was so distressed I couldn't even talk about it."

Rather than linking with the negating word *but*, which dismisses or erases what came before, launch your differing perspective with *and* or *and at the same time*. Both viewpoints then will remain on the data table, keeping the dialogue collaborative and co-creating new understandings.

Using the sentence starters in the order suggested works especially well.

Here's a preview of how the sentence starters might sound in a business example:

As opposed to, "What's wrong with everyone in the sales department. These numbers are terrible!"

"I felt stunned when I saw how much our sales numbers were down last month. My concern is that I have no idea why they dropped. I would like to schedule a meeting for brainstorming about what might be going on and what each of us might do about it. What about Thursday at noon?"

That was a quick run-through of starters #1, # 2, then #3, and then #4.

Starters #5 and #6 are listening responses. They might sound like this:

"Yes, I also felt shocked when I saw the sudden drop-off in our sales numbers. So yes, *I too would love to* schedule a meeting of management and the sales department to figure out what's happening. *And at the same time* I'd like to add inviting someone from tech to report on whether there may have been technical problems on our website that could be part of the problem." Then, circling back to the sentence-starters for adding data, "My concern though is that I have another commitment already on Thursday at noon. How about later that afternoon?"

Each of the safe-starters can be used repeatedly in a conversation, as many times as needed.

In sum, these six sentence starters are remarkably robust. One or more of them is likely to serve you well in almost any sensitive situation, with intimates, work associates, family members or friends.

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To explore more of Dr. Heitler's ideas, see her website at TherapyHelp.com.