



# NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS AT THE HOLIDAY "GATHERING"

The year 2020 has CHANGED almost everything. The election year and several high-profile events during the year have brought out divisive and often polarizing topics: race, justice, community health, and the economy, among others. These topics add to familiar (and unfamiliar) moments of tension as families and friends must find new ways to gather, considering health and family priorities in the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it be at someone's house, in a driveway, or on a video call, you may still find yourself having 'difficult moments' in conversations with your friends and family members about these topics.

## WHAT YOU SHOULD KEEP IN MIND:

### OPEN MIND

Approach all comments and conversations with an open mind - be ready to learn as much as you might feel compelled to explain or "teach" others. Oftentimes, if you focus on a different goal, you might find an exchange more productive than frustrating. Think of yourself as "studying" other perspectives. Ask questions towards understanding.

### CHECK INTENTIONS

Don't assume that divisive statements equal "bad" intentions. Statements can reflect everything from false information to fear or self-defense. Separate the comments from the people saying them.

ALSO, understand your intentions for engaging -- are you trying to be heard, change minds, or "fight back"? Know your purpose and evaluate if this is the time and place to fulfill that intent.

### CHECK EMOTIONS

Beware of how you are feeling and responding to statements being made. If possible, you might even check your emotional state before the gathering begins: Are you already anxious? Dreading a certain topic or guest?

Manage these feelings by being prepared, checking on your feelings in the moment, and using these checks to decide HOW and HOW LONG you will interact. Focus on facts as much as possible. Use "I" statements if you decide to discuss your emotions instead of moving towards 'heated attacks' based on those emotions.

### CHECK ASSUMPTIONS

We all have biases and assumptions that we can bring to a conversation. We know our viewpoints, our experiences, and our motivations, but we are often unaware of how we may be biased. As such, we may not recognize when we might be participating in "oops/ouch" moments. You are just as likely to offend someone as you are to be offended. Keep this in mind, be ready to make amends, and learn from the moment.

### BE PREPARED

Be sure you are ready to engage. If you know who you are likely to encounter, or the topics most likely to "stir things up," have information and facts prepared to keep you focused on the arguments and not people or feelings.

Also know that one conversation is VERY UNLIKELY TO CHANGE SOMEONE - so if you are looking to win someone over to your side, you might need to be prepared to follow up after the gathering and have numerous conversations.

### FIND ALLIES

Most divisive conversations tend to give an "us vs. them" framing to a discussion. Instead, try to think of ways to find common ground, or to "invite others in." Find ways to treat the other person as a potential ally. ALSO, find allies in others at the gathering -- bring in those with common views or who can support you in the discussion. Focus on those that can support you as a friend or family member, not just your argument, so you don't create more divisiveness.

## KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Set boundaries and know when you might need to 'walk away' - you can stop when you feel uncomfortable or if you cannot manage your emotions. You can also stop if you realize that despite your intentions, the conversation may be more destructive than constructive. Give yourself permission to call a "truce" or admit "defeat" -- it's better to leave your emotional state, as well as the nature of the gathering and relationships, intact.