

Holiday Conversation Guide

Going home for the holidays can mean potentially revisiting old arguments or surfacing new tensions, which can often lead to differences of opinion around the dinner table. Navigating these dynamics, however, doesn't have to be overwhelming, and the conversations don't have to be painful. At their best, these conversations have the potential to shift relationships and understanding, and deepen connection with family members and loved ones you may not have seen in a while.

This guide offers practical rules of thumb for defusing tension and navigating difficult conversations.

Rules of Thumb

Ask questions that signal curiosity.

Figure out the values and life experiences that underlie people's beliefs and political views. Even if you think you already know, ask anyway – you may be surprised by what you learn. Try questions like:

- *What makes you say that?*
- *What makes that important to you?*
- *Is there a person or experience that influenced your belief?*
- *Have you always felt that way?*

Acknowledge others' emotions.

The simple act of acknowledging what someone else is feeling or expressing can create the possibility to connect with that person. Remember, acknowledging someone else's experience does not mean that you have to agree with their stance. Use statements like:

- *I can understand why you feel that way.*
- *I can tell this is really important to you.*
- *What a frustrating/upsetting situation.*
- *I want to make sure I'm understanding correctly. What I'm hearing is...*

Tell your story.

The most important thing you can bring to the table is yourself. The good news is that speaking from your own experience is more likely to trigger empathy in your listener and bring you closer to understanding each other. You've been away at college and have had many new experiences; how can you share what you've seen and felt, and how that has shaped you, with your loved ones?

- Think about answering this question: "Can you tell me a story that helps me understand how you came to believe that?"

Bring feeling words.

Being vulnerable can make a world of difference in navigating those thorny topics that tend to make people feel further apart. Try talking about how the conversation or issue makes you feel rather than judging or discounting another person for their beliefs.

Take a break if needed.

How can you detect if you're in "fight or flight" mode and might need to step away? You might notice these signs:

- Physical Signs = heart racing, muscles tensing, breathing shallow
- Thought Patterns = "she never listens to me"
- Emotional Responses = frustration, anger, shame
- Behavior Shifts = yelling, walking away, going quiet

By stepping away, you give yourself space to respond calmly rather than react impulsively. It's better to acknowledge your feelings and redirect the conversation rather than have an explosive argument.

**Want to practice ahead of your trip home?
Try our Conversation Simulator by
scanning the QR code:**



Navigating Conversations During the Holidays

Take winning off the table.

CDI's research shows that conversations go better when both sides back down from their commitments to persuading others that they are right. Does it feel good to win? Sure does! But does it help bridge the divides? It seems to widen them.

Try shifting your goal for the conversation from winning to understanding. It'll be a whole lot less stressful that way.

Get curious.

The best way to begin a difficult conversation is to get curious about what's driving other people's views. This is not the time to make judgments; it's the time to ask more questions in order to identify the values and life experiences behind those views.

Focus on letting them tell their stories, and make sure they feel heard.

Share your sources.

If there's someone you disagree with, ask that person to share a resource that influenced their perspective.

Take the time to review what they share and follow up by telling them at least one thing you learned. One source is unlikely to change your mind, but you'll come away better informed and more prepared for your next conversation with someone who holds those beliefs.

Practice Makes Progress

These tools and techniques really do work – but only when they're put into practice.

Like any skill, navigating difficult conversations gets easier and more natural the more you do it.

This holiday season, think of each interaction as an opportunity to practice:

- Ask one more curious question than you normally would.
- Pause before responding when things feel tense.
- Share something personal about what shaped your perspective.

You'll get better at handling tough conversations and open new possibilities for connection with the people who matter in your life.

We encourage you to spend some time practicing this holiday season!

