

# The Hard Conversations

*By Joni Daniels*



***“I want to talk to you about your driving.”***

***“I’d like to talk about the arrangements you’ve made for the time when you can no longer live alone.”***

***“I want to know if you’ve given any thought to getting a second medical opinion.”***

***“I want to talk to you about a Durable Power of Attorney.”***

These are the hard conversations in life, the dialogues that we know we need to have but don’t want to initiate. Many of us see them looming on the horizon and think that if we just keep our heads down, they will either happen at the instigation of the other person or, even better, go away and magically resolve themselves. You certainly don’t have to hold these hard conversations. You can wait until:

- The spouse whose driving is questionable gets into an accident.
- A parent’s dementia has made him/her paranoid and distrustful of anyone asking for a signature on medical or legal forms.
- A friend informs you that they encountered your father at the mall and he appeared confused and disoriented.
- Your mother writes checks to phony sales people who come to her home and has drained her savings account.

Some people manage to avoid the hard conversations and simply deal with the consequences.

However, if you are interested in exerting more control over your life than the person who selects to pick up the pieces after the fact, then you need a goal, a strategy, a script.

And what about the fear that prevents you from having a hard conversation in the first place? It's easier to simply embrace it. The reason these conversations are so hard is because everyone is afraid to have them. You are in very good company here.

But someone needs to jump in and seize control. Why not you? Breathe deeply, and remember that you are simply taking your thoughts and putting them into action in order to secure a better outcome.

## GOAL

The goal is the reason you are taking action in the first place. What do you hope to accomplish?

Sometimes, even though the conversation is hard, the goal is simple:

- To bring up a topic for consideration
- To open the door to a thorny issue
- To begin examining information
- To explore feelings
- To show a willingness to be brave

You may not get to a solution with the first hard conversation. In fact, you might want to leave that for a later discussion. Sometimes, initiating a hard conversation starts out as a monologue. It may take the other person a while to realize that you want an exchange that they may not be ready to have. Treat him/her with the same respect that you would like to receive. Allow her time to get her thoughts and

words in order. Just because you are ready to talk, does not mean she is. She may not possess the cognitive ability to provide you with the information you hope to gain, but it can alert her to the fact that you want to get to a point where you both can talk about this issue.

## STRATEGY

With a goal in mind, a strategy gives you the 'how.' Sometimes a forewarning can help set the stage and other times it can ratchet up the anxiety. Think about not just how to make it easy for you, but what might make the other person less defensive or tense.

## ANTICIPATE

No matter how well things can go, the fear that holds us back from having the hard conversations is the anxiety over how badly things can go. So rather than not think about it, really think about it. Ask yourself "What's the worst that can happen?" and follow that with "And if that happens – what can I do or say?"

You will increase whatever bravery you bring to the conversation by having a back-up plan for your worst-case scenario. Better to create a back-up plan and never have to use it, than be caught off guard without one.

## SCRIPT

You will be nervous. She will be too. Some people diminish the message in order to make it more comfortable to say or easier to hear; at worst, it becomes so diluted that the real meaning never gets through. Saying, "I don't think that is a good idea," does not carry the same weight as "This is not a good idea." Own the message in a strong way. "I'd like you to..." is nice but "This is important because..." is clear.

Practice your opening. The first few moments will be easier if you aren't searching for the right words or tone. If you want to set the stage, set it decisively.

***“This is hard for me to say, but it needs to be said.”***

***“I don’t want to put off this conversation any longer.”***

***”I know this will upset you, but my goal is that we successfully resolve this together.”***

I’m extremely impressed with the little acts of bravery I hear about each day:

- the spouse who arranges for a meeting with a support group
- the adult daughter who initiates the conversation about a living will
- the friend who suggests getting a second opinion
- the person who informs a friend about a behavior that appears inappropriate

No, not all hard conversations are met with appreciation and applause. But by starting a difficult conversation and following these suggestions, you can pat yourself on the back, knowing that you have stepped up to the plate, taken responsibility, and perhaps gained a bit of control over a successful outcome.

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