

# HOW TO TALK TO YOUR NEIGHBOR

*A guide to having conversations about important issues with people who believe, think, and vote differently than you.*



This guide was created by the One America Movement to help individuals have conversations about the issues that matter to them with their loved ones.

The How to Talk to Your Neighbor guide is adapted from Over Zero's guide, "Navigating conversations on contentious issues." Learn more about Over Zero's work at [projectoverzero.org](http://projectoverzero.org).

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*Why should I bother to try to talk to people who disagree with me? I'm not sure it's worth the effort.*



# The polarization in our country is toxic but we don't have to continue down this path.

We get it. You need a break from all of the bickering and political memes and anger that seem to permeate social media. It feels like our country is falling apart. So, you “unfriend” your childhood friend, your coworker, and your dear grandmother instead of engaging in a digital argument.

Cutting people off online doesn't sound like a big deal, but when we choose to block or remove people with different opinions than us from our circle, we end up creating an echo chamber where the only thoughts we hear are ones that mirror our own. It doesn't take long to fall into unhealthy patterns of behavior that reinforce our differences and eliminate the opportunity to work together on the issues that matter.

It doesn't make the family reunion much fun either.

But, what would happen if you were to reach out to people who believe, think, and vote differently than you offline? What would it look like to get to know them better, learn why they believe what they believe, and how they'd tackle the issue at hand? Would you learn that you have more in common with them than you initially thought?

**We think so.** In fact, we have the research to prove that our country is less divided than we believe.

We've been taught that polite people don't discuss religion or politics (or any other challenging topic), and it seems like every day it becomes harder and harder to have deep conversations. But, we can't continue like this. **We have to learn how to talk to — and work with — the people in our lives regardless of our differences.**

# First Things First!

## Who should I talk to?

Start with someone you know and trust. Choose someone who will be open to a structured conversation including different points of view, and won't come out swinging. It's a conversation, not an argument.

## What should I talk about?

In today's climate, there is an overwhelming number of issues we disagree on. Try to pick just one narrow topic that you'd like to try to find solutions for. You want to stay open-minded during the conversation, so avoid anything that feels too high-stakes for you.



*Hi, Grandpa! I noticed you shared a post about defunding the police on Facebook. Would you have time to talk about that with me this week?*

*I don't want to fight either. I think it's possible that we could learn from each other and maybe find something we can agree on.*

## What could we accomplish if we could talk productively about:

COVID-19, faith, sexuality, guns, education, family, politics, leadership, the economy, Black Lives Matter, healthcare, immigration, social policy . . .

**or any other hot button topic?**

## What should I be careful about?

You and your conversation partner should come into the conversation on relatively equal footing. It can also be challenging to be vulnerable if the issue you'd like to talk about affects you and your conversation partner in very different, and often intimate, ways. Be thoughtful and considerate throughout this process.

## How should I start?

Schedule this conversation in advance. Both participants should be prepared and understand the goal is to talk deeply about the issue you choose, not to debate or change the other person's mind.

*Sure, but I don't want to fight with you. I think we disagree about this. Are you sure it's a good idea that we talk about it?*



**Ready to give it a try?  
Let's learn the ground rules.**

# Ground Rules for Meaningful Conversation

**In today's world, many conversations unravel into debates before they can even begin. Here are some rules to keep things productive and positive!**

## **Listen**

We are not debating! Listen to understand how someone got to where they are and how they see the world, not to change their mind.

## **Ask to Learn, Not to Respond**

Ask questions that can deepen your understanding of the person you're listening to, rather than questions that can increase your capacity to argue.

## **Be Present**

Oftentimes we begin to formulate our responses while the other person is still talking, especially when we are feeling nervous or defensive. Try to catch yourself when you begin to do this, and focus on what the other person is saying.

## **Pause**

Leave a pause between when someone shares and when you respond. This allows a moment for processing, and also keeps a pace of conversation that enables everyone to reflect and engage.

## **Watch for Cues**

Our body language, tone, facial expressions, and other non-verbal cues can help you measure the comfort of those participating in the conversation and can help you set the tone with your responses.

## Be Open-Minded

Be open to critique of your own positions and share doubts you may have about your own beliefs or positions.

## Assume Good Intent

Seek clarification by asking someone to “explain more” or, “can you say more about what you mean by that?” if you find yourself feeling defensive or offended by what they say.

## Be Self-Aware

Some things that people say will be hard for you to hear. Keep an awareness of your own reaction – physiological, emotional, and/or mental – and try to understand your own feelings about the conversation.

## Maintain Trust and Confidentiality

The conversation needs to stay between the participants. Don't discuss what you learned with others online or in person.



*We are all tired of bickering over issues instead of solving problems. With these rules in place we can focus on sharing our ideas and finding common ground.*

**Now that you know the rules,  
it's time to get talking.**

# Step One: Establish a Starting Place

## The Process

You will ask one question at a time, and give your conversation partner room to think about their responses. If needed, you can ask the prompting questions to gain a deeper understanding of their experience.

When it is your turn to respond, share only the story and facts of *your* experience. You can ask more questions to better understand your partner, and to connect and relate with them, but you don't want to argue with them or weigh in on their personal story. Do look for places where you can agree, and highlight these in your response.

**Remember, this isn't a debate — it's a conversation.** This stage of the conversation allows us to see the big picture, find common ground, and understand each other's lived experiences.

## Let's get started!

*When it's my turn to talk, I won't tell my partner their worldview is wrong. I want to be heard and understood, and I know my partner wants the same.*



# Big Picture Questions

By starting with the big picture, we immediately establish why this issue is important to both participants, and determine an end goal — the vision for the future.

*Question #1: Ask your partner*

## **How did you come to care about this issue?**

*Prompting questions:*

- Did something happen in your life to lead you to care about this issue?
- Do you know someone who is impacted by this issue?
- How did you feel when you first recognized this issue?

*Your turn to share*

How did you come to care about this issue?

*Question #2: Ask your partner*

## **What is your vision for the future when it comes to this issue?**

*Prompting questions:*

- If you could change anything about how our country deals with this issue, what would it be?
- What would our country look like if this weren't an issue?
- What would you like to say to people who are personally affected by this issue?

*Your turn to share*

What is your vision for the future when it comes to this issue?

**Make note of any common ground  
you may share with your partner.**

## Step Two: Reflecting on Personal Beliefs



*This is where the conversation may get hard. You can do this!*

This series of questions helps us reflect on why we believe what we believe so we can gain a deeper understanding of our partner's — and our own — beliefs and ideas.

This part of the conversation may feel uncomfortable to you if your lived experiences are different than that of your conversation partner. Focus on listening to their experience, pause and take a moment to breathe as you consider your response.

If you disagree with a position or statement you heard, you can share something you understood about the experiences they shared. Do not respond with a values statement or evaluation about their beliefs. Remember, **this conversation is about listening to each other**, not debating each other.

*Question #1: Ask your partner*

**Has your opinion or feelings about this issue changed over time?**

*Prompting questions:*

- Has this issue become more or less important to you over time? What caused that change?
- Have your opinions about how to approach this issue changed over time? Why do you think that is?
- Do you think differently about this issue than you did before? How so?

*Your turn to share*

Have your opinion or feelings about this issue changed over time?

*Question #2: Ask your partner*

**What has made you doubt or question your beliefs/feelings/opinions?**

*Prompting questions:*

- Have you had any conversations or relationships that make you question your stance?
- Have you seen any news stories that made you question your stance?
- Have you had personal experiences that made you question your stance?

*Your turn to share*

What makes you doubt or question your beliefs on this issue?

*Question #3: Ask your partner*

**What has solidified your beliefs/feelings/opinions on this issue?**

*Prompting questions:*

- Have you had any conversations or relationships that reinforced your stance?
- Have you seen any news stories that reinforced your stance?
- Have you had personal experiences that reinforced your stance?

*Your turn to share*

What makes you sure about your beliefs on this issue?

*Question #4: Ask your partner*

**What questions do you have about the issue?**

*Prompting questions:*

- What do you wish you had more information about?
- Do you see any holes in your understanding about this issue?
- If you could talk to an expert on this issue, what would you ask them?

*Your turn to share*

What questions do you have about this issue?

## Step Three: Working with Others

We have an opportunity to continue to talk about, work through, and find solutions to the issues that matter to us throughout our day to day lives. We know that as members of a group, sometimes we struggle to share our thoughts, especially if we have different experiences than the rest of our group.

This part of the conversation is about considering how your beliefs on this issue come up in your conversations with other people. **How can we be more productive in our words, actions, and conversations?**

*Question #1: Ask your partner*

### **When does this issue come up for you?**

*Prompting questions:*

- Who do you interact with about this issue?
- How do they feel/think about it?
- How does this influence you?

*Your turn to share*

When does this issue come up for you?

*Question #2: Ask your partner*

### **How would you change the conversation around this issue?**

*Prompting questions:*

- If you could change the public debate about this issue from a yes/no question into something different, what would it be? Instead of asking “should we allow puppies or cats in our town?” I might ask, “how should our town engage with animals?”)
- What aspects of this issue do you wish could be discussed and aren’t?

*Your turn to share*

How would you change the conversation around this issue?

# What can we do together?

## Discuss solutions together.

Even if we disagree on the larger issue, is there any way we can work together to make a difference in the elements we do agree on?

## How can we create change in our community on this issue?

1. Are there any organizations or service providers locally working on this issue?
2. Are there volunteer opportunities we could pursue together?
3. Are there leaders in our community working on this issue with whom we could speak?
4. What is the most effective way we can make a difference on this issue?



*Let's move from talk to action. Not only is it productive, but it can bring us together.*

**This step is important!  
Come up with an action plan together.**

# Reflecting on the Conversation

**Congratulations! You just had a really difficult conversation.**

As you come away from the conversation give yourself time to think through what you heard, felt, and understood from the conversation. Our differences are complex, and we aren't going to always agree.

**Luckily, agreeing on all the details wasn't the goal.**

**Ask yourself these questions:**

How did it feel to discuss this issue with your partner?

Did anything upset you or cause you to feel uncomfortable? Why?

Do you have any follow up questions you should consider?

Is there anything you need to process before you can engage in the work with your partner on this issue?

**We need to be able to move past our differences so we can break through the gridlock caused by toxic polarization and get to work on the issues that matter.**

*That was better than I thought it would be! I am surprised that we both had similar visions for the future, even if we disagreed on the methods.*





## What's Next?

We have a lot of work to do to reduce divisions in our country. Commit to working with people who come from different religious, racial, and political backgrounds to build a stronger, more united country for all of us.

At the One America Movement we believe in confronting the most difficult challenges and differences that plague our nation. You can help. Be bold in telling your stories and sharing you experiences — this work is essential to counter divisive narratives and reduce toxic polarization.

One America offers training programs for faith leaders across a variety of religious traditions, and has chapters across the nation which bring together groups of people across divides to work on issues of importance in their communities.

**Learn more at [www.OneAmericaMovement.org](http://www.OneAmericaMovement.org)**