

A GUIDE TO USING THESE IDEAS

PART III

Emotional Conversations, in Life and Online

Emotions impact every conversation, whether we realize it or not. Even when we don't acknowledge those feelings, they're still there—and when they are ignored, they're likely to become obstacles to connection.

So a critical goal, in any meaningful discussion, is bringing emotions to the surface, which is the third rule of a learning conversation.

Third Rule:
**Ask about others' feelings,
and share your own.**

There is a moment, in many conversations, when someone says something emotional, or we reveal our own feelings, or we want to understand why we keep fighting, or we hope to get closer to someone who feels distant. That is when a *How Do We Feel?* conversation

might begin, if we allow it to. And one of the best ways to start is to **ask a deep question.**

Deep questions are particularly good at creating intimacy because they ask people to describe their beliefs, values, feelings, and experiences in ways that can reveal something vulnerable. And vulnerability sparks emotional contagion, which makes us more aligned.

Deep questions can be as light as “What would be your perfect day?” or as heavy as “What do you regret most?” Deep questions don’t always seem deep at first: “Tell me about your family” or “Why do you look so happy today?” are easy to ask—and can be deep because they invite others to explain what makes them proud or worried, joyful or excited.

Nearly any question can be remade into a deep question. The key is understanding three characteristics:

1. **A deep question asks about someone’s values, beliefs, judgments, or experiences—rather than just facts.** Don’t ask “Where do you work?” Instead, draw out feelings or experiences: “What’s the best part of your job?” (One 2021 study found a simple approach to generating deep questions: Before speaking, imagine you’re talking to a close friend. What question would you ask?)
2. **A deep question asks people to talk about how they feel.** Sometimes this is easy: “How do you feel about . . .?” Or, we can prompt people to describe specific emotions: “Did it make you happy when . . .?” Or ask someone to analyze a situation’s emotions: “Why do you think he got angry?” Or empathize: “How would you feel if that happened to you?”
3. **Asking a deep question should feel like sharing.** It should feel, a bit, like we’re revealing something about ourselves when we ask a deep question. This feeling might give us pause. But studies show people are nearly always happy to have been asked, and to have answered, a deep question.

Once we ask a deep question, we need to listen closely to how others reply. Listening requires paying attention to more than just the words they say. To hear what a person is saying, we also need to pay attention to their **nonlinguistic emotional expressions**—the sounds they make, their gestures, tone of voice and cadence, how they hold their bodies and their expressions.

The last guide laid out some clues that are useful in determining what people want from a conversation. We can also learn to look for what they are feeling. But since it's easy to mistake, say, frustration for anger, or quiet for sadness, it is critical to be attuned to two things:

- **Mood:** Do they seem upbeat or glum? How would you describe their expressions? Are they laughing, or shouting? Are they up or down?
- **Energy:** Are they high energy, or low energy? Quiet and withdrawn or talkative and expressive? If they seem happy, is it calm and content (*low energy*) or excited and outgoing (*high energy*)? If they are unhappy, are they sad (*low energy*) or agitated (*high energy*)?

Look to *mood and energy*
to gauge emotions...

		MOOD	
		Positive	Negative
ENERGY	High	<i>Upbeat</i>	<i>Angry</i>
	Low	<i>Blissful</i>	<i>Frustrated</i>

...and then match to
show you are listening.

Mood and energy levels often tell us all we need to know in order to align emotionally. Sometimes, we might not want to match emotions: If someone is angry, and we become angry, it may drive us apart. But if we acknowledge their mood and energy—“You seem upset. What’s wrong?”—we can start to align.

RESPONDING TO EMOTIONS

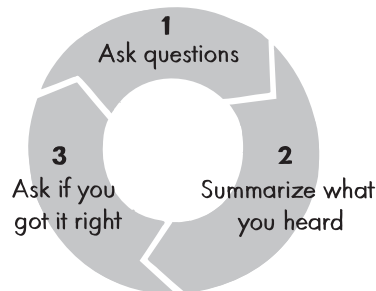
Once we’ve brought our emotions to the surface, what do we do next?

One of the most important aspects of emotional communication is **showing** others we hear their emotions, which helps us **reciprocate**.

There’s a technique for this—**looping for understanding**. Here’s how it works:

- Ask questions, to make sure you understand what someone has said.
- Repeat back, in your own words, what you heard.
- Ask if you got it right.
- Continue until everyone agrees we understand.

We prove we are listening by
looping for understanding.



Repeat until everyone agrees we understand.

The goal of *looping* isn't parroting someone's words, but rather distilling another person's thoughts in your own language, showing them that you are working hard to see their perspective, and then repeating the process until everyone is aligned.

There are two benefits to *looping*:

First, it helps us make sure we're hearing others.

Second, it demonstrates we *want* to hear.

This second benefit is important because it helps establish **reciprocal vulnerability**. Emotional reciprocity doesn't come from simply describing our own feelings but, rather, providing "empathetic support." Reciprocity is nuanced. If someone reveals they've gotten a cancer diagnosis, we shouldn't reciprocate by talking about our own aches and pains. That's not support—it's an attempt to turn the spotlight on ourselves.

But if we say, "I know how scary that is. Tell me what you're feeling," we show we empathize and are trying to understand.

We reciprocate vulnerability by . . .

- **Looping for understanding**, until you understand what someone is feeling.
- **Looking for what someone needs**: Do they want comfort? Empathy? Advice? Tough love? (If you don't know the answer, *loop* more.)
- **Asking permission**. "Would it be okay if I told you how your words affect me?" or "Would you mind if I shared something from my own life?" or "Can I share how I've seen others handle this?"
- **Giving something in return**. This can be as simple as describing how you feel: "It makes me sad to hear you're in pain," or "I'm so happy for you," or "I'm proud to be your friend."

Reciprocity isn't about matching vulnerability to vulnerability, or sorrow to sorrow. Rather, it is being emotionally available, listening to how someone feels and what they need, and sharing our own emotional reactions.

HOW DOES THIS CHANGE IN A CONFLICT?

Sharing feelings can be difficult amid conflict. If we're in a fight, or talking to someone with different values and goals, connection can seem difficult—even impossible.

But because emotions drive so many conflicts, during fights it's even more important to discuss *How Do We Feel?* It reveals how to bridge the gulf.

Researchers have found that in a conflict, **proving we are listening** and **sharing vulnerabilities** can be particularly powerful—and we can prove we are listening through specific techniques.

When we are in conflict with someone . . .

- **First, acknowledge understanding.** We do this through looping and statements such as “Let me make sure I understand.”
- **Second, find specific points of agreement.** Look for places where you can say “I agree with you” or “I think you're right that . . .” These remind everyone that, though we may have differences, we *want* to be aligned.
- **Finally, temper your claims.** Don't make sweeping statements such as “Everyone knows that's not true” or “Your side always gets this wrong.” Rather, use words like *somewhat* or “It might be . . .” and speak about specific experiences (“I want to talk about why you left dishes in the sink last night”) rather than broad generalities (“I want to talk about how you never do your part around the house”).

The goal is showing that the aim of this conversation is not winning, but understanding. You don't need to avoid disagreements or downplay your own opinions. You can offer thoughts, advocate for your beliefs, even make arguments and challenge each other—as long as your goal is to understand, and be understood, rather than to win.

HOW DOES THIS CHANGE WHEN WE GO ONLINE?

Humans have been speaking to each other for more than a million years and communicating via written language for more than five millennia. And over that time, we've developed norms and nearly unconscious behaviors—the lilt in our voice when we answer a phone; the sign-off in a letter signaling our fondness for the reader—that make communication easier.

In contrast, we've only been communicating online since 1983. Relatively speaking, the norms and behaviors for talking over the internet are still in their infancy.

One of the biggest problems with online discussions, of course, is they lack the information usually provided by our voices and bodies: Our vocal tones, gestures, expressions, and the cadence and energy we bring to our speech. Even when we write letters, we tend to include nuances and subtleties that come from editing ourselves and thinking about what we want to say.

Online, however, communication tends to be fast and unthinking, unedited and sometimes garbled, without any of the clues that our voices provide, or the thoughtfulness that formal correspondence allows.

But online communication is here to stay. So what do we need to know?

There are four things that studies show make online conversations better.

When talking online, remember to . . .

- **Overemphasize politeness.** Numerous studies have shown that online tensions are lessened if at least one person is consistently polite. In one study, all it took was adding *thanks* and *please* to a series of online arguments—while everything else stayed the same—to reduce tensions.
- **Underemphasize sarcasm.** When we say something in a wry tone, it signals an irony our audience usually understands. When we type something sarcastic online, we typically hear these same inflections within our heads—but the people reading our comments do not.
- **Express more gratitude, deference, greetings, apologies, and hedges.** Studies demonstrate that when we are grateful (“That comment taught me a lot”), or solicitous (“I would love to hear your thoughts”), or preface comments with a greeting (“Hey!”), or apologize in advance (“I hope you don’t mind . . .”) or hedge our comments (“I think . . .”), online communication gets better.
- **Avoid criticism in public forums.** In another study, researchers found that giving negative feedback online backfires much more than in real life. It pushes people to write more negative things, and to start criticizing others more frequently. When we criticize others publicly online, we make bad behavior into a digital norm.

All of these, of course, are also useful tactics when we’re speaking face-to-face. Many of them are obvious, things we learned as kids. But online, they’re easy to forget because we’re typing fast, texting between meetings, hitting SEND or POST without rereading our words to see how they might land. Online, a bit more care and thought can yield outsized rewards.