



How to Discuss Politics with Friends & Family Amidst the Presidential Election

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As the 2020 election gets closer, tensions in conversations around politics arise faster every day. Our nation is currently filled with more conflicting opinions than normal-- something that is hard to ignore. Some people may find this topic to be a matter they would rather not discuss with loved ones for valid and personal reasons. This is normal and not something everyone needs to do! However, others may feel conversations surrounding the election are important to discuss with friends and family but are unsure of how to approach it. So how do you deal with the tension, the discomfort, the stress, or the feeling of dread while managing to communicate effectively?

Dr. Tania Israel, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has recently published a book called *Beyond Your Bubble: How to Connect Across the Political Divide*. In this book, Dr. Israel elaborates on how to engage in meaningful in-person dialogue regarding political topics. The emphasis on in-person dialogue with familiar faces is important. When you know someone on a personal level, versus a comment on the internet, it gives you more information, context, and reasoning to understand their viewpoints. In order to prepare for these face-to-face conversations surrounding a difficult topic like the upcoming election, here are a few tips based on Dr. Israel's work that you can follow.

Preparing for Conversations: Sit down with yourself and analyze your own political opinions, feelings, triggers, and boundaries.

- By taking the time to be more self-aware you can better gain an understanding of your own beliefs and values and why you feel strongly about them. This may help you prepare to get your viewpoint across successfully.
- This may also be a time where you reflect on your intention for a future in-person dialogue. Dr. Israel emphasizes the point of these conversations is to listen and truly understand another's perspective even if they have a differing opinion. A simple intention could be set around trying to understand another person's opinions, even when defensive feelings come up.
- Evaluating what triggers you have and establishing boundaries with yourself for a discussion is important. This can help you be more self-aware during the middle of a conversation and know when you need to exit immediately.

Communication Tips: Engage in assertive communication and listen to the person or people who are part of the conversation.

- Utilizing assertive communication techniques such as speaking your own needs, listening to the other person/people, engaging in eye contact, and refraining from aggression helps get your message across.
- Actively listen during the conversation. It may be natural to have walls up and be guarded, but actively listening is important in trying to understand another person.
- Avoid using trapping questions -- those that “trap” the other person in their response. Dr. Israel notes that the point of these types of conversations is not to win, but rather to understand.
- Use open-ended (ex: “what are your thoughts on gun control?”) rather than closed-ended questions (ex: “do you agree with gun control?”).
- Remember not to play devil’s advocate. In other words, avoid arguing simply for the sake of arguing.

Managing Emotions During Conversations: Keep note of how you are feeling throughout the conversation and take care of your emotions during these conversations.

- Ground yourself during the conversation if you notice the person or people you are speaking with are evoking strong, negative emotions. It can be helpful to remind yourself that they are still a person with at least one good quality, and someone who others like for a reason. Remember that they are still human too.
- Set boundaries and keep these in mind. Recognize that there may be a point where you have to walk away and end the conversation, such as if the person is being extremely disrespectful or simply refuses to listen. Keep your triggers in mind and note when you feel you are swimming against the current.
 - For example, you may state: “I do not feel that you are listening to my opinion. I am trying to express my opinion, not trying to change yours. If we cannot have this conversation, then we may have to agree to disagree.”

After Conversations: Process the conversation, including your own feelings about how you felt while conversing, how you communicated, and how you handled any difficulties.

- Consider the relationship and what the conversation may mean for the relationship. How do you feel about this relationship after the conversation? Do you have any outstanding worries?
- If you feel that you were unheard during the conversation, try to remind yourself that there is a deeper context beneath a person’s opinions -- each person’s unique opinion has been shaped by their own beliefs, values, family members, culture, surroundings, etc. from the time they were young. People have a reason for holding a strong opinion.
- Remember: the real “win” is not about feeling that your opinion won, but rather comes from your ability to communicate and listen in an effective, respectful manner. If you engaged in active listening, really tried to understand the other person, used assertive communication skills, and grounded yourself as needed, consider this a win!

- Engage in self-care if you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed. It may be validating to have a conversation with someone who has the same views as you.

Sample Conversation:

- In this example, Person 1 and Person 2 are discussing their views on brownies and cake. Person 1 is pro-brownies and Person 2 is pro-cake. You will notice some of the techniques we have discussed above being used here.
 - Person 1: "I feel it is important to discuss this with you because I want to understand you and I want you to understand my opinion on why I prefer brownies to cake. Even if we don't agree in the end, I feel that understanding each other could help us get along better and reduce some of the tension we have between us."
 - *Assertive communication*
 - Person 2: "I also think that it is important that we discuss this, thanks for bringing it up. I will try my best to listen and be respectful while you're talking."
 - *Assertive communication; active listening*
 - Person 2: "I would like to start off by explaining my values and beliefs surrounding why I like cake. I have liked cake since I was little. Chocolate is my favorite because it has the richest taste."
 - *Assertive communication; explaining their viewpoint, which has significance in their life*
 - Person 1: "So you've liked cake for a long time now. It makes a lot of sense as to why you like it so much since it has been a big part of your life for a while. What are your thoughts on sprinkles on top of brownies?"
 - *Active listening shown in reflection of what Person 2 said; asking an open-ended question in an attempt to understand their views better*
 - Person 2: "So if you like sprinkles, that means you like whipped cream, chocolate chips, and icing on brownies too?!"
 - *Person 2 was triggered by Person 1's question, and has begun to engage in aggressive and defensive ways by asking a closed-ended, trapping question, and making assumptions that were not stated*
 - Person 1: "No, I didn't say that. I don't think you understood my question. I just wanted to better understand your thoughts on sprinkles on top of brownies."
 - *Assertive communication; clarification*
 - Person 2: "Well I can't believe you even asked me about sprinkles! That's absurd! Brownies are trash and you're not changing my mind about it."
 - *Continued aggressive, defensive behavior*
 - Person 1: "I am not trying to change your mind about anything. I came into this conversation wanting to understand each other, even if our opinions are different. Maybe this is getting out of hand. I don't feel comfortable talking about this anymore, so I am going to leave. Maybe we can try and have this conversation again when we are both feeling a little calmer."

- *Person 1 recognized that they must create a boundary and end the conversation, as Person 2 is speaking aggressively and is simply not listening to Person 1 anymore*

Remember that you can also talk to someone. If you continue to struggle with negative emotions surrounding election stress and related conversations, you may benefit from talking to a psychologist or other mental health professional. Many professionals are offering psychotherapy via secure internet video connection at this time. The Pennsylvania Psychological Association can assist you in finding a local psychologist by using the [Psychologist Locator](#). You can also ask your health care professional or a trusted friend to recommend a psychologist or other mental health professional.

References

Israel, T. (2020). *Beyond your bubble: How to connect across the political divide, skills and strategies for conversations that work*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Mills, K. I. (Presenter). (2020, August 26). Speaking of psychology: How to have meaningful dialogues despite political differences with Tania Israel, PhD. [Audio podcast]. In *American Psychological Association* (Producer). <https://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology/meaningful-political-dialogues>

For more information regarding Dr. Israel and her book:
<https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/beyond-your-bubble>
<https://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology/meaningful-political-dialogues>