

Tension to Connection

How to defuse challenging conversations



Chapter 2 Handout:
Understanding & Recognising
Challenging Conversations



Training for Young Workers

What makes a conversation challenging?

A conversation can be challenging when there is a miscommunication or a barrier between you and the person you are talking to, that is stopping you from working through the interaction and providing your service.



A conversation can be challenging for a variety of reasons. A conversation that is challenging for one person might not be for another person. There are often multiple factors at play in a challenging conversation.



A conversation may be challenging because:

- The person you're talking to is being aggressive
- The person you're talking to is being discriminatory
- The person you're talking to is distressed
- There is a customer/client who is repeatedly calling or coming into your work
- You are unable to help someone with their issue, or you don't know how to help them
- There is a language barrier between you and the person you're talking to
- The person you are talking to has indicated thoughts of suicide
- There are technical issues
- Many more...



What other situations do you experience in your role?

How do I know when I'm in a challenging conversation?

It is helpful to reflect on signs that tell us when we are in a challenging conversation so we can identify and respond to them in the moment.

You may be able to spot these signs in yourself or the person you are talking to.

These may look like:

- Feeling frozen – not knowing how to respond
- Sweaty palms
- Shaking hands
- Shortness of breath
- Racing heart
- Tunnel vision
- Raised voice/yelling
- Exaggerated hand movements
- Swearing
- Crying



What do you experience during a challenging conversation?

Sometimes, during a challenging conversation, you or the person you are talking to may experience a ‘crisis response’, where the Fight/Flight/Freeze (FFF) part of their brain is activated.

This happens when our brains think we are in danger, even if, in reality, we aren’t. Some people who have experienced trauma and distress in their lives, are more likely to experience an FFF response in a seemingly ‘safe’ situation.



[You can learn more about FFF activation here.](#)

If we notice ourselves or another person experiencing a crisis response, it can be helpful to try to relieve the physical symptoms by staying calm, taking deep breaths, counting backwards from 3 and doing a grounding activity like making a cup of tea or stepping outside. The skills we discuss later in this resource can help respond to a crisis response.



What should we keep in mind when responding to challenging conversations?

There are four principles that inform our responses to difficult conversations at WIRE, these principles ensure we are acting appropriately and respectfully. Below you can find further information on these principles and how they might relate to your role.

Person-centred: Putting the person at the centre ensures we are responding to their unique needs and circumstances and being led by them.



[Click here for a video about person-centred care.](#)

Trauma-informed: Understanding that people have experiences of trauma, and understanding how this affects how they behave and avoiding creating further harm.



[Click here for a video about trauma-informed care.](#)

Strengths-based: Being strengths-based means recognising and utilising the strengths and resources already present in someone's life.



[Click here for a video about strengths-based approaches.](#)

Intersectionality: People's identity may affect their experience of different systems, creating barriers and prejudices. Intersectionality is about looking at how different forms of oppression interact, intersect and compound to affect one's access to opportunities and privileges.



[Click here for a video about strengths-based approaches.](#)

Get in touch if you have any questions.



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