

Tension to Connection

How to defuse challenging conversations



Chapter 3 Handout:
Helpful Ways to Defuse
Challenging Conversations



Training for Young Workers

When we think about how to respond to challenging conversations, it can be helpful to think about **what we can and can't control** in these interactions.



What we can control

- Our own reactions,
- Some of our physical environment,
- The options we offer someone,
- How and what we communicate to them.

What we can influence

- The tone and direction of an interaction,
- The experience someone has of our interaction,
- Organisational policies and practices,
- Structural issues.

What we cannot influence

- How someone responds to you,
- How they feel,
- Your external operating environment such as rules, laws, the limits of your role etc.



Additional information and examples on the skills discussed in chapter 3

Setting up a safe space: This involves inviting meaningful conversation by giving respect and affirmation. Listening, validating and identifying initial issues and feelings.

- Think about a time when you felt really listened to – what did the other person do?

Boundaries: Boundaries can be personal (you are not comfortable with people crying in front of you) or professional (you cannot sign off on a product return without your manager’s approval). Either way, they should be respected and are necessary for you to effectively and safely perform your role.

When communicating boundaries, clearly state the boundary (what you can/can’t do and what you are/are not OK with) and what will happen if it is not respected, i.e. “I understand that you are angry, but I am going to ask you to stop yelling at me before I continue helping you.”



Setting expectations: Communicate what the other person can expect from you early on, setting expectations can include explaining to the other person:

- Your role,
- the scope or eligibility criteria of your service,
- how much time you can spend with someone,
- the information you need from someone and why.



Asking open questions: These encourage someone to speak in more detail about their situation, but also often require some thought before answering.

For example:

- “When this happened last time, what helped?”
- “Have you been in a similar situation before?”
- “How did you handle it?”

Checking and clarifying: Confirm your understanding by repeating and restating the other person’s idea in your own words. It can be helpful to thank them for clarifying and let them know that you now have a clearer understanding.



Reflecting and paraphrasing: Try to identify the emotional state of the other person.

Validating: Acknowledges someone's situation and allows them to feel heard and understood.

Affirming strengths: Even in difficult situations, there are strengths and positives that can be identified to empower someone and comfort them.

Contextualising: Using an intersectional framework helps us identify that the world we live in treats people differently and this impacts their experience – identifying this can help people understand and navigate their circumstances.

Offering information and referrals: Using a person-centred approach means providing information and referrals that are suited to the person's specific circumstances.





Short Quiz

What skill(s) are being used in these responses?

"I can hear how much work you've been doing to fix this issue."

- validating?
- contextualising?
- affirming strengths?

"Anyone in your situation would be feeling exhausted and overwhelmed right now."

- validating?
- reflecting?
- contextualising?

"Women are often sent the message that motherhood will make them feel fulfilled, but we speak with many women who are wanting to explore additional goals and aspirations."

- validating?
- setting expectations?
- contextualising?

Get in touch if you have any questions.



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