

TEACH Health Professions Educator Series

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# Difficult Conversations with Learners

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# Disclosures

- No financial conflicts of interest

# Learning Objectives

Participation will improve your ability to:

1. Identify situations with learners that elicit difficult conversations.
2. Describe the optimal setting (how, when, where) for a difficult conversation.
3. Recognize and respond to the immediate reaction of the learner.
4. Assess the learner's understanding of your message.

# Difficult Conversations: Stanford Graduate Course

Session Focus	Case Vignette
Navigating a biomedical ethical challenge	Neonate diagnosed with unsuspected Down syndrome and complex congenital heart disease
Addressing medical errors	Parents confront a pediatrician who missed a critical diagnosis
Conveying difficult diagnosis	Patient with MS seeks guidance on likely course of disease and how to convey his diagnosis to family, friends coworkers
Discussing end-of-life care	Angry family members of a elderly, critically ill patient who has no treatment options resist end-of-life care
Dealing with rage and sorrow	A toddler drowns in the family pool, and the mother believes the father was negligent
<b>Terminating an underperforming graduate student</b>	<b>A PhD candidate does not demonstrate independence or problem-solving skills, despite feedback</b>
<b>Dealing with personal disappointment</b>	<b>A graduating medical student does not receive their residency match of choice, and their parents are disappointed</b>
<b>Dealing with team challenges</b>	<b>A clerkship student perceives unequal attention from a supervising resident</b>

Prober CG et al. Managing difficult conversations: an essential communication skill for all professionals and leaders. *Academic Medicine*. 2022; April 12. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004692

# Guiding Principles

1. Assure confidentiality
2. Be non-judgmental
3. Do not mislead
4. Emphasize what you know
5. Show empathy
6. Do not mistake vagueness with compassion
7. Keep language succinct and simple
8. Offer hope and comfort
9. Be calm and calming
10. Be an active listener
11. Pauses are your friend
12. Remember it is *how* you say it

# Stages of the Conversation



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## Before the Conversation

- Identify clear goals
- Assess recipient's emotional state
- Prepare outline
- Find your voice
- Anticipate questions
- Practice



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## Beginning the Conversation

- Choose setting
- Address information asymmetry
- Get directly to the point
- State goal clearly
- Follow logical approach



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## Conducting the Conversation

- Asking open ended questions
- Check in frequently
- Use frequent pauses
- Outline next stage
- Reflect immediately after



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## Breakout Case

Jim is an M3 on the Internal Medicine clerkship on his third rotation. Also on the rounding team are another M3, a Medicine intern, a Medicine senior resident, a pharmacist, and the attending. Jim started out doing pretty well on the rotation but by the time week three rolled around, he began to show up late for pre-rounding, which resulted in being unprepared for his patients' presentations. One morning on rounds he presented labs from three days ago, resulting in reporting a K+ of 2.7 when the current K+ was actually 4.6. Luckily the resident had reviewed the chart and realized that the report was inaccurate. Patient Advocacy received a call from a patient's room and the patient reported, "There was a student in here, I think a medical student, who came in to check on me. He checked on me with questions about how I was doing then told me he saw on my record that I lived out by the lake and started telling me about some parties he had been to out there. It seemed a little odd to me."

# Breakout Assignment

1. What are your clear goals?
2. How will you assess Jim's emotional state?
3. How will you conduct the discussion?
  - Key messages
  - Words
  - Tone
4. How will you recognize and respond to Jim's immediate reaction?
  - Questions Jim will ask
  - How you will reply
5. How will you assess Jim's understanding of your message?



**SHORT  
SUMMARY!**

# Stages of the Conversation

## Before

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- Assess recipient's emotional state
- Prepare outline
- Find your voice
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- Practice



## Beginning

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- Address information asymmetry
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## Conducting

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# Guiding Principles - **favorites**

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# SKILL DEVELOPMENT

## Stages of Skill Development



