

Some Guidelines for Constructive Conversations When Someone Is Upset

When you are upset with someone or they are upset with you and you decide that the best way to deal with the situation is to speak to the other person or persons, here are some hints and guidelines for maximizing the likelihood of positive results from the conversation:

Use action talk to describe the situation or incident about which you are upset

This means avoiding telling the person your label or interpretation for what they did and avoiding telling them what you think their motives, feelings or intentions might be. Action talk describes the actions you or the other person did that you could see or hear.

Tell the other person or persons your positive intention for speaking with them about the situation

For example, "I really want to sort this out so I can be close to you." Or, "This incident has got me thinking about leaving but I want us to stay together, so it's important to me to have this discussion." Or, "I find myself avoiding you and I worry that if we don't clear this up we will lose our friendship."

Don't attribute negative intentions to the person before talking it out

Give the person the benefit of the doubt by assuring them that even though you are upset, you are not sure why they did what they did and would like to find out.

Ask out of curiosity rather than make accusations or assumptions about what the other person meant by what they said or did

Much of the time, in the heat of the moment, and because we have old hurts and our own interpretations about what happened, we don't stop and check out the other person's understanding or intentions in the conflictual situation.

Make a personal feeling and perception statement

This is the famous "I" statement. Tell the person your feelings and perceptions about the situation or incident. Be sure to own them as your feelings and perceptions, though.

Make a request

Ask them to have a conversation with you about the matter and/or ask for future action changes. This usually includes a specific action you are requesting, a specific time to take that action or by which to take the action or a specific result you ask them to commit to producing.