



Managing Challenging Conversations

Purpose: Pandemic response teams have reported an increase in challenging conversations. This worksheet was developed to help you practice responding to these types of conversations.

In your experience, have conversations become more difficult? If so, how are they more difficult?

One reason conversations may be more difficult is pandemic fatigue, which is an expected and natural response to a prolonged public health crisis. It is tiring trying to make decisions and manage our emotions in the face of so much change and uncertainty!

Another reason conversations are challenging is that people are frustrated with trying to keep track of shifting guidelines. They may be asking:

- How can we make sound decisions when we don't know what the danger level is?
- What should we do when one public health authority tells us one thing, and another says something completely different?

PRACTICE 1: Imagine you are on the phone with someone who is stressed and angry. Their sister has COVID, their partner won't get vaccinated, their child has been sent home from school due to an exposure and they just do not want to deal with the varying guidelines they are being given!

What emotions/reactions does this scenario bring up for you?

What tools will you use to keep the emotions from escalating even further as you conduct the call?

Great ideas! Here are some ideas that have helped other contact tracers and case investigators keep their conversations collaborative rather than confrontational.

- **Reflect back what you're hearing:** we can validate someone's feelings about a situation without necessarily validating false information

“I hear that you’re feeling frustrated about conflicting guidelines. I’ve worked with other people who feel that way too.”

- **Show gratitude:** It is hard to stay angry with someone who is thanking you or agreeing with you.
“Thank you for sharing that. It can be really scary when we do not know what to expect in the immediate future.”
- **Invite the person to share more:**
“What makes you concerned about that?”
“How do you feel about the new guidelines?”

PRACTICE 2: Now imagine that you are speaking with someone who says, “Why should I trust anything you people have to say? It seems like you’re just making things up at this point!”

What emotions/reactions does this scenario bring up for you?

What tools will you use to keep the emotions from escalating even further as you conduct the call?

How might you:

Reflect back what you’re hearing:

Show gratitude:

Invite the person to share more:

REFLECTION: Many contact tracers and case investigators report that confrontational calls significantly impact their level of stress and burnout. What do you do to take care of yourself after a call like this?

What procedures/protocols does your team have in place should you need additional support after a particularly challenging call?

How easy is it to access this support?
