

High impact conversations

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Communication is a tricky business!

There is a Zulu saying that people are people because of other people. What connects us to others is love and conversation.

A single conversation can change a life. Perhaps you can recall a time when a comment so touched you, it echoed in your mind until it found a place in your heart. Perhaps there were words of comfort, of support or of understanding that you heard as a child that serve as a cloak against the chill winds of hurt that face us all from time to time.

Great conversations are like enchanting songs sung between people. Conversations harmonise and resonate and deepen our relationships.

The art of conversation

Given the central space that conversations have in creating a meaningful and happy life, it seems that all of us should set ourselves of the goal of becoming better conversationalists.

If you can think of some of the wonderful conversations you have had it is probable that they had some of these features:

People stopped what they were doing and really listened;
Curiosity was piqued;
Jealousy and competition were absent;
Differences were seen as interesting rather than threatening;
People felt able to be authentic and to show their vulnerabilities;
Hurts might have been talked about but faults were not; and
Ideas and humour were played with.

The fine art of talking, getting your message heard and understood as well as converted into some form of action by another human being is an amazingly tricky business.

We all have ongoing conversations with ourselves as well as with others. We can get into all sorts of bother when we project the conversations we have with ourselves and assume they are the thoughts of others.

It is important to know that:

- * What is received is not necessarily, what is sent
- * What is sent is not always what is meant.

Creating High Impact Conversations

The number one most powerful tool to creating impactful conversations with young people is:

Drop everything to be available to talk to

Be authentic and open up your ears

There are three ways of listening:

- For content
- For process
- For intervention

The fine art of conversational "Fly fishing"

Creating high impact conversations with children and teenagers is a lot like fly fishing in a stream filled with capricious fish.

Each person speaks a new language. Don't try to understand them in your language. Try to understand and utilise their language- using active curiosity.

Pacing

Pacing involves tuning yourself to someone else's tempo. It can involve breathing at the same rate that they do. Matching them where they currently are, in some way. Having matched their current behaviour, emotions, language, body signals, you are in a powerful position to understand the way they see the world.

Leading

Having matched the young person where they are, you are then in a position to take them where you want them to go (leading).

At the heart of influential language is presupposition. Presuppositions are the unsaid meanings and information in a sentence or phrases. For example, if someone were to say: 'Either now or in a moment you can think of a time when a conversation has been important to you.' You are very likely to follow this instruction. This is because the first part of the sentence presupposes that you are going to do what has been suggested.

Along with presupposition is linking unrelated events. For example, as you go to the bathroom, I wonder if you could think creatively about this, or, as you spread butter on your toast tomorrow morning I wonder if you will think about what we've said.

Another example of presupposition:
You're a genius even though you've forgotten it,
just like you've forgotten how you learned to walk.

Another very useful language technique is the yes set. In this method you make a series of statements that are undeniably true and then connect them to a suggestion.

For example,
This morning when you got up. (Pause, true)
And you still felt sleepy (Pause true)
And the temptation must have been so strong to stay in bed (Pause, true)
You must have summoned great will power to get to school (Suggestion-yes).

Another example:

Whether you can remember when you were a little kid, there was a time when you were so excited to learn something new.
It might have been dinosaurs, or insects or horses or something even more exciting
And even though things were confusing, maybe you couldn't even wait to tell someone of your new discovery.
And then one time you learned that it wasn't cool to be quite so excited
And you learned to cover it up
You learned to cover it up so well, that now you've almost forgotten where you left it.
Sometimes we hide treasures so well that we don't even realise it.

Seeding

To return to our fly fishing analogy, pacing is know where the fish are, leading them is entrancing them with the possibility of some bait, seeding is knowing which bait to select.

Seeding ideas often takes the form of embedded suggestions and is typically used in hypnosis but can also be used conversationally.

As you head on down into deeper relaxation.

What do you think people will notice first when you start to free yourself from (the problem)?

As you sleep soundly tonight you may find that clarity emerges in your mind about the direction you want to take and you can relax into that certainty.

When you start to stop worrying about the things you can't do anything about I wonder if you'll stop to start focusing on the things you can do to have a happier life.

Seeding and pacifying behaviours

We all use pacifying behaviours when we talk about stressful feelings. Kids are masters at this. They twist their hair, look at their feet, touch their

face, scratch, yawn, roll their eyes, exhale more loudly than usual, fiddle with things, or shake their legs. Notice how people self-soothe and pacify their feelings.

An increase in pacifying actions is often an indication that someone is becoming more agitated or even potentially aggressive. Lower the tone of the interaction at this point.

A stillness of pacifying actions often indicates a moment when new ideas or associations can be seeded into the conversation.

While you can incorporate all of these methods to increase the impact of conversations with young people, it is essential to remain authentic. Words make a powerful difference and especially when they are spoken by a kind person who genuinely has your best interests at heart.

The Language of Empowerment

We also want to shift young people away from words that lessen their power to change their situation. Often young people talk in ways that frame themselves as a hapless victim of unfortunate circumstances.

The words they use to convey this sense are useful to notice because eventually you may wish to shift them to using words that are more powerful.

The Language of Empowerment

<u>From</u>	<u>Replace with</u>
I have to	I choose to
I need	I want
I can't	I won't
I'm afraid to	I'd like to
Maybe/ try	Will or won't
I can't stand	I don't like
Hopeless	Stuck

Other methods

Encouraging resistance –

Accepting then utilising, or encouraging in a productive way the person's resistance. This also includes encouraging a response by frustrating it. For example, before you pick up your pen, try to think of three main words. Also before you pick up your pen think

Providing the illusion of choice e.g. would you like to do A or B first?

Use space and position e.g. as you sit where your son was sitting you can think more clearly about him

Emphasising the positive- positive connotation.

Amplifying a deviation - gain a small response & build on it.

Emphasising the positive- positive connotation

Building constructive conversations

Don't stay around to be abused. Some teens are yet to learn that demeaning, abusing language doesn't work. It is ok to say to them, "I don't have to put up with being spoken to like that. When you are ready to talk positively I'll be happy to chat with you". Then move away.

In a family setting it is ok to say, "we don't speak to one another in that way" and then move away.

Stay cool and collected.

Some children and teens love drama and intensify interactions. Take your sails out of their winds. If you become aware that you are feeling threatened or agitated, pause, find some other task that you need to do and settle yourself.

Practice flying reminders

If a child or teen is speaking disrespectfully, quietly whisper to them "you're better than this, drop it" and move on.

Ask mini-questions

How did you do that?
What did you do first?

Don't offer solutions or advice too quickly

If there is a young person that you want to have a positive conversation with, start by commenting positively on one thing they do every day.

Know that small requests lead to later, greater compliance.

Know that if you stick with them long enough, they will give you the answer.

Be prepared to be the person that they weren't expecting.

The dark arts of questioning

Questions ???????????

Opening Questions

Who thought that coming to see me was a good idea? What made them think that? Do you agree with their opinion?

(If not) What would they need to see happen so that they could stop being so worried about you?

Just tell me those things I need to know to help you change further (Rossi)

What are the changes that you are looking for?

If I could wave a magic wand and have you changed just as you want to be, what would be happening? (de Shazer)

Between deciding to come and talk with me and today, what changes have you noticed? What have others noticed? (de Shazer)

How did you make these changes happen?

(White)

If a miracle had occurred overnight but you didn't know it and [the problem] had disappeared what do you think you would notice first? (Berg and de Shazer)

What were you like before the problem invaded your life? (White)

What would be the first sign to you that you've got the problem beaten? (White)

What would happen if the problem doesn't change? (Haley)

Is there any way in which the problem is helpful to you? (Berg)

These can be extended to develop an inquiry into life before and after the problem.

Miracle Questions

Originated in Milton Erickson's (1954) crystal ball technique

Suppose tonight while you are sleeping a miracle occurs and the problem you came here to deal with is no longer a problem. But because the miracle happened while you were sleeping you didn't know it happened. What would be the first thing you would notice after you woke that would tell you the miracle happened?

Relational Questions

Circular questions are based on the notion that behaviour is connected to someone else's behaviour and therefore, behaviours and problems act as a message to both respondents and observers. While most often used in family therapy sessions, these questions can easily be transported into an individual session and can be used to create an inquiry into the connectedness of problems.

Do you think other people worry most about you?

Do you ever find yourself worrying about you?

(if yes, what do you worry about?

If no, do you think other people feel you neglect yourself?)

What do others think will happen to you if [the problem] continues?

What do you think about their viewpoint?

If you gave up [the problem] who do you think would take it up?

How would they handle it?

Who would be least surprised, if you were able to overcome [the problem]?

What do they know about you that gives them faith in you? (White)

Who would notice first if you changed?

Is it possible that other people may notice changes in you before you do?

What positive things about yourself do you think you might be blind to? (if they say "dunno", you can apologise for asking such a dumb question because, of course, they can't see them).

What sort of time do you think your parents (or friends) have when you're not around?

How do (other family members or friends) get along without you? When it happens do they have good moments?
What rating would you give yourself as a student/ friend/ human being (0-10)?
What do you think this set of events looks like through your best friend's (or worst enemy's) eyes?
If someone else asked you for help about [the problem] what would you say?

Looking for Exceptions to the Problem

This involves looking at what's there when the problem isn't. These questions serve to amplify non-problem areas in the person's life and seek to provide some explanation for this beyond clear dismissal explanations such as it was luck or chance.

Have you ever felt [the problem] coming on and have not given in to it? If so, how? (White) If the answer is "dunno" a useful response can be to say "so you have been able to do this even without knowing how you did it!- you really don't know? "

When does (the problem) not happen? (White and Epston)

Is there someone with whom the problem doesn't happen? (White and Epston)

When do you take a holiday (or go on strike) from the problem?

What is different when (the problem) doesn't happen? (O'Hanlon)

How does your day go differently when (the problem) doesn't happen?

Who notices first when (the problem) doesn't happen?

Can recall a time when you felt the problem coming on but it didn't? How did you do that? (White and Epston)

What would other people see as a refusal on your part to have the problem? (White and Epston)

Do you ever get bored with (the problem)? If so, have you ever been so bored that you've done things differently?

Externalising the Problem

Questions of Relative Influence: (White and Epston)

If your life equals 100%, how much of your life is taken up by the problem and how much is yours? (e.g. 80% versus 20%)

How have you managed to keep 20% to yourself?

Has it always been 20% or have you been able to fight back?

Who notices when you keep that 20%?

If (the problem) was a person/animal/object what would it be?

What will your life be like now that you've started to take control?

What will you do with all the spare time you'll have now you're beating the problem?

What would be the first indication to you that things have started to change for the better?

Is there any part of the problem that you would like to keep?

What are the things that are happening in your life that you definitely wouldn't want therapy to change?

Scaling Questions

Compared to last year is your life now happier or unhappier?

If you were to really decide to study... and I'm not saying you should.. but if you did, how good a student do you reckon you could be? (Quite often adolescents will answer this with a shrug and a "dunno" in which case you can then say so even you don't know just how capable you could be?)

If ten equalled the most worried you could be and zero equalled not being worried at all, how worried are you at the moment? How worried are your parents? How worried should you be?

Time Oriented Questions

Adolescence has an immediacy about it, which often minimises self-reflection and maximises self-degradation. These questions aim to frame problems and issues as having a life span i.e. a birth and a death.

Do you think [the problem] has always been there? (if yes, so it's a problem from birth?

If yes, which one of your ancestors do you feel is genetically to blame for you having this problem? Is now the right time to challenge history?

If we could fast-forward you into the future, where would you want to be? Who with? What would you be doing?

Shaping the take away message

People remember the starts of things and the ends of things more than they do the middles of things. This means that the way a conversation ends will powerfully influence the changes that occur.

Don't waste this opportunity seeking clarification about what the young person has understood. Saying things like, "does what I'm saying sounds reasonable to you?" or "can you tell me what you have got out of our conversation today" sounds sensible and logical but it frames you as a typical adult.

It can be useful to ask, "is there anything else that I really need to know right now to understand you?"

and

"I wonder what you will notice between today and when we meet up next?"

What if I'm still worried?

Engaging in high impact conversations with children and teens often gives you reasons to feel concerned about them.

The rules of thumb that I use to determine how concerned I should be are:
Is the child or teenager different from how they usually are?

Has that change been noticed across different settings?

What does my inner sense of fear tell me about this young person?

The Power of Three

Most people only remember three things about most conversations. If I had my choice the three things they would remember would be:

1. That they are a good person who has the power to change things.
2. That talking to me was helpful.
3. That I am someone who believes in them and their capacity to find a way to have a happier life.

High impact conversations are as much about a meeting of hearts as a meeting of minds.

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A Values Based Method of Engagement

Underlying Values	Dominant Emotion	Common Behaviours	Person's metaphors	Metaphors
I want to be free	Anger Resentment Sadness Insecurity	Rebellion Limit testing Truancy Drug use Defiance	Unfairness Injustice "They never listen"	Public relations Righting wrongs Hidden sides Independence vs. reaction Freedom fighters
I want to be loved	Desire Fear Loss of trust	Suicidal behaviour Self-harm School refusal Psycho-somatic disorders Food hoarding Stealing at home Sibling rivalry Depression Boasting Shame Anxiety Panic attacks	Insufficiency Inadequacy Predictable bleakness of the future	Fair play Accuracy of prediction Capacity for self love and for showing love to others
I want power	Fear of loss	Violence Delinquency Theft Criminal acts Bullying Graffiti Insecurity Hostility	Necessity of action Entitlement	Ability and competence
I want certainty	Despair Resignation	Eating disorders Thought disorder Anxiety Depression Ruminative thinking Obsessions	Insatiable need for reassurance. Threats Uniqueness	Trust in feelings Difference made by knowing