

THE WORLD IS SUFFERING:
SAFE CONVERSATIONS® CAN BE PART OF THE CURE

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I: The Announcement of a Global Pandemic

In the last 3 weeks, we watched a virus that began in China spread throughout the whole world, and it is affecting our lives in profound ways. For the first time in recent history, the world which is usually divided is now united to fight a common enemy: COVID-19. What is each of us going to do during this time?

II: An Opportunity for Connection

In this horrific time of crisis, many feel frightened and hopeless. However, times of crisis can also contain opportunities for growth. Looking for such opportunities need not detract from the seriousness of the crisis, or the legitimate fear that people feel, but rather it can be a strategy to keep us from despair. In this moment, in particular, we have an opportunity for connection: We can use this time to create healthier relationships, both at home and across distances. The relational sciences are teachable now, thanks to advances in the neurosciences since in the 1990s. As relationship experts we have worked with the science over the last thirty years to create a process called Safe Conversations. Safe Conversations is a 3-step structured dialogue that is so simple and easy that children as well as adults can easily learn how to do it.

Part of the beauty of Safe Conversations is the way it teaches us to practice wonder in our relationships. In this moment, with so many businesses closed and so many of us stuck at home, cultivating our connection with the people around us is of utmost importance for our mental, emotional, and even physical health. Many of us have an opportunity now to slow down and listen to one another, to stop and wonder about one another. It is said that a transformation can happen in one's relationship if one can shift from judgment to curiosity. To be sure, many of us will have difficulty doing this, not only because relationships can be stressful, but also because of the additional stress of possibly catching the deadly virus. Safe Conversations can help those who are anxious and stressed-out shift their focus to wonder in all their relationships.

III: The 3 Steps of Dialogue

For many people, spending time with family, or other people with whom we share a living space, isn't easy¹. Safe Conversations offers a simple 3-step Dialogue process to help us

¹ As example of the strain extended time together in isolation can put on relationships, consider the fact that that some Chinese cities have already seen a spike in divorce rates as people come out of quarantine (<https://www.businessinsider.com/covid-19-peak-divorce-rate-chinese-cities-2020-3>) and news outlets like CNN are producing articles with advice on how couples isolated together (either with or without children) can weather the storm with their relationship still intact: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/24/health/marriage-coronavirus-wellness/index.html>

when relationships become difficult. When a person wants to send a message, they become “the Sender.” The person receiving the message become “the Receiver.” Once the Sender has shared their thoughts, the Receiver mirrors the Sender, repeating back what they have said to make sure they understood, thus demonstrating active listening. The Receiver then asks the Sender “Is there more?” before responding with their own thoughts. When this happens, the Sender instantly relaxes. They feel like the Receiver cares about what they are saying even if the Sender has a different point of view. This first step in the dialogue process—this act of “wondering”—creates the conditions that allow the participants to stay connected even when discussing a challenging or contentious topic.

The second step of the process helps the Sender feel further understood by having the Receiver validate what they are feeling. After hearing what the Sender has expressed in the first step, the Receiver responds with “that makes sense” and then describes why it makes sense. In the final step, the Receiver moves from validation to empathy. The Receiver put themselves in the Sender’s shoes and say something like “I imagine when this comes up, it makes you feel x, y, and z...Is that accurate?”

Each of these steps helps the Sender feel heard and understood while giving the Receiver the tools to listen and wonder more effectively. The structure of the Dialogue slows down the conversation to help both participants remain fully present without giving into their instinctual ways of reacting when things get difficult. It is these instinctual reactions, and a corresponding deficit in communication and listening skills, that often prevent us from building healthy relationships

IV: Why Don't We Get Along?

Many of us don't know how to communicate well, and even fewer of us know how to listen well. Extensive studies conducted by *The Harvard Business Review* led them to conclude that “immediately after the average person has listened to someone talk, he remembers only about half of what he has heard—no matter how carefully he thought he was listening.”² Furthermore, when conversations become contentious and start to turn into arguments, many of us just shut down. Our brains go into fight, flight, or freeze mode. We either become defensive, look for an escape from the conversation, or just stop communicating. None of these reactions is a recipe for effective conflict resolution.

The challenge is exacerbated by the fact that we live in an individualistic and competitive society. Our culture teaches that an important goal in life is “being smart,” “knowing a lot” and knowing it well. Everyone struggles to know a lot, say the most, and win the debate. While “knowing” is certainly a worthy goal, “not knowing” can also be important. Not-knowing is a powerful tool for connection because it helps us to develop an attitude of wonder that opens us up to the people around us. When we wonder about someone or something, we cease to predicate them, judge them, put them in a category. Instead we open ourselves to new possibilities. In this way, practicing wonder

² <https://hbr.org/1957/09/listening-to-people>

in our lives and relationships allows us to shift from judgement to curiosity. By doing so, we are able to build partnerships that might not have otherwise been possible.

V: Benefits of Practicing Wonder

The Safe Conversations process actually teaches people to practice wonder in their relationships. The “Is there more?” question after “mirroring” begins to catalyze greater connection because it invites the receiver to shift from judgement to curiosity, which puts them in a state of wonder. By slowing down to make room for curiosity, the people in conversation can now stay connected even when difficult topics arise. Everyone can feel their point of view has been heard. When they can share their thoughts without fear of judgment, they are able to be more open and vulnerable. When people practice Safe Conversations in their relationships, they create space for this vulnerability and are able to connect in new ways.

Practicing wonder, then, has tremendous benefits for relational health. However, it can be beneficial to our physical health as well. The latter is critical in a pandemic. As the Receiver wonders about the Sender’s words, that act of wonder releases the neurochemicals of peace and calm - dopamine, acetylcholine, and norepinephrine—which also strengthens the immune system.

VI: Conclusion: Practicing Wonder

As a deadly pandemic threatens lives around the world, Safe Conversations can be part of the healing process. Our entire global family is being asked to come together in new ways. This means families will have to stay home together as we all practice physical distancing. If we can connect in our homes and learn to communicate better, we can be the beginning of ripple effect. Even connecting on the micro-level is one step towards becoming more connected as a global community. By increasing love and connection in the world, it brings us that much closer to greater world peace.

If you are interested in reading more about the power of Safe Conversations, our book *The Space Between* is available for download on the Relationships First website. All proceeds go to helping families in need! <https://relationshipsfirst.org/product/the-space-between-ebook-and-kindle/>