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# Myself



We need to talk...

## How to have a difficult conversation

From a heart-to-heart with your husband to a face-off with a friend, sometimes it's easier to keep schtum than cause a showdown. Here's how to face those awkward chats – no ranting required

By **Antonia Hoyle**

We can spend hours discussing shoes, or dissecting the merits of the low-GI diet versus the Dukan, but when it comes to tackling tough conversations, even the most talkative fall silent. And we're not doing ourselves any favours. It's not as if your boss is going to voluntarily offer you that week's holiday you've worked hard for. Nor will your friend mind-read the fact you feel she never calls you. Often we inwardly seethe until we either get so angry we lose our temper, or we lack the confidence to do anything, so what needs to be vented remains unsaid. Help is at hand, thanks to a new book by psychologist Sarah Rozenhuler, *Life-Changing Conversations*, which gives us a simple strategy for broaching taboo topics. Rozenhuler, 40, says: "Learning to ►

raise awkward conversations can make the difference between our lives taking an honest new direction and watching ourselves self-destruct." With that in mind, here are Rozenhuler's seven steps to starting that crucial conversation.

## Happy-conversation rules to remember:

- Ask questions as often as you voice your own opinions.
- Show interest in the other person's views, and respond to them.
- Make more positive than negative comments.



### 1. Stand up for yourself

You already have the strength you need – you just have to work out how to access it. "Courage is an inbuilt attribute in even the most timid," says Rozenhuler. Say your sister has left her kids with you yet again, unannounced, and you're tired of being taken for granted. Think of a time when you successfully stood up to someone in the past, even if it was only the delivery driver after he made you wait in all day. Remember how you told him it was unacceptable and that you would be making a formal complaint? Didn't that make you feel better? Jot down the pros and cons of confronting your sister. She might be momentarily affronted, but isn't that better than letting it build up until you lose your temper and fall out?

### 2. Pick your moment

Get the place and time right. "Choose a neutral environment for your discussion – one that is unlikely to trigger resentment," says Rozenhuler. If you're trying to tell your husband you want to rev up your social life, don't do it while he's enjoying a takeaway on the sofa. Waiting until you're on the way home from a fantastic party will remind him how much he enjoys meeting up with people.

### 3. Don't say it's okay if it's not

"Women often apologise when we're not really sorry and say we accept issues when we don't," says Rozenhuler. You know the score. Your friend's kept you waiting at a bar for an hour – again. When she arrives you say it's "fine" through gritted

teeth and spend the evening quietly sulking for the sake of keeping the peace. But you're entitled to your emotions. Politely explaining that you felt cross and humiliated will pave the way for an open conversation and a more honest friendship. And will hopefully make her think twice next time she's running late.

### 4. Use "I", not "you"

"Tune in to the other person's needs and adapt your conversation accordingly," says Rozenhuler. She says there are four languages of conversation – the head (opinions), heart (emotions), hands (details) and horizon (the bigger picture). The fridge repair man may appreciate a head and hands approach, but your teenage daughter will react better to language of the heart. Change, "You spend all your time sulking in your room," to, "As your mother and someone who loves you, I'd like to see you more."

### 5. Put pen to paper

Rozenhuler suggests you pinpoint which of the six core emotions – happiness, sadness, anger, envy, shame or fear – you're feeling and write what she describes as a RANT: resent, appreciate, need, truth. Say your mother's up in arms that you're missing her birthday lunch, despite the fact you've seen her three Sundays in a row. Your list might read: "I RESENT you for making me feel guilty", "I

APPRECIATE your love" and "I NEED you to respect my other commitments". It will help you clarify your objectives and arrive at the T of the acronym – Truth.

### 6. Remember that you're worth it

Let go of the victim complex that makes you think you don't deserve to be heard, or, says Rozenhuler, "you're shooting yourself in the foot before you've even started". You know your boss isn't going to give you a pay rise without a darn good sales pitch on your behalf. Find at least three positive statements ("I always meet my targets", "I have taken on new responsibilities" and "I complete projects on time") for every negative ("I feel underappreciated") and prepare a list of attributes you bring to the job.

### 7. Get ready to move on

Imagine the elation you'll feel when you finish the conversation. "You'll be happier than you ever thought possible," says Rozenhuler. Take a deep breath, speak calmly, and remember you're taking the final step towards a happier future. ●

*Life-Changing Conversations* by Sarah Rozenhuler (Watkins Publishing, £8.99)