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There are some conversations none of us want to have. We drive ourselves mad rehearsing the perfect words in our heads, but often postpone saying anything. Psychologist and organisational consultant **Sarah Rozenhuler** offers some strategies for success

WORDS ANITA CHAUDHURI

1 “You’re drinking too much”

‘It goes without saying that you need to pick your moment carefully, and ensure that neither of you are drinking at the time,’ says Rozenhuler. ‘A good opening gambit can be to explicitly say, “Look, this might be a bit of a difficult subject to bring up, but I’m concerned about how much you’re drinking and the impact it’s having on your life and the people around you.” Saying what your concern is directly will be helpful.’

Rozenhuler counsels against diving in there and giving advice. ‘Sometimes that can really rankle with the other person. It’s better to offer help – for example, “Would you like me to find out where the local AA meeting takes place?” Frame it in terms of what you can do to help, rather than saying, “Listen pal, you need to get yourself down to AA otherwise you’re in trouble”.’ Sticking to the facts and giving the other person feedback on how you feel can be beneficial, especially if they are in denial about having a problem. ‘For instance, you might say, “Last week when we met, I was so looking forward to a heart-to-heart with you, but when you turned up, you were already drunk. I felt disappointed”.’

Rather than blaming the other person or lashing out, really own your feelings. ‘The other person is less likely to get defensive if you stick to how you feel,’ she explains.

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PHOTOGRAPHS: VINCENT HAZAY/PLAIN PICTURE

2 “I hate the way you are parenting our children”

‘First, try to understand your partner’s perspective,’ suggests Rozenhuler. ‘Often, people parent in the same way they were parented. And, if not, they often overcompensate in the opposite direction. So asking your partner some questions about why they’re forcing your child onto the naughty step, or, at the other extreme, letting the child away with bad behaviour, should be the opening gambit for this subject.’

She also suggests you need to make a decision about when you’re going to tackle the topic. ‘Are you going to raise it in the moment when the issue arises with the children present, or are you going to take it offline and have the conversation when they’re not around? In a sense, this depends on what the issues are about. If it’s about a partner, for example, who has a laissez-faire attitude towards leaving knives lying around, you might just say, “Please don’t keep doing that”.’

‘But if there’s a pattern of, perhaps, controlling behaviour, it’s better to say, “Look, we need to have a chat about this later.” Talking things through might make things a bit more conscious for the other person – often they might not even be aware there’s a chasm developing in your parenting styles, so it’s worth airing issues and trying to understand why each of you has the approach you do, and then trying to establish some kind of common ground from there.’