

SAY IT

before you swallow it

If you've ever bitten your tongue in a meeting with your useless boss, laughed off *another* passive-aggressive comment from your mother-in-law, or been up until 3am rehashing what you 'should' have said to both of them, you're not alone. Most of us were never taught how to handle conflict directly. We were taught to be nice. To smooth things over. To keep the peace, even if it felt 'off'.

By **KELLIE GILLESPIE-WRIGHT**

From an early age, the message is subtle but persistent: being liked matters more than being clear. Good girls say yes. Assertiveness is risky. Discomfort is dangerous.

So when conflict starts to simmer, at work, at home, or anywhere else, something in us reacts before we can explain why. A lump in the throat. A tightness in the chest. We second-guess what we were about to say. That reflex to shrink into ourselves, or to simply clam up, takes over.

According to confidence coach Chantal Dempsey, this isn't a personal flaw, it's learned. 'From a young age, many women are conditioned to prioritise harmony,' she says. 'Traditionally, children model one of their parents, and for generations, the roles were

clear. The father figure was often seen as the authority and the mother as the peacekeeper.

'So, when a girl watches her mother constantly shrink her needs to avoid conflict, she learns that unspoken rule: be agreeable, don't rock the boat, don't be too much,' she says. 'Even now, despite generational progress, those messages still echo. It shows up when a woman bites her tongue in a meeting, when she says "it's fine" but it's not. When she is praised for being "nice" instead of respected for being clear and strong.' But swallowing your needs doesn't prevent conflict. It only delays it, often allowing small tensions to quietly build



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until a minor issue becomes harder to contain. So how can we break the cycle?

Words alone won't cut it. The way we show up matters. Tone, posture, and mindset influence whether a conversation becomes

constructive or collapses into tension. 'Your body tells the story your words are trying to say (or trying to hide!),' says Dempsey. 'Research shows that 93% of communication is non-verbal, with 55% body language, 38% tone of voice, and only 7%

words. Small adjustments can de-escalate and signal calm and confidence whilst naturally lowering defensiveness and conflict.' This means delivery matters as much as the words you say. Speaking slower, with a steadier and lower tone, signals that you're grounded. People tend to mirror the energy in front of them, so calm often invites calm. The same goes for posture. Uncrossing your arms, softening your shoulders, and planting your feet shows you're steady, not confrontational.

Think about your focus

And when it comes to words, start small. If someone makes a dismissive comment that lands wrong, don't be tempted just to brush it off. Try something direct, but grounded: 'That didn't sit right with me. Can we talk about what you meant?' It signals openness, not combativeness, and invites clarity instead of conflict.

But communication isn't only about how we look and what we say. It's about where we place our attention when things get tense. Dana Caspersen, conflict engagement specialist and author of *Conflict Is an Opportunity* (Association for Conflict Resolution), has spent years helping people navigate hard conversations with clarity and care. She urges us to stop fixating on who's right and focus on what matters beneath the conflict. 'By consciously shifting attention away from attack and defence and toward a mindset of curiosity, we can help the

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Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Dana Caspersen

A conflict engagement specialist, best-selling author, and award-winning performing artist. Drawing on the insight gained from her experience as a mediator and conflict analyst, Caspersen empowers people and organisations to navigate complex situations. Author of 'Conflict Is an Opportunity: 20 Fundamental Decisions for Navigating Difficult Times'.

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Chantal Dempsey

Award-winning mindset and confidence coach, NLP expert and master hypnotherapist, known for her transformative impact in the fields of confidence, communication and personal development.

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conversation itself shift to the level of what really matters, versus fixating on positions and strategies,' she says. Without that shift, tension lingers. 'When tensions rise but are unaddressed, a pattern often takes hold where people get entrenched in their positions and strengthen their assumptions about the other person's motives. The absence of constructive communication prevents people getting the information they need to understand the situation from both sides.'

Name your needs

Nevertheless, it's easy to fall into a tug-of-war over who's right. Caspersen notes: 'People often engage in cycles of attack and defence in relationship to their positions. What is missing is an understanding of the needs behind those positions.'

That's why it's essential to clarify what really matters. 'Needs and interests are the key to finding constructive ways forward in conflict,' says Caspersen. 'We can practise naming needs and interests and articulating them in ways people are more likely to hear by describing them without attack or defence, and in relationship to ourselves, as what helps us survive and thrive, rather than as a reaction to someone else.'

'When those needs aren't named, the result is often that one person's position gets pushed through, creating resentment and instability, or a compromise is reached that satisfies no one.'

To prevent that kind of breakdown, Dempsey recommends pressing pause. Phrases like 'Let me think about that for a moment' or 'Give me a second to find the right words' create space to respond instead of react. That same steady approach helps in the moment someone cuts you off. Try: 'I would like to finish what I was saying, then I will hear you out fully.' Or, 'Can I finish?

I promise to hear you out.' These small boundary-setting phrases can shift the energy without raising the stakes.

Sarcasm, too, is best met with clarity. As Dempsey puts it: 'Sarcasm often masks discomfort or passive aggression.' Try, 'That felt like a dig, can we stay on topic?' or 'If something is bothering you, I would rather hear it honestly.'

And if someone goes silent? Dempsey suggests ways of keeping the door open: 'I notice you have gone quiet, I would love to understand how you are feeling.' Or 'If now is not the time, I respect that, but I would like us to revisit this.'

She also emphasises the importance of being direct, without heat, or being clear without being harsh. Phrases like, 'Let me be clear about where I stand,' or, 'This is the part that doesn't work for me,' set a boundary without escalating tension. Even saying no can be kind: 'This is not something I can agree to, but I am open to finding a solution.'

At the same time, people are more likely to hear you when they feel heard themselves. That doesn't mean you have to agree, but acknowledging their experience can open the door. Dempsey suggests phrases like, 'I hear what you're saying and I can see this really matters to you.' That recognition can create space for something more honest to unfold.

Tweak your language

And once that door is open, what you say matters just as much as how you say it. Some phrases can shut a conversation down before it begins. Avoid 'You always' or 'You never,' which provoke defensiveness. Try, 'I've noticed a pattern, and I want to talk about how it impacts me.'

Similarly, 'If you really cared, you would...' can sound like emotional pressure, whereas 'What I need to feel supported is...' focuses on your needs without blame. And

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If someone goes silent, keep the door open. Try: 'I notice you have gone quiet, I would love to understand how you are feeling.'

while 'I'm sorry you feel that way' might sound polite, it often deflects responsibility. Try instead: 'That wasn't my intention, but I see how that impacted you.'

Even small tweaks, like replacing 'why' with 'how come', or 'should' with 'could', can shift the tone from judgement to curiosity. And instead of saying, 'You do this,' try, 'I feel that when this happens...' to keep the focus on your experience, not their behaviour. These are subtle changes, but in moments of stress, subtlety matters. They help create enough safety for both people to stay in the conversation, rather than shutting it down.

Of course, it's easier to speak clearly when you feel composed. But in conflict, your nervous system may say otherwise. 'When you are in conflict, the amygdala, your brain's alarm system, gets activated,' Dempsey explains. 'Your heart rate goes up, your breathing gets shallower, your muscles

tense. In that moment, your body's priority is survival, not smart communication.'

That's why she recommends starting with your breath. 'Try inhaling for four, hold for four, exhale for four. This sends a signal to your brain that you are calm, and in turn the brain releases calming chemicals into your system.' Caspersen reinforces this approach. 'Our bodies register experience in the form of sensation and image and hold that experience even when we don't register it on a conscious level.' She suggests practicing ahead of time: imagine a stressful moment, notice what your body does, then shift into a posture of ease with an open chest and feet on the ground. Practise moving between the two to build muscle memory for calm.

And if the conversation goes badly? That doesn't mean you failed. Caspersen advises stepping back instead of pushing forward. 'Check if you are making things

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worse. If you are in attack or defence mode, take several breaths and actively shift into a curious mindset.' Then clarify your intention. 'Even if you're angry or hurt, direct your attention to the needs and interests of the other person as well,' she says. 'Abandon covert intentions to prove yourself right and the other person wrong.'

Understand the dynamics at play

Once there's space for reconnection, approach it with care. 'Let them know what you regret about how it went last time (from the perspective of your own actions) and what matters to you in the conflict. Ask what matters to them and if they think you're missing anything.' And when power dynamics are involved, Caspersen stresses caution. 'If a situation of power imbalance feels dangerous,' she says, 'first take a step back and assess whether you need to find allies or other support before you engage.'

If it's safe to do so, focus on shared problem-solving. 'Acknowledging the other person's interests (as opposed to positions or

Read

Changing the Conversation: The 17 Principles of Conflict Resolution by Dana Caspersen (Penguin)

Listen

How to navigate conflict, with Philippa Perry, The Liz Earle Wellbeing Show

Watch

From Conflict to Comfort: Navigating Difficult Conversations with Anne-Maartje Oud, on YouTube

strategies) while clearly stating yours without attack or defence puts that important information in the space between you.'

Dempsey adds: 'When you're speaking with someone in a position of power, the stakes feel higher, and your nervous system knows it.' Her advice? Ground yourself in your own worth. 'Take a deep breath and remind yourself that no matter who it is, they are a human being, just like you. They have emotions. They've made mistakes. They are not above you, and their role doesn't change your right to be heard.'

That reminder matters. Because conflict isn't just about being assertive. It's about staying rooted in connection, and rooted to your values, your boundaries, and your voice.

This is what breaks the cycle. Not swallowing your voice, but understanding what's at stake and being willing to say it out loud. Because in the end, conflict isn't about controlling the outcome, it's about fair resolution, and that happens by having your voice heard, even when things get uncomfortable. ■

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