



## 3 Guidelines for Difficult Conversations

### 1. Talk about your own feelings.

When a difficult conversation arises, it is natural to frame your communication in terms of what that other person has done, using the word, “you” repeatedly. “You make me so mad!” or “You always...” Even the details of an incident can feel like an attack using that language: “And *then* you...” Instead, it is a much better idea to talk about your own feelings. You are the expert on you, so no one can tell you that you are wrong. In addition, sharing your feelings draws the other person in rather than putting them on the defensive. For example, “Right now I’m feeling very alone,” or “I wanted to tell you how embarrassed I felt at dinner last night.”

### 2. Ask good questions.

Rather than making statements which often involve assumptions about the other person’s motivations or actions, try asking questions. For example, instead of saying, “You never introduce me to any of your friends,” you might try, “Did you notice that I was feeling left out of the conversation with your friends back there?” If you can ask a question which goes deeper than the circumstances, go for it. For example, “Does it make you uncomfortable when Janette comes over?” instead of, “You always head for the golf course when Janette comes over.”

### 3. Issue an invitation.

Instead of keeping the conversation centered on things in the past, paint a picture of a new and better way of doing things in the future. If you can start a sentence with, “Wouldn’t it be great if...” then you are on the right track. For example, instead of talking about all the times your companion has pulled the same stunt, try saying, “I’m looking forward to the time when we can both enjoy a shopping trip together and neither of us gets upset about anything. What do you think it would take to make that happen?” or “Wouldn’t it be great if we could work together as a team on this?”

Using any one of these three ideas can turn a fight into a dialogue, deflecting defensiveness and inviting intimacy. However, it’s often difficult to remember what the three rules are – let alone to use them in the middle of an unplanned argument. Therefore, practice using these techniques in *all* your conversations and relationships. You will find ways of incorporating them naturally into your own style, and you might even get to enjoy it!