



QUAKERS

Canadian Friends
Service Committee

Years in the making,
this series distills expert
knowledge on what works in
difficult conversations down
to simple bite-sized tips. It's
a calendar, one tip to reflect
on each week for a year.



Weekly tips for better conflicts



If you're hungry
to improve your
skills for that tough
conversation, these
tips are here for
you.



Curious what you'll discover in this series? The tips can be summarized as:

Four tips for more rewarding disagreements and conflicts

1. **Distinguish between the problem and the person.** When something is wrong, name that problem, but don't confuse that with being opposed to the other person or their feelings. To address the problem, try to engage with the other person as someone you care about and respect, not something to defeat, control, or persuade.
2. **Bring out everyone's best.** Conflicts are demanding. As much as possible, pick a place and time where everyone can be their best self—the one who's most open to positive engagement on the issue.
3. **Listen slowly and generously to find feelings and needs.** Keep slowing down and listening—interpreting generously and identifying the basic feelings and needs. Check with the person that you got these right.
4. **Simple and clear definition.** Together with the other person, give definition to the story of what's happening. Try to be simple and clear. Avoid being clever or making a broad analysis that includes too many problems.

Want more?

Trouble with your neighbour? A difficult boss? A family member makes a cringey bigoted comment? If you're ready to discover powerful skills you can use right now to address situations like these, read on.

You'll find a breakdown of the four tips from page 2 into a calendar of 52 tips—one you can focus and reflect on each week for a year! At the end there's a story showing how these tips could be used.

If you're like most people, you'll learn best through practice. Yes, you can read about how to swim, but really, you have to get in the water. Practice is what makes any new skill possible. Eventually it may even feel easy and natural.

This long list of 52 tips is for those who prefer detail and want to practice to take their conflict skills to the next level.

Each tip is carefully selected. They're based on scientific evidence and advice from experienced people who've dedicated their lives to transforming bitter conflicts.

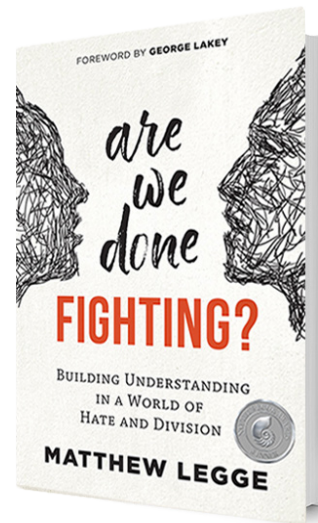
These tips are offered in the hope that some will be helpful to you, but they're only suggestions. Nothing here is meant to be memorized or repeated robotically. There's no "one right way" to be in conflict.

General information always needs to be adapted by the person using it. These tips can't anticipate your particular situation. It's up to you to decide when something feels right to try, or too dangerous, too emotionally demanding, and so on.

Why did a Quaker peace and social justice agency make this resource?

If Quakers are known for one thing, it's their deep commitment to peace, pacifism, and social justice. This dates back centuries. There's a reason that Quaker service agencies won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Canadian Friends Service Committee has more



Above: Canadian Friends Service Committee's award-winning 2019 book *Are We Done Fighting?* shares surprising research and inspiring stories of conflict transformation.

than 90 years of experience with peace and social justice work.

This is a rich and complex history. We've reflected deeply on peace for a very long time. We always have more to learn too. And Quakers, like everyone else, need simple reminders to help bring out our best selves, especially during conflicts.

Over the last 15 years we held multiple consultations with Quakers across Canada. We found out their priorities, hopes, and fears. We discovered what Friends believe about peace and what they're doing at the grassroots.

We reached far beyond Quakers too. We listened to so many stories from folks from all sorts of backgrounds who are working for peace and social justice in countless different ways.

We also did a thorough review of academic evidence. We wanted to learn what different disciplines know about human behaviour and beliefs and how peace can spread.

While thinking and talking about it, we never stopped doing peace work. We've been continually learning and refining our knowledge about what's possible, and our theories about how change

happens for a more just and peaceful world.

We've developed a clear sense of what [peace means to us](#). It's informed by so many great ideas from academics and practitioners. It's informed by successes in many different countries, by those doing the hard and courageous work of positively transforming all sorts of incredibly difficult conflicts.

All of this careful research and reflection—grounded in our values and history as Quakers—has led to not one but two books: [The Four Elements of Peacebuilding: How to Protect Nonviolently](#), and [Are We Done Fighting? Building Understanding in a World of Hate and Division](#).

We've now had countless conversations about peace and justice issues, facilitated lively [workshops](#) with hundreds of participants, done [podcast interviews](#), given presentations, published an [academic article](#), and written an ongoing [blog for Psychology Today](#).

There's so much inspiring and practical peace content in our books and interviews, on our blog, and in the free workshops we offer.

But we realize that many people who need to hear how conflicts are being transformed positively every single day—how justice is being achieved right now—aren't going to read a whole book. They aren't going to take part in a workshop series. And reading a short blog post is too easy to forget.

So we developed this series of short tips for you.

It's setup as a calendar, sharing one tip each week for a year.

Why not, once a week, spend just a few moments reflecting on a particular peace skill? Many are simple, but powerful.

We worked with a social media expert to record each of the tips to come as a short video. You can [watch them on YouTube](#) or get them [sent to you by email](#) once a week as an easy reminder you don't have to plan for.

Whether you read each week's tip, or watch it as a video, afterward you can discuss the tip with a partner or friend, and even experiment with using it if the opportunity arises. See how it feels!

This series is here for you. It's going to help you strengthen and spread your peace skills.

Let's get started!



Each tip is available
as a video. You
can even get them
delivered weekly to
your email.



Year-long calendar



- 1. Pause and check in with yourself.** Are you hungry? Are you tired? Are you in a noisy or high stress environment? Do you feel safe or threatened? Take a few moments and take stock of your current experience, especially the physical sensations. Mindfulness has become a buzzword but slowing down and being aware of how you're doing is an incredibly powerful skill in conflicts. It helps you to be more intentional and less reactive.
- 2. If you can, wait until a good time.** It's not always the right moment for a difficult conversation. If you have the chance (especially possible if a conflict has started over email or text), wait until you feel calm, safe, well fed and well rested, and are in the right environment. Then respond. You'll have the best chance of bringing out your best self. You may not be feeling great or in a good environment though. In that case the tips to come will become all the more important.
- 3. Keep slowing down.** Conflicts have a way of speeding you up. Consciously slow down and check in with yourself. Things come up that you want to react to quickly, but try not to take the bait. Before speaking, leave a bit of silence. Deliberately speak a bit slower than you might want to. Scan your body and your feelings. If you're feeling threatened, you're not going to be your best self. Notice your feeling and either take a break, or try to address it with the tips that follow.

One simple but powerful exercise that's been studied is to take a breath in through your nose, then, before exhaling, inhale a bit more air through your nose so that your lungs expand further. Finally, exhale all that air slowly through your mouth. A minute or two of this usually improves mood and helps you to feel better regulated.
- 4. Humanize.** When you're challenged by someone, there's a tendency to create distance from them. It's very easy to creep back into negative emotions, harsh judgments, even seeing them as less human than you are. Counteract this by considering what makes this person unique. See them as more than just this conflict or just a member of some category you don't like ("She's one of those woke do-gooder Gen Zs," "He's a typical selfish slob"). What's this person's favourite vegetable? That question can shift your thinking and energy back to humanizing the unique complex individual before you.
- 5. Notice what you think the problem is.** We often start a conflict with a strong idea about what's wrong. It's usually something another person said or did. What story are

you telling yourself? What assumptions are you making? How is this limiting your thinking?

- 6. Reflect on what you want.** Do you care about having a positive relationship with this person? Do you want to get your own way at all costs? Be clear on what you hope for.

A major block to more creative disputes is not wanting them. The definition of aggression is the desire to cause harm. If you feel aggressive, or believe that your only option is to force the other person to change, notice this.

Trying to crush your opponent can achieve change in some conflicts, but it damages relationships. A large body of research from many different types of disputes finds that threats, punishments, and other coercion are regularly less strategic and successful over the long term compared to simple respect and listening. So to have a high quality conflict, it helps to let go of the desire to dominate or control the other person.

It's rewarding to notice if you have other unrealistic expectations too. (In a bitter disagreement about the death penalty the person will hear your evidence, completely change their mind, and agree with you.) Not all conflicts can be neatly "resolved." Perfect agreement or total conflict "resolution" is often the wrong expectation, unless this is a minor situation that hasn't built up for long. What's usually feasible is more interesting and constructive conversations where both parties learn something and come out feeling closer with each other.

- 7. Make sure you want to engage.** Frequently, conflicts can be transformed so that the friction or disagreements feel more worthwhile and less exhausting. But it takes some work and skill. Before you get started, know if you're committed or not. If you don't care about having a relationship with this person (e.g. it's someone you just met and will likely never see again), your best

strategy may be to accommodate them or avoid the conflict.

- 8. You can't command feelings.** If you decide to engage, it's not helpful to tell people to calm down or get a sense of humour. Just acknowledge feelings and give them space to be what they are. It may be that the situation would be better if people felt differently, but feelings don't change on command. Don't deny or devalue your own feelings or anyone else's. Get comfortable with feelings being there. Depending on your culture and upbringing, this might be a challenge, but stick with it!

Emotions need to be given space and treated with some tenderness. They are absolutely fundamental in conflicts. This is the case even for those of us who don't realize it and think we're only driven by reason.

Shame about feelings and attempts to suppress or command them contribute to all sorts of further conflicts. So remember, feelings aren't the problem, they're just feelings. It's only actions and beliefs that can be real problems. Feelings are just a type of energy that arises, stays for a while, and then passes.

- 9. Do your best to help them feel safe.** If a reaction in a conversation is surprisingly intense, it's likely the person feels threatened. There's an old saying that sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never hurt you. Neuroscience has shown this to be false. Words can trigger pain as severe as that from being physically attacked. We are also all social beings and care deeply about being in good standing in our groups. These facts help explain why anything that someone experiences as a threat to their sense of self, or status within their social groups, runs the risk of bringing out an intense response.

When we feel threatened, it can be very hard for any of us to hear what's said, or to keep engaging in constructive ways. Instead we cling to current beliefs and habits



as if they're shields that protect us.

To transform conflicts, you want openness—both on your own part and the other person's. You want to work with them to find ways to change the patterns that have led to a destructive conflict. But that can be demanding and frightening. So do your best to help it feel as safe as possible for everyone.

Even difficult conversations can flow relatively smoothly so long as people feel safe. Help them feel that you care about them and have their best interests at heart. This needs to be true though. If people sense you being insincere that will damage the interaction.

10. **Become curious.** Curiosity is energizing. It helps you overcome initial simplistic thinking and biases. Get curious about the other person's experiences and ideas. Transform your over-confidence into an inquisitive mind that wonders how the situation got here. Expect to learn something. You don't have to agree with the person's beliefs to learn something from them. If you engage with curiosity, you're likely to find a fresh perspective on their personal story and how it led them where they are. Ironically, when you try to change the person's mind, you often meet strong resistance. Yet if you do the opposite—listening more and expecting to learn from the other

person—they may open up and be more willing to learn from you too.

11. **Try complexity.** Your tendency will be to collapse your thinking, becoming more certain and less thoughtful. You'll likely start seeing things in simple binaries: "I'm right, she's wrong." You'll also lose the nuance of what the person is saying. You'll hear it as more negative or extreme than they intended. Overly negative interpretations encourage overly simple feelings: negative emotions about the other person as a *bad person*.

Keep it complex. Try to find the both-and. You don't need to think you're wrong, just remember that you're *both* right in some ways *and* the situation is more complex than that. There's always more to the story than you know. Be *both* challenged by or opposed to what the person is saying *and* feel positively toward them as a human being separate from whatever actions they've taken or beliefs they hold. *Both* talk about the challenging issues *and* remember to switch topics sometimes and find common ground on another issue.

12. **Connect with your best self.** Appreciate your own goodness. This is a deep place in you, which many people feel in their heart or lower belly regions. Connecting with this place when something difficult or painful happens can nourish you. It might help

to physically place your hands here. Bring your attention here too, nurturing yourself. Recognize your pain. Listening to yourself like this empowers you. It reminds you to proceed in a positive way. Be compassionate with yourself and you will be able to listen better to others. Studies of self-compassion find that it improves performance in stressful situations such as in college sports.

Who are you when you're at your best? Remember times when you've helped others—a family member, a classmate, a co-worker. That's who you are. You care about people. Be that person now, even though it's tough. Keep remembering the positive values you hold and how you have power to bring those out in this conflict.

- 13. Everyone believes they have good intentions.** You don't have to agree, but recognize that they have a way of believing that their intentions are good, maybe even loving. That's as obvious and makes as much sense to them as your beliefs make to you.
- 14. Keep out of the moral domain.** This tip might be counter-intuitive, but the evidence on morality is mixed. Acting from a sense of ethical duty can result in some of our best most caring actions, but it also helps us to rationalize harming each other. Especially when we feel like victims of moral transgressions by the other side, we're less ready to take their needs and perspectives seriously, and quicker to seek revenge.

Morality is a slippery topic. People easily find ways to argue that their actions or positions are morally superior. This reasoning might not be valid, but it's hard to convince someone of that. It's easier to connect with them without getting into ethical debates. Generally your best option is to avoid the temptation to feel self-righteous or go on the attack against their morals.

- 15. Get on the same team.** Change your focus from "me vs. you" to "me and you vs.

the situation." The other party is part of the problem, but people are never "the problem." There were millions of factors (upbringings, economic pressures, advice you've received...) that played into each of you doing what you did. The situation is much bigger than just two people in this moment. And both of you contributed to make the situation what it is now.

When you see things as "me vs. you," one side can only gain when the other loses. "Me vs. you" raises the stakes of the interaction and makes change costly for everyone. This leads to patterns such as blame, defensiveness, and getting stuck. You try to force them to admit they're wrong, they do the same to you.

The benefit of shifting your mindset to "me and you vs. the situation" is that your thinking gets broader and more creative. Thinking about many different contributions to the problem lowers the stakes, making it easier to experience mutuality. The situation is impacting both of you. You look for ways to transform it together.

- 16. Keep it small.** Try not to expand the conflict unnecessarily. Don't draw in lots of past history or everything you dislike about the person. The moment is already strained. People can only hear so many difficult things at once. Stick to one or two key issues.

If the other person brings up a number of different points, it helps to acknowledge these but say you'd like to leave them aside for the moment. Focus on only one issue at a time. That way the conversation won't get muddled or overwhelming.

- 17. Be less clever.** Many of us are good at analyzing and deconstructing people and situations. You might give someone a mental health diagnosis ("She's clearly a narcissist," "He's demonstrating textbook signs of right wing authoritarianism"). You might pick apart their ideas and apply far-reaching labels ("That's his ableist privilege,"



“She’s childish and naïve”).

Your diagnoses might be accurate. But their main *function* is to make you feel more power and control while distancing yourself from the other person. You might feel superior or like you’ve won some points, but this isn’t useful if you’re serious about transforming conflicts. Instead, try to get out of the over-analysis trap to feel *closer* to the person.

18. Listen deeply. Listening without getting distracted by what you want to say next can be difficult. Slow down and bring your attention to what’s being said. Try to hear from a spirit of child-like curiosity, not a hidden agenda to catch the person out. Engaged body language—facing the person, making culturally appropriate eye contact, and nodding—helps them sense that you’re listening.

19. Reflect back only what’s been said. The possibilities for misinterpretation and confusion are very high in-person, and even higher over email or text (which don’t let you hear the tone something was said in, see body language, or make eye contact). It may seem too basic, but it’s very powerful to reflect back just what you heard.

Don’t add any judgments, diagnoses of people or situations, or advice. When we disagree with someone, many of us trans-

late that person’s ideas. We make the points sound more ridiculous. Reflecting back will remind you to be accurate instead of making the person sound bad.

People can also be unclear or say things they don’t intend to. Reflecting back what you heard helps to make sure you’re both having the same conversation, the one you want to be having.

Simple reflecting back (“So I think you’re saying... did I get that right?”) helps the person feel heard. Feeling heard is powerful. We all need to feel heard *before* we can accept being contradicted. If they repeat their points, as often happens in arguments, it’s a sign that they don’t yet feel heard.

20. Listen to hear the feeling and the need.

People most often state analyses or make demands. These might be harsh and painful to hear. But underneath them are some common human feelings and unmet needs.

When your friend tells you he feels that you’re surrounded by selfish morons society needs socialism to fix the overlapping crises we’re in, that’s not actually a feeling and a need. It’s a very broad judgment and then a big demand for others to change. Feelings and needs are simpler than this.

If you want to understand your friend better, it will help to know what he's feeling and what he needs. If he doesn't state his feelings and needs, you can make a guess, but ask if you got it right. "Do you feel scared because you need more social harmony around you?" You might get it wrong, but keep asking until he agrees that that's exactly what he's feeling and what he needs.

Once you've identified the feeling and need and they've agreed that you got it right, you can then ask for clarity about anything else that's been said ("The word 'socialism' can mean a lot of different things. What does it mean to you?").

- 21. Speak up.** If you feel angry, that's a sign that you think something's wrong. Don't deny your discomfort—feel it and, if you can, let it move you *closer* to the other person. They've got plenty of discomfort in their life too, most of it you can't see and might not guess.

Moving toward the conflict situation is usually the best way to change it. Don't think it's more mature or polite to keep quiet. Many terrible situations result in part from no one speaking up. Pretending nothing's wrong so you can avoid conflicts isn't automatically helpful.

Each of us can benefit from disagreements with people who think differently from us and also care about us. They have perspectives we aren't aware of. It's healthy to be constructively challenged, even if it feels uncomfortable. So if someone raises a problem, consider thanking them for speaking up and letting you know their perspective. And if you feel that there's a significant problem, be brave and speak up.

- 22. Share observations, not evaluations.** "I notice you're speaking louder and faster than usual" is an observation. "You're acting like an entitled brat" is an evaluation. Observations are direct and simple. They

state only what's happened without adding assumptions, analyses, or blame. Observations come in through your senses. They're only what you directly witness (see, hear, etc.), not what you think something *means*. Because observations don't have extra layers of thoughts and interpretations to them, they're less controversial and easier to hear and agree with. This makes observations more powerful for connecting with someone.

- 23. Be clear.** What's obvious to you isn't obvious to anyone who isn't inside your head. This person hasn't seen what you've seen. They haven't read everything you've read. To be heard, try to make simple and clear statements. Avoid long winding sentences, being too broad, or rambling.

It helps to speak for yourself, so you know that what you're saying is true. Try using "I" statements. If you're talking about a big topic like your opinions on affordable housing, you're usually thinking of particular examples you read about, heard from someone else, or experienced personally. Bring clarity to the conversation by saying, "I experienced..." or "I remember seeing a show on TV that said..." and offering details, rather than talking abstractly. This helps to communicate what you're actually thinking. It makes it clear what you *don't* mean. Setting clear boundaries on what you want to discuss will reduce chances for a conversation that goes nowhere because the two of you are thinking about different things.

- 24. Ask if you were clear.** Say something like, "I'd like to make sure I was clear. Can you tell me what you heard me say?" Hearing what the other person took away from your words is a good chance to recognize if something was clear to you but came across in a way you didn't intend.

- 25. Say how you feel.** Feelings aren't demands or veiled judgments. No one makes you feel anything. People provide a stimulus, but



you can react to it in many ways. This fact also means that you can't make anyone else feel the way you want them to. All you can do is act in positive ways. Even still, people might not respond how you hope. That's OK. You can't *make* anyone happy, only they can feel happy (or not!). So when talking about your feelings, don't imply blame. Assume responsibility for your own feelings and be as precise with your wording as possible ("I feel cranky" not "You're driving me crazy!").

26. Make your words meaningful. Part of being clear and doing what you can to help the other person feel safe is being intentional with your words. Maintain the power of your words and help the other person trust that you mean what you say. Avoid statements like, "This is literally the worst I've ever felt" when, if you stopped to think about it, you've felt worse. Plus "worst" is imprecise. Try instead to be accurate: "I feel deeply upset." Communicating in a trustworthy way also means not saying anything that isn't true because you know it's what the other person wants to hear, or you imagine it will manipulate them into doing what you want.

27. Say what you need. Needs aren't demands or diagnoses of other people. "I need to understand and to be understood" not "I need you to stop being such an idiot and listen to me." Explore your needs and then ex-

press them. We humans all have the same basic needs. This makes connecting with needs a simple but fantastic way to overcome apparent divisions and feel closer to people.

28. The only choice you can make is for yourself. Any time you interact with someone (including to disagree with them), you're relating with them. So you always have the power to change your role in that relationship. Perhaps that change will shift the conflict dynamics overall.

Model the behaviour you'd hope to see from the other person and you'll have the best chance of bringing it out in them. It will be hard for them to maintain a high energy hostile interaction if you keep slowing down and showing understanding and empathy for their feelings and needs.

29. Get into your body. Conflicts can temporarily shake up your world. You may think everything is going wrong. Notice these thoughts, but don't believe them. It's easy to get wrapped up in the negative energy and imagine that the situation is more severe and far-reaching than it is. Storms pass.

Disputes can challenge your identity, leading to a lot of rumination. Brain scans suggest that after having a belief challenged, many people get stuck in a loop trying to

figure out *who they are as people*. Too much of this is bad for your health, and doesn't help address conflicts either.

If you can, release the cycle of over-thinking. Try going for a walk, doing some deep breathing, exercise, dance, draw, journal, make art, watch a nature show that helps you feel a sense of awe and of your own smallness.

Connecting with your whole self in these ways can improve your connection with others. Your body and your emotions are intimately linked, and again, feelings are primary in conflicts. So to change a conflict, try changing your physical surroundings or what activities you're doing.

Similarly, during a dispute it can be helpful to move rather than staying seated. Ask the person to walk with you while you talk. Moving your bodies can keep the conversation moving so it doesn't get stuck. Studies find that people are also more creative while walking.

Or go to karaoke and sing together. Neuroscience shows that when people sing and dance together, their brain activity comes into greater synchrony, helping them feel closer. Synchronized movement or breathing makes it easier to take the other person's perspective and understand where they're coming from. So do something fun and active to redirect the negative energy and excessive self-focus.

- 30. Get help from a third party.** Most of the world's peoples don't focus primarily on analyzing conflicts. Instead, one common approach is to turn to stories, proverbs, and teachings, in particular from elders who offer advice and wisdom to reorient the conflicted parties. Conflicts are transformed when feelings change and people bond again. Shared rituals and ceremonies often tap into this transformative power, creating space for deep shifts of old conflict patterns. This happens in community, not just between the individuals directly

involved. Who can you look to as a trustworthy mediator or wise elder?

- 31. Consider different solutions.** Very often there are creative ways forward that can benefit everyone; they just aren't the first ones that come to mind. Try thinking of a few potential solutions before proposing anything. Don't get too fixated on the first demands you hear from the other person, or your initial sense of what you want done. If there is something you absolutely must achieve, why is that? Once you understand each others' feelings and needs (the most important drivers of whatever solutions you'll each come up with), only then is it a good time to discuss solutions. Depending on the problem, finding a solid win-win solution might take further research or negotiation. So offer your solution as a proposal.

- 32. Conflicts are OK.** Conflict isn't a failing; it's a normal part of life. But some of us are embarrassed to be in conflicts or see them as "bad." And most of us find them unpleasant. We want to wrap them up and move on as soon as we can. Often that doesn't work out though.

Don't be too quick to settle. If having a good relationship with this person matters to you, try not to go for a quick compromise or a solution where one party wins only at the expense of the other. So don't be too fast to move out of the discomfort. If you're still feeling uneasy and it doesn't seem like the situation has been positively addressed, keep finding ways to talk about it. When either of you needs to, take a break, but agree that you'll return to the discussion later.

- 33. Is there a meaningful gesture you could make?** Many times a heartfelt expression of sympathy or understanding, a sincere apology, or other symbolic gestures can open a pathway to conflict transformation. Is there something the other party might be hoping to hear or receive from you? What would it take for you to feel good



doing that?

34. Imagine that they've said what you want to hear. Is there a particular apology or statement you're hoping for? If you're finding it hard to have positive feelings for the person, you could try imagining that they've already said whatever it is you most want to hear. How do you feel? Many people find that, even though they know they might never *actually* hear these words, just imagining that they have helps them feel better and more open to conflict transformation.

35. Meet people where they are. As an example, the other person may not know the conflict skills discussed in this document. Try not to feel like you know more than them and can tell them what to do or give them tips they haven't asked for. Thinking you know best can easily block connection and listening.

36. Try a kindness meditation. One way to open your heart in a conflict is to generate positive feelings for someone you love and focus on those sensations in your body. Think of a person you feel close to and care about. Try stating basic well-wishes while picturing them: "May you feel safe. May you feel happy. May you feel healthy." You can adapt the words to suit you. Take time with this and tune in to the sensations in your

body.

Eventually, after focusing on the positive sensations in your body when thinking about a loved one, extend those warm feelings to yourself. Finally—and this can be challenging and take practice—see if you can extend those feelings to the person you're in conflict with. If it helps, you can think that if this person felt safe, happy, and healthy, they'd be nicer to you—so you really want those positive things for them! This simple meditation has been studied and shown to improve people's feelings of wellbeing, social connection, and even *purpose in life*.

37. Try to take their perspective. Another great way to humanize people is through perspective-taking. It's an important part of empathy. Imagine their situation and the many factors influencing them.

38. Consider common goals or identities you share. Another way to feel closer to someone is to think of the many things you have in common. Rather than focusing on the label you've given them that makes them seem distant and less worthy than you, you could try focusing on identities that bring you together. A few to get you started include: people who experience pain and disappointment, people who are feeling some stress as a result of this conflict,

people who like _____ movie/music/person, people who live in _____ place...

39. Recognize “mirror image perceptions.”

Whatever negative evaluations you're making of them, they may well be making similar ones of you. It's a sort of mirror. This doesn't mean that everyone is equally correct. But it does mean you're unlikely to force them to agree with your critical judgements. A whole network of previous causes and conditions (including many biases) is leading to their beliefs, and yours. When you catch yourself making a negative judgment, it could give you helpful perspective to recall that the other person might think the same thing in reverse. If they did think that, would there be some truth to it?

40. Remember that you have biases. Biases impact what you perceive as true. If you're like almost everyone, your biases include:

- negativity bias—your brain focuses on and stores negative information differently. That makes it easy to remember the negative things people say and do and harder to recall the positive
- confirmation bias—you like, look for, and remember things that agree with what you already want to think
- motivated reasoning—you spontaneously come up with reasons that seem to support whatever you want to believe
- information bubbles and echo chambers—the information you're aware of is systematically biased because you only connect with certain people and news sources based on your prior beliefs and tastes
- biases in interpretation—sometimes factors you don't think of (a cultural difference in what politeness looks like) better explain what

a person did than the factors you can easily think of (that they're a rude jerk).

Intellectual humility—remembering that you *might* be wrong or that what you know may be incomplete and need to be revised—is a powerful way to reduce biases and prejudices of all kinds.

41. Highlight common ground first. It's easy to oppose. You might ignore all sorts of points where you agree and zoom in on the one thing the person said that you dislike or feel “triggered” by. Try to pause and think of anything you agree with. Point out this common ground before saying anything critical. If you learned something from the person, or they got you thinking in a different way, point this out too. The more you do that, the more likely they'll be to reciprocate. Don't make forced compliments, but people will almost always say something you can agree with or learn from.

42. People learn and grow. Are you assuming this conversation won't go anywhere? Then why have it? You have to expect that meaningful change is possible. If you hold negative expectations, the other person will pick up on those, and the conversation will be the worse for it.

It may help you in remaining optimistic to recall that people change. You yourself have learned new skills and increased your knowledge many times. In fact, while they may be tense and frustrating, conflicts can be important learning opportunities. They're a chance to develop your listening, your empathy, and other key life skills.

Speak in ways that emphasize the possibility for learning and change. (Instead of “The fact is...” or “Anyone can see that...” try: “My perspective right now is...”, “Where I'm coming from at this moment is...”, “Based on what I know currently I'd say...”)

43. Interrupt old patterns. If you're in a dispute with someone you know, the two of



you have a whole history together. Stories about each other can make it tough to listen or be heard. You might be guessing what they're about to say, or thinking that what they're saying now doesn't fit with what they did years ago.

Try to break with what you expect and instead stay present to what's happening. If you're learning new conflict skills, the other person may be taken by surprise or think it's some fake technique you're trying on them. Do your best to stick with the simple approaches suggested here and not fall into old patterns.

- 44. Ask questions that bring out their positive values.** Do you think and act in the exact same ways when you're alone, when you're with your best friend, or when you're at work? Most folks would say definitely not.

We each have many sides to our personality. Conflicts can bring out the worst parts of us. If you see someone as being only that worst part they're showing you, you can fix them that way in your heart ("She's such a demanding person!"). You'll then continue to relate to them that way, and this can keep bringing it out of them. A body of research shows that negative beliefs we have about each other can become self-fulfilling prophecies, contributing to entrenched conflicts.

The worst parts of someone that you can see in a conflict are not all that they are. At the right time in the conversation, you can ask them about their pets, their kids, or something else to show that you're interested in them and to get them to remember how they care for others. Help both of you to recall that your lives are bigger than this conflict. Your lives include many expressions of your positive values. Try to recall and talk about those in an uplifting way.

- 45. Ask "how" questions to get at cause-effect relationships.** Once you know what the person feels and what they need, you might explore opinions or more abstract topics you disagree on (try not to start here though).

When you hear a belief that you disagree with, a common response is to ask the person *why* they think that. This leads to a debate about evidence. Research shows that such debates are rarely a fruitful way to learn or to change opinions (your own or someone else's). Debates frequently go nowhere in part because we're all such good storytellers. When asked *why* we believe something, we can come up with a story to justify it. (You may not find a person's story *convincing*, but that doesn't mean you'll get them to change it and see things your way. People frequently stick to beliefs regardless of evidence against them).

A better question, then, is *how* a belief works. If your sister says that Canada applying economic sanctions on Iran is a good thing and you don't believe that it is, don't ask why she supports sanctions. Ask how sanctions work. Get her to explain the details.

Again, keep the conversation out of the moral domain. If she says, "I don't know how sanctions work, but Iran is evil so Canada has to sanction them," you could respond that you're curious what the results of that would be. How would sanctions work? What effects would they cause?

Studies find that how questions (but not why questions), reduce over-confidence. When most of us try to explain the details of an issue like how sanctions work, we realize that the issue is more complicated than we initially thought. We then tone down our over-confidence and can have more meaningful conversations.

- 46. Ask questions to clearly define the rules of the game.** Ambiguity is the fuel of rationalization, denial, and many other mental tricks. We humans use different rules and expectations in different situations. This helps us both feel consistent and moral in our actions, and still able to behave in inconsistent and sometimes immoral ways. Getting people to define the rules they use to make decisions is shown in some studies to effectively decrease prejudice. This works because defining your thinking reduces your ability to rationalize inconsistencies.

Your uncle says that victims of a US school shooting were actually paid actors and the whole event was faked. Try to avoid repeating the false belief in an effort to debunk it. Most evidence finds that's likely to reinforce the belief. Instead, try to establish the rules.

Your uncle is showing major distrust for news media. What information is trustworthy and how does he decide? Hearing

his own criteria for trustworthiness, without any judgments or arguments from you one way or another, may help him to notice that the sources for the false belief he's taken on don't meet his own definition of trustworthy.

Again, feelings are primary and your uncle very likely has an unmet need that this intense belief is helping him with. So a more meaningful conversation might come from identifying what he feels about the shooting and what he needs. Many people turn to extremist thinking and conspiracy theories for a sense of control and purpose in their lives. These are very important universal needs. Explore these feelings and needs in a positive way instead of getting into a back and forth debate about the rules or evidence around his specific belief about the school shooting.

47. Identify if this touches on sacred values.

If you're having a conversation about the issues, then there needs to be evidence that would change either of your current positions. One trick many of us use is to demand unreasonably strong evidence for things we don't want to believe—evidence we don't demand for things we agree with. You could ask what evidence the person would need before they'd feel happy changing their position. If what would change your mind, or the other person's, is unreasonable, keep talking. Gently point out the inconsistencies—you don't expect that much proof for other beliefs you hold.

Alternately one of you may say there's no evidence that could change your mind. That means you're not talking about the issues, you're talking about a faith-based stance—something that's sacred to one or both of you. When sacred issues come up, debates are even less useful. The best you may be able to do is try to help each other feel safe and heard in the conversation.

- 48. Many changes take time.** In some conflicts, taking a long view can help you to



not get discouraged. Over time one or both of you may come to change your positions. You've changed your mind before and it can happen again. As much as you want the other person to agree with you right away, trying to force quick changes rarely works. Studies find that people like a position on an issue more if they believe that they came to it themselves, and if they put some time and effort into getting there. This might take months or years.

- 49. Make change as easy as possible.** Change is hard. It takes effort to do things differently. Plus if the change relates to an action or belief that's close to your identity, it may feel scary to touch because of a fear that your group (family, friends, coworkers) will reject you for changing.

In conflicts, do everything you can to make the change you want easy and inviting. Look for solutions that are as simple as possible for everyone. A lot of what looks like pushback against change is actually confusion about what it means to make the change, so make it clear what's being asked for.

- 50. Don't get hung up on techniques.** This calendar offers many options you can try if you want, just remember, there is no perfect wording or formula for conflicts. Conflict is a living and dynamic process. Each one is unique.

Many people navigate conflicts in healing and transformative ways without learning particular techniques. And even if you know what to say, if your words are disconnected from how you feel, they're unlikely to be received with trust.

What's more important than techniques is human connection. This can be strengthened with enough time and practice. Don't try to memorize and repeat the points here. That will drive you further into your head, making you less present. Keep connecting to your own best self.

- 51. Use humour that doesn't put people down.** Laughing together is a great way to feel closer. It needs to be used in a moment when it's not avoiding a serious point someone made. It also can't be about degrading anyone.
- 52. Avoid humiliation.** This is extremely important. Anything that makes the person more distant from you just increases your problems with each other. If you ridicule someone or your interaction otherwise leaves them feeling controlled or like they've lost their dignity, they'll likely want to retaliate. Shame and a perceived loss of status or power are most likely to get people digging in their heels and escalating conflicts.

Even if they give up and agree with you, if

they feel belittled, there will be lingering resentment. Then your relationship—whether it's a friendship, they're just a classmate, whatever—will suffer. This may lead to future destructive conflicts.

It's also important that you not let others humiliate you or put you in danger. If it becomes necessary, protect and value yourself by ending your relationship with a person.

Bonus: a story to tie it all together

The following is a hypothetical story to illustrate how these tips might be used. Dialogue is italicized. The disagreement is largely about belief; it's not a conflict over a particular issue like one roommate thinking the other is too messy. For that reason some of the tips about solutions aren't as relevant for this story and aren't used.

Again, this isn't a formula and you don't need to try all of this, definitely not in this specific way. Just find what inspires you from the general ideas here, or find one or two tips you'd like to test out in your next disagreement. Aim to authentically express care, not to be perfect!

It's 2021 and many people you know are being hospitalized from COVID-19. On a Zoom call your friend James tells you he's passionate about science and evidence. That's why he's not getting vaccinated against COVID-19. He's done his own research and doesn't believe that vaccines are safe. He says that Ivermectin is far safer and is a great treatment for COVID. He talks about scary cases of people dying of blood clots after receiving COVID-19 vaccines, that vaccines were produced too quickly, and that Big Pharma is just trying to profit off of the pandemic. He says mainstream media is going along with this rather than promoting safer and cheaper generic drugs. He's angry at people who fail to see how the media and governments are lying to keep the truth under wraps.

You say, *Hmmm* but don't respond further.

After the call you check in with yourself (tip 1). You notice that you feel exhausted and angry. This anger tells you that you believe something's wrong. You decide it's important to speak up about it (tip 21) because this issue matters greatly to you and you don't want hidden anger to linger and harm your friendship.

It's clear what you think the problem is (tip 5): James is in a filter bubble (tip 40). The misinformation he's accessing is biasing his thinking about COVID-19 vaccines and making him act in ways you detest. You feel sure that his desire not to get vaccinated comes from his upbringing and status as a privileged white male.

Pausing to think about it further (tip 3), you realize that your quick analysis might be inaccurate or incomplete (tip 40). Is James' race and gender highly relevant here? You look up the question quickly and find some data saying that white people are getting vaccinated as much as people of other races, but that women get vaccinated more than men. So your initial analysis might have something to it, but it has limitations too.

More importantly, you realize how much those judgments alienate you from James, fuelling your anger without doing anything to improve the situation (tip 17). You realize that James isn't the only one with power in your friendship, so you make the choice to use your power to have a constructive disagreement (tip 28).

You have the energy and desire to engage in this conversation (tip 7). Your friendship with James matters and you hope to maintain it. You also want him to at least hear your perspective and take you seriously, even though you recognize that you can't control his apparent fear about vaccines (tip 8) or force him to get vaccinated (tip 28).

Reflecting on your feelings and needs, you decide that your exhaustion is largely from the stress of the pandemic. You feel threatened by the virus and isolated because of physical distancing and other public health measures.

Your anger arises from your judgment that people

like James are selfish and ignorant. They don't take the pandemic or other people's health seriously. You're particularly triggered because a cousin of yours died from COVID and you think this might have been prevented if people followed public health measures and got vaccinated. Noticing this strong moral belief, you see how it's limiting your ability to connect with James (tip 14).

You remember that, just like you, James believes he's acting ethically (tip 13). You remember "mirror image perceptions" too (tip 39). While you consider James ignorant, James considers people like you who support vaccines without doing their own research to be the real ignorant ones. Although accurate versus inaccurate information is central to this disagreement, debating about who is or isn't misinformed is unlikely to be constructive (tip 45).

You realize that there's a lot you don't know about James' particular experience. You'd like to find out (tip 10). Your curiosity, and shifting your mindset to see you and James as on the same team (tip 15)—both struggling with the pandemic in different ways (tip 38)—helps your reactions to become more complex (tip 11). James could both be off-base about the science, perhaps even immoral in his choice to not get vaccinated, and have some meaningful reasons for his feelings and needs. You want to listen to him to find out about those (tip 18).

You know this could be a difficult conversation, and your feelings will drive your thoughts and actions (tip 8). Since you still feel upset and distant from James, you decide to spend some time connecting with your best self (tip 12). You recall your own positive qualities and values. You remember some good times you've had with James and several thoughtful things he's done for you over the years (tip 4). This starts to help, so you move into a kindness meditation (tip 36).

You sit in a quiet space, let your body relax as much as you can, and say out loud: *James, I want you to be safe. James, I want you to be happy. James, I want you to be healthy.* After each statement you pause and notice any positive sensations in your body. The word *safe* resonates for you and you feel your heart region becoming less tense and

constricted. By the third statement with the word *healthy* you feel a stronger physical sensation of care for James. There's now a warm tingle in the center of your body. You repeat these positive statements but for yourself. You now feel more cared for, caring, and ready for this conversation.

You text James and ask if he'd like to go for a walk in the park near his house later in the week (tip 29). You know that it's a quiet and calming environment, so you think it will be a good location to help you both feel safe (tip 9). You have a snack before arriving (tip 2).

After chatting for a bit you say, *I'd like to talk about what you mentioned the other day, about not getting vaccinated for COVID. Is this a good time?*

He agrees that it is.

You: *If I understood you, you're worried about people dying because of vaccines, that they were released too fast, and that you think using Ivermectin to treat people once they have COVID is a better approach than mass vaccinations. You're also worried that Big Pharma is profiting off of the pandemic while the government and mainstream media keeps the truth from us. Did I get all that right?* (tip 19).

James: *Yeah that's right, but people aren't just dying because of vaccines, there's lots of horrible side effects too.*

As is often the case, James has made many points you could discuss. You highlight your common ground first (tip 41): you agree with James that Big Pharma has behaved in some very harmful ways. They made tremendous profits off of COVID vaccines even though the vaccines were developed with major public funding. The companies also failed to provide a timely and affordable vaccine supply to poorer countries, or to help countries produce vaccines themselves, which you see as unconscionable.

You admit to James that you don't know much about Ivermectin. Not pretending to know everything sets a tone of honesty and openness for the conversation (tip 28). James speaks about the drug for some time. You're neutral in your response but promise that you'll read one or two

articles if he sends you something that's credible.

Once he's spoken about Ivermectin and seems like he's feeling heard (tip 19), you ask, *How are you feeling about the pandemic?*

James: *I'm feeling sick of all these lies we're being fed. Personal freedoms matter. They're worth fighting for. They're being eroded by our corrupt dictator government.*

As is so common, you asked for a feeling but you got an analysis. You take a guess (tip 20): *It sounds like you feel frustrated and mistrustful. Would you say you also feel anxious about the pandemic itself or not?*

James: *Yeah, I do feel all of that. Exactly. I'm anxious about COVID, of course. But more than anything I'm pissed off.*

Knowing how James feels, you now find out what he needs. At first he says he needs governments to leave him alone.

What need would that meet though?, you ask.

James says he needs freedom. You agree that freedom within reasonable boundaries is extremely important (tip 41). You realize that freedom is an ambiguous term and ambiguity can fuel confused conversations (tip 20). But you decide to leave that aside for now and instead ask him what he'd like to be free to do that he isn't able to do currently.

James: *I just want my life back. I want to predict what's going to happen and what I will and won't be allowed to do. I don't want to be discriminated against. I want to hug my friends and family and for no one to act like that's weird. I want the government to stop driving a wedge between us.*

You have a strong negative reaction to his framing of the issue as him being a victim of discrimination, but remember to keep slowing down (tip 3). You realize that debating about who is or isn't a victim would take the conversation into the moral domain and that wouldn't be useful (tip 14).

Instead, you focus on the needs behind what James is saying. It sounds like he needs order and connection. Those are universal human needs. It

sounds like you need a sense of order and of connection, you say.

James: *I'd say that's right, sure. And justice.*

You explain that you share those same needs. His desire to hug people resonates strongly with you (tip 27).

You now decide to keep the conversation small (tip 16). You say you'd like to leave Ivermectin, the media, and the speed of vaccine production aside for the time being and talk about the harms from the vaccines. To you that's the most central issue.

You start on this topic by asking questions to find out what his rules are around safety and evidence (tip 46). When does it matter that something that's overwhelmingly more likely to protect him has a rare risk associated with it?

You: *You said you're concerned about harms caused by the vaccine. Are you comfortable wearing a seatbelt while driving?*

James: *Yeah, that's fine.*

You: *So do you support measures that are likely to keep people safe even when, very rarely, they cause serious harms? There are cases where people would have been better off if they weren't wearing seatbelts, but overall wearing a seatbelt is much safer than not wearing one.*

James: *Vaccines aren't like seatbelts. They're unnatural and wrong.*

James is taking the conversation into the moral domain. Like freedom, the words unnatural and wrong are vague and can be used to appear to support all sorts of contradictory beliefs and choices (tip 46). You also see that James is starting to look agitated. You observe his tone becoming firmer (tip 22—although you decide there's no benefit to sharing this observation with him).

So you come back to clarifying his rules, but also add a joke that you hope will bring you closer together (tip 51): *I'm interested in this issue of natural vs. unnatural. Remember when you and I dyed our hair that one Halloween and how ridiculous we looked? I assume you don't mean that that was a bad thing to do because it wasn't our natural hair colour, right?*

You keep listening, reflecting back what you hear, and trying to establish, together with James so that he agrees, what his rules are. Since you keep trying to show with your slow pace of speech (tip 3), your tone, your engaged body language, and questions (tip 18) that you care about him, you notice James lowering his shoulders and speaking in a softer voice again (tip 9).

The discussion doesn't go far, so you change course: *I'm still curious to understand your positions better. I appreciate your willingness to keep talking about this. I guess my question is: What evidence would you need before you could feel comfortable that a COVID vaccine is safe for you?* (tip 47).

James: *I'd want to see solid proof that no one experiences side-effects.*

You explain that you'd of course love that too. The problem is that that level of safety just isn't possible. Some small percentage of people will have negative reactions to any medication, even to any food or drink.

I guess so... but the reactions to these vaccines, which are basically poison and damage your lungs and heart, that's way worse, he says.

You: *You think there needs to be a higher standard of evidence of safety for COVID-19 vaccines than for other medications because the adverse reactions to the vaccines are more severe?*

James: *Exactly.*

You notice that James isn't repeating his points, and most of the time he's telling you that you're right when you reflect back what you heard. Sometimes he's clarifying when you reflect back and he doesn't think that you got it (tip 19).

You now understand James' feelings, his needs, and you can even put yourself in James' shoes more readily to see his perspective (tip 37). So now you're ready to explain yourself further:

We're in agreement on a number of things but I think this question of the standards of safety for vaccines is one where we don't see eye to eye right now. I haven't read as much about this topic as you, so where I'm at currently [tip 42] is based on the people I know who've

gotten very sick from COVID and from a few articles I've read [tip 23]. My cousin died. So I think there's a very serious risk from getting COVID while unvaccinated. Even if you don't get really sick, you're more likely to spread the virus to others and not even know it. That could kill them.

That means my perspective right now is that you're taking a big risk, James. You're not in a place of safety. Of course I'm not safe either, but at least the vaccine has helped to reduce my risk of getting seriously sick if I catch COVID. I hope it's also making me less likely to infect anyone else.

I guess my decision to get vaccinated came from the exact need that we talked about that we both share—to feel connected with others. Being vaccinated feels like a small but meaningful way to care for people around me.

I'm feeling happy that we've had this conversation [tip 25]. I think it's so important to keep talking with each other about these difficult issues that impact all of us [tip 15]. I'm also still finding it tough to understand your choice not to get vaccinated. But what I wanted was for us to have an honest conversation and listen to each other, and I feel like we've done that [tip 27]. So I appreciate that. It's really important to me that I was clear just now. Can you tell me what you heard me say? [tip 24]

As the conversation moves on to lighter subjects, there's no neat resolution (tip 6). But you've managed to navigate your differences without feeling alienated or disliking each other as people. You remind yourself that both you and James can and



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