



ACBS World Conference
SAN FRANCISCO
— June 14-19, 2022 —

“I hate to say this, but...”

How Psychological Flexibility can help you
have difficult conversations

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June 2022

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"I hate to say this, but...":



How Psychological Flexibility can help you have difficult conversations

Dr Ray Owen
Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Health Psychologist

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Today, we look at:

- What matters most to you as a professional having difficult conversations
- How these conversations can be harder by our own reactions to the thoughts and feelings they evoke in us
- How Psychological Flexibility can be a useful lens to approach this
- The role of Values
- A simple procedure to make sure you arrive at the start of a difficult conversation in the best state to handle it well.





An exercise

What we'll cover

1.

Difficult conversations

What they are

Why they matter

2.

Communication skills

Examples

Limitations

3.

Feeling bad

How these conversations affect us

The role of Values

4.

Psychological Flexibility

Why it's relevant

How it can help

A new skill

Exercise 1

Difficult communication situation
that you have encountered

WHAT was the situation?

WHAT was difficult about it?

HOW did you feel during it?



Some examples of difficult conversations:

- Breaking very bad news
- Dealing with angry people
- Explaining that someone -maybe you – has made a mistake
- Challenging a colleague about unacceptable behaviour
- Raising a performance issue with a junior member of staff
- Performance Management / Disciplinary meetings



	With patients / clients / relatives	With colleagues
Benefits of handling difficult conversations well		
Costs of handling difficult conversations badly, or avoiding altogether		

Consequences of poor clinical communication

- Psychological distress and morbidity
- Poor adherence to treatment
- Reduced quality of life
- Dissatisfaction with care
- Complaints and litigation
- Potential burnout in healthcare professionals

Conflict resolution

Management skills

Assertiveness Training

Communication Skills Training

Skills Training



In basic training



Ad hoc events



Example of Cancer & Palliative Care

Advanced Communication Skills Training / 'Connected' (2003 -)

Fallowfield / Maguire / Wilkinson & many others

National reports

- Department of Health Cancer Plan (2000)
- NICE Supportive and Palliative Care Cancer Service Guidance (2004)
- Health Service Ombudsman Report (2006)
- Cancer Reform Strategy (2007)
- High Quality Care for All – NHS Next Stage Review, Lord Darzi (2008)
- End of Life Care Strategy (2008)
- Equality and Excellence: Liberating the NHS (2010)
- Improving Outcomes Guidance (2011)



National Cancer Action Team
Part of the National Cancer Programme



NHS

National Cancer Action Team
Part of the National Cancer Programme

Connected
National Communication Skills Training Programme

Workshop

Welcome to the course
We will be starting at 9.00am
Coffee is available



Toolkit

Guidelines for specific conversations

Giving complex information

Giving information is a vital part of the healthcare professional's role. To ensure that patients can both absorb and understand complex information it must be tailored to the patient's specific needs. For example:

- Identify and stay with the patient's agenda
- Be logical and organised
- Signpost where the interview is going (warning shot)
- Put complex information into simple language (without being patronising)
- Chunk information into manageable blocks
- Check understanding
- Pick up and explore verbal and non-verbal cues (empathise)
- Acknowledge the impact the information has on the patient by exploring facts and feelings
- Give appropriate but not false reassurance
- Summarise and check if the patient has some further questions
- Arrange appropriate follow up.

Breaking bad news

Bad news is bad news. You cannot often the impact, but you can help the patient's adjustment by the way you deliver it. The key is to slow down the speed of transition, for example, with giving a cancer diagnosis, from a perception of wellness to the realisation of life-threatening disease.

Preparation

- Make preparations as full as possible and have all the information you require to hand
- Plan the time (make sure there is enough time) and prepare a place with privacy
- Involve a relative or friend if appropriate.

Delivering bad news

- Find out what the patient already knows
- Find out how much the patient wants to know

Picking up cues

- Acknowledge
- Clarify
- Explore

Blocking behaviours

- Physical questions
- Inappropriate information
- Closed questions
- Multiple questions
- Leading questions
- Defending/justifying
- Premature reassurance
- Premature advice
- Normalising
- Minimising
- Jollyng along
- Passing the buck
- Chit chat

Facilitative skills

Goldberg et al 1993; Wilkinson 1991; Maguire et al 1996; Zimmerman et al 2003;

- Open questions
- Open directive questions
- Psychological focus
- Pauses
- Screening questions
- Reflection (*acknowledgment*)
- Paraphrasing (*acknowledgement and checking*)
- Summary
- *Negotiation*
- *Exploration*
- *Clarification*

Moore PM, Rivera Mercado S, Grez Artigues M, Lawrie TA.
Communication skills training for healthcare professionals working with people who have cancer. The Cochrane Library. 2013.

'Powerful, humane
and wise'

Julia Samuel

'Everyone should
read it'

Nigella Lawson

Listen

How to Find the Words for
Tender Conversations

Bestselling author of *With the End in Mind*

Kathryn Mannix



Compassionate

Respectful

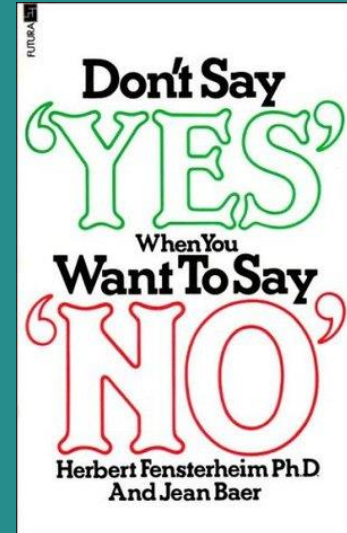
Curiosity

Why 'skills' are not enough

A BILL OF ASSERTIVE RIGHTS

1. You have the right to judge your own behavior, thoughts, and emotions, and to take the responsibility for the initiation and consequences upon yourself.
2. You have the right to offer no reasons or excuses for justifying your behavior.
3. You have the right to judge if you are responsible for finding solutions to other people's problems.
4. You have the right to change your mind.
5. You have the right to make mistakes-and be responsible for them.
6. You have the right to say, "I don't know."
7. You have the right to be independent of the goodwill of others before coping with them.
8. You have the right to be illogical in making decisions.
9. You have the right to say, "I don't Understand."
10. You have the right to say, "I don't care."

The example of 'assertiveness training'





emotions

thoughts

sensations

urges





I feel awful saying this...

Towards & Away



Things we need
Things we want



Danger
Pain



Unwanted feelings
Difficult thoughts



Why we change behaviour when we feel bad (in this context)

⇒ 'Pure' experiential avoidance

"I can't do this"

⇒ Distraction / fusion / cognitive load:

"er... what was I saying..?"

⇒ The 'Rule of feeling bad'

- "if I'm feeling bad, something must be going badly"

"This is going horribly wrong ..better change tack"



The 'Rule of feeling bad':

“if I'm feeling bad, something must be going badly”

- ⇒ Sometimes might be right
 - Creating interfering levels of distress in other
 - New information coming to light – changes plan
 - I'm wrong person / this is wrong time / wrong setting
- ⇒ Often failure to recognise we might feel bad when it's going well / because it's going well



Why we feel might feel bad when it's going well

- ⇒ Other unhelpful rules
 - e.g. “Good communication always makes the other person feel better”
- ⇒ Empathic pain
- ⇒ Values
 - “Inside your pain you’ll find your Values”
 - “Inside your Values you’ll find your pain”



Exercise 2

Which of *your* Values were in play in that difficult communication?

In choosing to have that communication?

In how you would have wanted to act in that communication?



Why's it so hard?

Because we give a damn.



Psychological Flexibility Model

(e.g. ACT - Acceptance & Commitment Therapy)

AWARE

-of the here & now

-notice what's going on inside you and around you



More fulfilled, more effective, more resilient

OPEN

- Step back & make room for thoughts & feelings
- Not getting tangled up, pushed around or running from them

ENGAGED

- Know what matters to you
- Do what it takes to live that way under current circumstances

On 'Intention' (both of behaviour & outcome)

- ⇒ The ABC problem in complex situations
- ⇒ The importance of Intention
- ⇒ The balance of persisting in Intention vs adapting goals to context
 - To persist, or change
 - Defusion, observing self
 - What is happening here?
 - Why am I considering x?
 - What do I anticipate as consequences?



Psychological Flexibility Model

(e.g. ACT - Acceptance & Commitment Therapy)

AWARE

-of the here & now
-notice what's going on inside you
and around you

- **Anchor in here-and-now**
- **Focus on what's happening not just 'internal world'**

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- Step back & make room for thoughts & feelings
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ENGAGED

- Know what matters to you
Do what it takes to live that way
under current circumstances

- **Remind self of what matters in conversation**
- **Remind self of own values**
- **Engage willingness to do this**

- **Recognise common thoughts and feelings for what they are, and why they are**
- **Make room for feeling bad – not a disaster, not to be fixed, not to be avoided**

AWARE

- of the here & now
- notice what's going on inside you and around you

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- **Remind self of what matters in conversation**
- **Remind self of own values**
- **Engage willingness to do this**
- **Focus on present moment**
 - **situation in hand**
 - **task in hand**
- **I always doubt myself – because I don't want to be complacent**
- **I feel anxious in stomach – that's natural (I give a damn), just let it be**
- **Matters that they're informed, can make choices**
- **I want to be supportive and clear**
- **I'm willing to accept discomfort if that's what it takes to do this well**

Don't just walk in & hope for the
best..

... *arrive*

Come into this moment

- ONE THING I SEE
- ONE THING I HEAR
- GROUND UNDER MY FEET
- FEEL ONE BREATH

Set your intention

- WHAT AM I AIMING TO ACHIEVE IN THIS CONVERSATION?
- ACCEPTING AGENDAS MAY NEED TO CHANGE

Connect to your values

- WHY DOES IT MATTER TO ME TO DO THIS (WELL)?
- HOW DO I WANT TO BE IN DOING THIS?

Engage your willingness

- WHAT DIFFICULT THOUGHTS & FEELINGS ARE LIKELY TO SHOW UP FOR ME IN DOING THIS?
- AM I **WILLING** TO EXPERIENCE THEM, IF THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES TO ACHIEVE A VALUED OUTCOME?

How to Arrive

Ray Owen, 2022

1 Come into this moment

- ONE THING I SEE
- ONE THING I HEAR
- GROUND UNDER MY FEET
- FEEL ONE BREATH

2 Set your intention

- WHAT AM I AIMING TO ACHIEVE IN THIS CONVERSATION?
- ACCEPTING AGENDAS MAY NEED TO CHANGE

3 Connect to your values

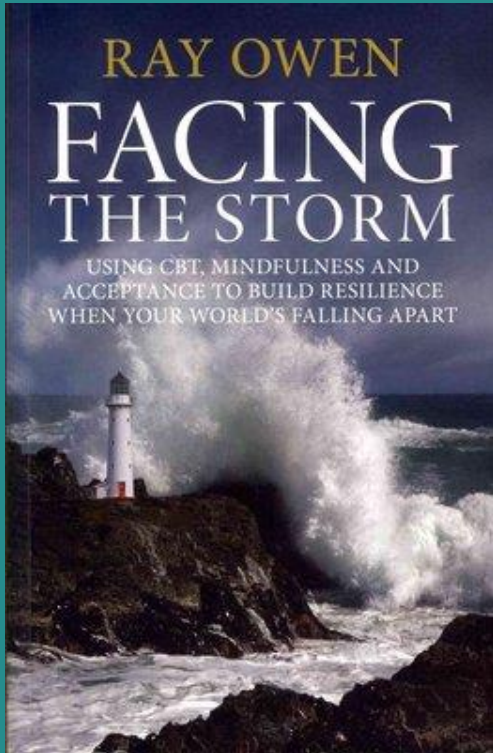
- WHY DOES IT MATTER TO ME TO DO THIS (WELL)?
- HOW DO I WANT TO BE IN DOING THIS?

4 Engage your willingness

- WHAT DIFFICULT THOUGHTS & FEELINGS ARE LIKELY TO SHOW UP FOR ME IN DOING THIS?
- AM I **WILLING** TO EXPERIENCE THEM, IF THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES TO ACHIEVE A VALUED OUTCOME?



To learn more..



Second edition coming soon...

Thanks

Do you have any questions?

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