

**Conversations with “Unlikely Friends”**

**A Personal Invitation to Revive Civility and Respect**

There’s an uneasy feeling that things are broken, disrespect is on the rise and we’re tearing each other apart. A large number of Americans have a feeling of dislike, distrust, and even contempt for many of their fellow Americans largely because they hold different political views and we are seeing citizens demonizing others based on who they voted for.

The divides we are experiencing make it extremely difficult to come together and find ways to deal with issues of common concern. It adds to the feeling of distance and disconnection people have from each other and within their community and with their government. If it is not addressed, this divide threatens to become a chasm that will become almost impossible to bridge.

In order to address this problem and enhance our sense of community, we can and must rebuild some of the connections that have been damaged through the years by partisan political fights and the use of extreme rhetoric that demonizes and degrades those on "the other side" of an issue. Finding a path forward will require Americans to begin listening and engaging with one another again. The good news is that a majority of Americans want to change the tone in our country and want to live in a way that is grounded in a sense of respect for each other.

Connections made in each community, can only be made by individuals who take responsibility to change the climate and who are willing to listen deeply to each other and relate as human beings first.

The [National Institute for Civil Discourse](http://nicd.arizona.edu/) (NICD), a non-profit, non-partisan institute based at the University of Arizona, is dedicated to addressing incivility and political dysfunction in American democracy by advancing transformational change. NICD has created this discussion guide to help all of us move forward.

As Americans seeking to create a more perfect union, we have often come together around common values of freedom, liberty, fairness, equality, safety, family, faith and opportunity. We thank you for participating in this initiative to revive civility and respect - person by person, community by community - through listening with respect to another who may hold different views.

**Discussion Guide**

**The Power of One on One Conversations and Developing Unlikely Friends:**

This is based on the experience shown in and "Unlikely Friendship" where two people who have different political and/or cultural views agree to meet for 30-60 minutes for conversations. The approach includes having two people who might hold different political views or be on different sides of various issues, listen to each other and promote civility and respect within the conversation and potentially beyond. The main emphasis is on listening across differences and getting to know each other as individuals.

Conversations are divided into four parts with suggested questions under each one to help structure the conversations. The four parts of the conversation are:

1. Getting to know each other better and experiencing an unlikely friend.
2. Sharing concerns about the divisions in our community and in our country.
3. Exploring areas of agreement.
4. Reflection and sharing the experience.

**Approaches to Enhance the Conversation**

Here are some tips from our friends with [Living Room Conversations](http://www.livingroomconversations.org/conversation_ground_rules), which are designed to help enhance your experience.

* **Be Curious and Open to Learning, Listening**

Listen to and be open to hearing all points of view. Maintain an attitude of exploration and learning. Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking.

* **Show Respect and Suspend Judgment**

Human beings tend to judge one another, do your best not to. Setting judgments aside will better enable you to learn from others and help them feel respected and appreciated.

* **Share the air-time**. Be sure everyonehas the opportunity to participate. You can “pass” or “pass for now” if you are not ready or willing to respond to a question.
* **Look for Common Ground and Appreciate Differences**

In this conversation, we look for what we agree on (where you share hopes, concerns, interests); and simply appreciate that we will disagree on some beliefs and opinions. Don’t try to “convert” or disparage anyone who disagrees.

* **Be Authentic and Welcome that from Others**

Share what’s important to you. Speak authentically from your personal and heartfelt experience. Be considerate to others who are doing the same.

* **Be Purposeful and to the Point**

Notice if what you are conveying is or is not “on purpose” to the question at hand. Notice if you are making the same point more than once.

* **Own and Guide the Conversation**

Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation by noticing what’s happening and remember too, what is said here, stays here.

**About Listening**

Listening to the ideas and opinions of others—and having one's own ideas understood, and genuinely being heard —is a foundation for building understanding between people and is especially important when listening across differences for understanding. However, people often fail to listen to one another and, as a consequence; we create antagonism instead of alignment.

If we are going to have a civil, respectful conversation with someone who thinks differently than we do, we have to learn how to understand his or her perspective and values. By doing so, we can start to see the person as a human with experiences, emotions and underlying values that inform their perspective. We don’t have to change our values and beliefs to act civilly and respectfully toward others. But by listening to others, we can enhance our understanding of that person’s values, allowing us to feel more understanding and empathy towards others.

Listening takes effort. Give the speaker your full attention. Be patient. Put aside your own view and opinions for the time being. Choose words carefully. Show that you hear and understand, not necessarily that you agree.

Let’s watch a video on active listening and how to be a great listener (Try this webpage:

<http://bit.ly/ReallyListen> )

1. Stay focused, keep natural eye contact, don’t judge, be patient
2. Really listen, don’t think about what you want to say next
3. Allow for periods of silence, wait until the other person speaks again
4. Occasionally paraphrase or repeat what the other person has said
5. Understand the emotions behind the words, try to express the feelings you thought you heard

**Conversation Flow**

Conversations are divided into four parts with suggested questions and time under each one to help structure the conversations. These examples of questions are provided as a source of suggestions and we encourage you to adapt as best fits your authentic conversations. Elements of these conversations could be done in small groups or pairs.

1. **Getting to know each other and exploring unlikely friendships (30 minutes)**
2. **Start by Getting to Know Each Other (10 minutes)**

Spend time discussing a couple of these questions to get to know each other a little better as people, as individuals with rich lives and experiences. Please remember to share time equally.

* What sense of purpose/mission/or duty guides you in your life? What would your best friend say about you and what “makes you tick”?
* Tell me a little about your family--do you have children? Do you have siblings? Are family near here or scattered around the country?
* What do you value most about our community (or our country)?
* What are some of the main ways you are involved in the community?

1. **Unlikely Friendship Video (5 minutes)**

Spend the next 5 minutes and watch the following video together: [www.bit.ly/unlikelyfriend](http://www.bit.ly/unlikelyfriend)

1. **Explore Developing Unlikely Friends (15 minutes)**

Now take about 10 minutes to discuss this experience and its potential relevance for your lives and communities. In the video, Bob and Donna make an “unlikely friendship.” They deeply disagree about an issue, but by getting to know each other on a more personal level, they become friends. Some of the following questions can guide you in this conversation:

* What struck you about their experience?
* In what ways do liberals and conservatives stereotype each other? Do you ever feel stereotyped by those you disagree with on issues?
* Have you ever taken a position or voiced an idea that was very different from a group you are part of? How did that feel? Or have you ever decided against speaking out because it just wasn’t worth the repercussions?
* What could it mean for our community (or organization) if we each reached out and found an unlikely friend to engage?

After this short discussion, take a few minutes and reflect individually on this question, write your thoughts down and then with a partner explore together:

* If you were going to look for an “unlikely friendship,” whom would you talk to and how would you start the conversation?
* What are the risks and rewards?
* Discuss together with a partner, ideas around what would decrease the risks and increase the rewards?

1. **Sharing concerns about the divisions in our country/your community (15 minutes)**

Move the conversation to explore more about your community or our country- choose one of these questions to discuss and again please remember to share time equally:

* Why do you think our country is so bitterly divided at this time?
* How do you feel about our community--do we seem more or less divided than other parts of the country?
* What are the main ways that you think people are uncivil and disrespectful to each other when it comes to political discussions?
* In spite of political differences, what do you think are some of the main things that a majority of people in our community agree on? How about things the vast majority of people in the country agree on?

1. **Exploring areas of agreement and possible ways to work together (20 minutes)**

Move the conversation to explore areas of agreement and looking forward - a few of these questions may assist you:

* What are your hopes for our community and/or country?
* What kind of influence would you like to have on our political system?
* What things come to mind that could be done to improve civility in our community and/or before the next election? What can candidates do differently? How can their supporters show more respect for each other?
* Are there some things we could get media to do differently that would help create a more civil and respectful climate?
* Are there some others in town you want to reach out to and invite them to find an “unlikely friend” and participate in a conversation like this?

# Reflection and Sharing the Experience - (15 minutes)

Consider closing by taking a few minutes to reflect briefly together. Explore the following questions:

* In one sentence share what was most meaningful or valuable to you in this experience?
* What would you say about this experience to someone else you wish would join you in a conversation like this?
* Is there a next step you’d like to take based on the conversation you just had? Would you invite that person you identified to have a one-to-one “Unlikely Friendship” conversation and/or encourage this to be done within a group you know (e.g. civic, faith based, school, at work)?

**Share Your Experience**

Please share your thoughts on this to help us learn what was important and where people are helping revive civility and respect in your communities, you can do so here at [www.ReviveCivility.org](http://www.ReviveCivility.org) through this form <https://www.revivecivility.org/contact>. Sharing the experience on social media can help spread civility too, for example snap a selfie and/or a picture of your coffee date and share it on social media using **#revivecivility.**

**Information and other guides can be found at** [**www.ReviveCivility.org**](http://www.ReviveCivility.org)**.**

**Thank you for engaging across divides!**