

4 Tips for Talking to People You Disagree With

Megan Phelps-Roper grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church and was picketing with signs like “gays are worthy of death” at the age of five.



Photo from iStock .

She left 20 years later because strangers on Twitter changed her mind.

“Initially, the people I encountered on the platform were just as hostile as I expected,” she says. But slowly that changed. They started to ask about her beliefs, and she asked about theirs. Their conversations planted seeds of doubt, and slowly her entire worldview shifted — eventually driving her to leave the church (and the beliefs that came with it) behind.

In Megan’s [TED Talk](#), she urges all of us to talk and to listen to the people we disagree with. Here, in her words, are her tips for how to have effective conversations:

1. Don't assume bad intent.

Assuming ill motives almost instantly cuts us off from truly understanding why someone does and believes as they do. We forget they're a human being with a lifetime of experience that shaped their mind, we get stuck on that first wave of anger, and the conversation has a very hard time ever moving beyond it.

But when we assume good or neutral intent, we give our minds a much stronger framework for dialogue.

2. Ask questions.

When we engage people across ideological divides, asking questions helps us map the disconnect between our differing points of view. That's important because we can't present effective arguments if we don't understand where the other side is actually coming from and it gives them an opportunity to point out flaws in our positions.

But asking questions serves another purpose; it signals to someone they're being heard. When my friends on Twitter stopped accusing and started asking questions, I almost automatically mirrored them. Their questions gave me room to speak, but they also gave me permission to ask them questions and truly hear their responses. It fundamentally changed the dynamic of our conversation.

3. Stay calm.

This takes practice and patience, but it's powerful. When my husband was still just an anonymous Twitter acquaintance, our discussions frequently became hard and pointed, but we always refused to escalate. Instead, he would change the subject. He would tell a joke or recommend a book or gently excuse himself from the conversation. We knew the discussion wasn't over, just paused for a time to bring us back to an even keel.

People often lament that digital communication makes us less civil, but this is one advantage that online conversations have over in-person ones. We have a buffer of time and space between us and the people whose ideas we find so frustrating. We can use that buffer. Instead of lashing out, we can pause, breathe, change the subject or walk away, and then come back to it when we're ready.

4. Make the argument.

This might seem obvious, but one side effect of having strong beliefs is we sometimes assume that the value of our position is, or should be, obvious and self-evident; that we shouldn't have to defend our positions because they're so clearly right and good; that if someone doesn't get it, it's their problem — that it's not my job to educate them. But if it were that simple, we would all see things the same way.

As kind as my friends on Twitter were, if they hadn't actually made their arguments, it would've been so much harder for me to see the world in a different way. We are all a product of our upbringing, and our beliefs reflect our experiences. We can't expect others to spontaneously change their own minds. If we want change, we have to make the case for it.

[Watch the full talk](#) to hear her extraordinary story.



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