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A GUIDE TO
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How to Talk
to People
YOU DISAGREE WITH
POLITICALLY

Healthy
Sheet Pan
Meals

4



UNITED WE STAND

An illustration of two stylized human figures, one on the left and one on the right, sitting at a long table. Both are facing each other and have laptops open in front of them. Above the figures are two speech bubbles: a blue one on the left and an orange one on the right, both containing a white question mark. The background is a light blue gradient. The words 'UNITED' and 'STAND' are in dark blue, while 'WE' is in orange and 'S' is in light blue. The text is arranged in a large, bold, sans-serif font.

How to Talk to People You Disagree with Politically

When it comes to politics, you may strongly disagree with your uncle Joe, your outspoken coworker, or your old high school classmate who posts political rants on Facebook. Yes, the country is politically divided, but you don't have to let politics destroy your relationships. Here's how to be respectful and kind to everyone—no matter how they vote.

By Christa Melnyk Hines

Jeanne Safer, PhD, and her husband have been married for 40 years. But their lengthy and committed partnership may seem like a unicorn to some. Safer, an ardent liberal, and Richard, a staunch conservative, have managed to build a strong bipartisan marriage. How? By establishing thoughtful rules of engagement that can work for anyone who wishes to get along with people they disagree with.

“You do not have to have insane fights with your parents, your children, anybody who disagrees with you. It doesn’t have to be a war, but you have to understand how to deal with it, and it takes something that is less and less available to us now, which is self-control,” says Safer, who is a psychologist and the author of *I Love You, but I Hate Your Politics: How to Protect Your Intimate Relationships in a Poisonous Partisan World*.

Throughout her marriage to Richard, who is the senior editor of the conservative magazine *The National Review*, Safer has learned how to gracefully navigate many partisan political minefields both at home and socially.

Safer’s number one rule is to avoid raising your voice. “As soon as you raise your voice, you cannot have a conversation. The person you’re talking to will interpret that as shouting, and rational dialogue will go out the window.”

Our ingrained biases can make it difficult for us to understand why other people don’t align with our positions on issues. Our annoyance with those we don’t understand might be expressed in outrage, but is often rooted in fear or another underlying emotion.

“Anger gives us this sense of control over other negative emotions. It’s very uncomfortable

to sit with sadness (or anxiety, embarrassment or shame), but when we have anger, now we’re powerful. (I can yell at you. I can really blow up. I can throw something.) It gives us this illusion of control,” says psychologist Gregory Nawalanic, PsyD, of the University of Kansas Health System in Kansas City.

If you have (or are tempted to have) a heated exchange, get to the root of your anger by considering the emotions behind it. For example, if you feel like you might cry, your anger could be driven by sadness. Perhaps you’re disappointed and sad that your adult child’s political views don’t align with yours, which feels to you like a negative reflection on you as a parent. Or maybe you’re worried that if your partner disagrees with you on an issue that’s important to you, your marriage is in jeopardy.

How do you get past that?

“One of the mindsets of a peace builder is to remain curious,” says Jeremy Pollack, founder of Pollack Peacebuilding Systems, a nationwide conflict resolution consulting firm that serves families, businesses and communities. “You can ask questions and get clear answers as to why this person has this position instead of just assuming it’s because of some character flaw or some difference in values.”

While discussing a hot-button issue like gun control, for example, you may realize that you both agree that mass shootings need to end, but you have different ideas about how to achieve that goal.

Also, try thinking of the person who shares an opposing viewpoint as an ally rather than the enemy. Look at the *problem* as the problem rather than the person you disagree with as the problem.

“The minute we attribute that problem to this individual, that’s a real quick way to get into conflict,” Pollack says.

During a difficult battle with leukemia 10 years ago, Safer became keenly aware of how little a person’s political persuasion has to do with their personal values—something she calls the “chemo test.”

“My dearest friend—we’ve known each other 25 years and share every political opinion—did not come to the hospital once,” she says.

When Safer asked her neighbor, who she only knew as a devout and conservative Catholic, for help, she was surprised by the woman’s warm response.

Look at the problem as the problem rather than the person you disagree with as the problem.



"I called her apologetically and said, 'Can you do me a gigantic favor? Can you do my laundry?' Her answer was—and it still makes me cry even now to think about it—I have three kinds of detergent, which kind would you like?"

Her neighbor went to Safer's apartment, took the laundry, washed it, and then delivered it to the hospital across the city.

"And then she said, 'Can I do more? I want to do more.' And that stuck with me," Safer says.

Above all, Safer advises us to never unfriend a loved one on social media because of their political views. "It's hard to fix that," she says.



HOW NOT TO PUSH PEOPLE'S BUTTONS

"If you're willing to not be right, then you've got a much better chance of being respectful. If you need to be right no matter what, it's going to be very hard for you to get along with people who don't agree with you," Pollack says.

One way to quit the need to be right is to stop what Safer calls "article thrusting." That means no more emailing or sharing articles with your partner, friend, or relative in an attempt to open their eyes to your way of thinking.

"No one will read anything that you ever send to them that way. Never, ever, ever. It's a way to only offend," Safer says.

Also, avoid starting conversations with "How can you possibly think . . ." or "[Your candidate] said the stupidest thing . . .!" These kinds of statements immediately put people on the defensive.

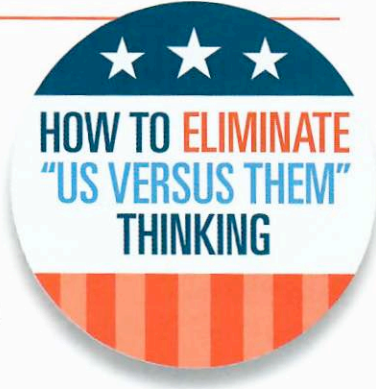


HOW TO HANDLE POLITICAL OPINIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

If reading your loved one's social media posts upsets you, just keep scrolling rather than reading or responding.

"Why put yourself in that position? Do not read them," Safer says. "Do not have a political fight with anybody that you care about online. If you have to talk to somebody, I recommend

doing it in person, on the phone, or even a very old-fashioned thing—writing a letter."



HOW TO ELIMINATE "US VERSUS THEM" THINKING

Despite outlining an educated, logical opinion backed up with strong evidence and reliable resources, you may be frustrated that the person you are arguing with refuses to budge on their position.

Why? Accepting or even considering information that doesn't support our positions is uncomfortable for the brain.

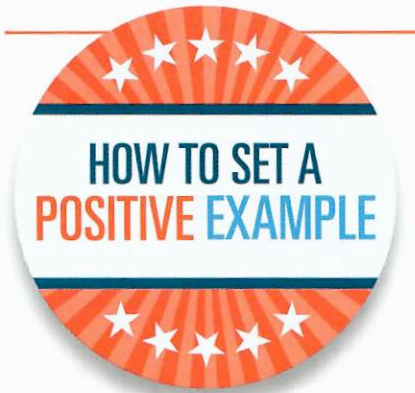
"The human mind is programmed to make a lot of sense of its reality. Once it kind of anchors in a particular frame of reality, any new information that would test that frame is filtered out or discounted or defended against," Pollack says. "The mind only wants to take on information that confirms its belief. Anything that challenges the idea of the reality we have basically feels like it's challenging our survival."

It's a phenomenon that some media outlets, as well as political pundits and politicians, embrace to grow and retain their audience. By establishing an "us versus them" platform, they provide a like-minded community that validates their audience's anger and disgust toward the other side.

"Politics used to be kind of fear-driven. It's undergone this shift and now it's anger-driven," Nawalanic says. "People feel like they're on the debate stage in these discussions, and their own candidacy stands in the balance. But the reality is that you're not going to change their mind. The

If you need to be right no matter what, it's going to be very hard for you to get along with people who don't agree with you.

best idea is to agree to disagree and salvage and value your relationships.”



Although you can't change another person's opinion, you can make a difference toward altering the tone of political discourse. By listening, even if it's uncomfortable, you show respect and kindness.

“There is a fundamental need for people to feel that they matter. Everybody's perspective matters. Even if they don't agree with you, you've got to remember that person is a human being,” says Pollack. “If we forget that, it's very easy to dehumanize and to get into conflict.”

Your willingness and ability to thoughtfully listen and calmly discuss an issue might set a positive example for others about how to conduct their conversations. (Note: It's appropriate to take a break or move on if you find yourself growing angry.)

The future is grim if we continue to silo ourselves into echo chambers and refuse to reach across divides to work to understand one another.

“We'll lose the American way. We'll lose the fact that our country is made great by its diversity,” Safer says. “We'll lose who we are.”

DO POLITICS MAKE YOU ANGRY?

Here's what that's doing to your body.

Anger triggers a fight or flight response that floods the body with stress hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline. Your heart rate and blood pressure increase, and you experience a surge of blood sugar.

When you're in an argument, this stress response reduces your ability to discuss a situation rationally. It also reduces your short-term memory. (That's why when you later reflect on the disagreement, you think of all the things you wish you had said!)

“When the argument gets heated, you eventually find yourself almost sounding like a caveman,” psychologist Gregory Nawalanic, PsyD, of the University of Kansas Health System in Kansas City, says. “If you're watching two people debate and one person gets really angry and starts yelling, they've essentially lost because the calm person is going to be able to have a rational response.”

In addition to hurting your relationships, walking through life in an angry, chronic state of stress increases your risk of health issues, including heart attack, stroke, autoimmune disease, headaches, and mental health conditions.

If you feel anger rising in your spirit and your body, try these suggestions:

- ★ **Take a deep breath**—literally. Inhale, hold your breath for four to five counts, and slowly exhale. Repeat as needed.
- ★ **Exercise daily** to help discharge stress hormones.
- ★ **Set aside five to 10 minutes of quiet time** each morning and evening.
- ★ **Establish daily intentions**, such as “I will be kind,” “I will listen before I speak,” or “I will not raise my voice.”
- ★ **At the end of the day, reflect** on what happened and how you responded (acknowledge mistakes without obsessing over them).

- ★ **Avoid alcohol.** Alcohol can loosen your inhibitions and make self-control harder. “It's hard enough to be rational about politics when you're totally sober,” says Jeanne Safer, PhD, author of *I Love You, but I Hate Your Politics*.
- ★ **Take breaks from the news**, especially anger-filled political commentary.

If you frequently struggle with anger, depression, anxiety, or feelings of hopelessness, talk to your physician or a mental health provider. ❖

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