



One on One Discussion Guide

Engaging Differences in our Communities

In today's world, we are highly connected by social media and technology, and yet, we feel more disconnected than ever. Our politics are polarized, our media is partisan. Too often, families are divided and friendships strained. Americans from across the country and political spectrum are alarmed by the bitter divisions in our country. Just when we think our politics can't get worse, we find a new bottom.

The [National Institute for Civil Discourse](#) (NICD) believes the American people will be our saving grace. We are less divided than we seem and hungry for constructive ways to connect with each other. We want to rekindle Americans' conviction that engaging our differences is essential to fulfilling the promise of our nation. Doing so will require Americans to begin listening and engaging with one another again.

NICD, a 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 short discussion guide to support a conversation between two people who have different political perspectives and who are interested in respectfully engaging these differences.

This guide offers tips to:

- Learn to listen and build relationships--especially with people of different views;
- See each other as a people first and foremost before any of the political thinking enters the conversation;
- Talk about what steps we can take to build community and engage differences locally.

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 conversation - only through person to person, and community to community efforts – can we constructively engage our differences.

How to Get Started

1. Invite a co-worker, neighbor, or family member with a different political perspective to meet over coffee and talk. **[If your conversation will take place during a time of social distancing, use an alternative option such as Facetime, Skype, Zoom, etc. to hold your conversation virtually].** Let them know that you'd like to explore ideas that you might have in common, the source of divisions in our country, and explore ways we can constructively engage differences between people who hold different views.

2. Set a time that works for both of you and sit down and allow at least half an hour to talk. Some people may find they need closer to an hour to have a full conversation.
3. Follow the outline for the conversation described below under Suggested Conversation Flow.
4. As you talk, make a special effort to share time equally and really listen to each other. Don't try to convince the other person of anything - simply focus on learning about them and from them.
5. At the end of the conversation, take a few minutes to reflect on what was discussed and where you may have found areas of agreement. If you discussed possible actions, take note of those.
6. Share your experience with others as it can help inspire them and spread respect. Consider sharing on social media and/or sharing the tools on [EngagingDifferences.org](https://engagingdifferences.org).

Discussion Guide

Tips to Enhance the Dialogue

The goal of the conversation is to gain a better understanding of the different viewpoints and life experiences of another person. Really listen to what they have to say. Your focus is on understanding what they're saying, not trying to change their opinion.

- Hold the conversation in a safe, neutral, and comfortable space **[or virtually if your conversation will take place during a time of social distancing]**.
- Use personal experiences to help share your viewpoint.
- Listen to understand the other person's perspective, not to respond to what they say.
- Pay attention to the feelings that are behind their words.
- Ask questions for clarification or further learning.
- Acknowledge what you have heard by summarizing or repeating back some of what the other person said.
- Avoid nonverbal cues or comments that shows disinterest or discounts another's beliefs and experiences.

Suggested Conversation Flow

- Getting to know each other
- Discussion Question #1
- Discussion Question #2
- Discussion Question #3
- Closing thoughts

Use this guide to get you started, but feel free to adapt it to get the most out of your conversation.

Getting to know each other (5-10 minutes)

Start by spending time getting to know the person in front of you as individuals who have rich lives and varied experiences. Please remember to share time equally.

- Tell me a little about your family - do you have children, siblings?
- Tell me a little about your work - what do you like most about it?
- How long have you lived in the community and what are some of the ways you are involved?
- 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”?

Discussing the three key questions (20-30 minutes)

After you have spent some time getting to know each other, turn to the three questions and take turns sharing your views on each one. After you each comment briefly you may want to ask some of the follow up questions to learn more.

1. What are you most thankful for about living in America?

Begin by sharing some of your views about our country and what you appreciate most about it. This starts the conversation on a positive note and opens up the possibility of discovering common ground. Some follow up questions you may want to ask are:

- What are you most proud of in our nation's history?
- What are some things you take for granted as an American that you wouldn't have in most other countries?
- Have your views of what you like about America changed through the years or remained the same?

2. How do you feel about the deep divisions we see in our country?

Move the conversation to explore more about your community - choose a few of these questions to discuss our divisions and differences. 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?
- In what ways do we stereotype each other? Do you ever feel stereotyped by those you disagree with on issues?

3. Why should we engage our differences and how can we find more constructive ways to work together?

Move the conversation to a discussion about the difficulty associated with talking with someone who has a different perspective, and what we can do to overcome this awkwardness.

- It can be difficult to talk about something we care deeply about with someone with a different point of view. Why is that?
- Despite our discomfort, why is it important to engage across our differences?
- How, in your life, has engaging with someone who thinks differently than you, been helpful?
- What people or organizations do you think could be involved in ongoing efforts to build community and engage differences locally?

Closing Thoughts (5-10 minutes)

Close the conversation by taking a couple of minutes to reflect briefly together:

- In one sentence, what was most meaningful or valuable to you in this conversation?
- Is there a next step you'd like to take based on the conversation you just had? Should we have another conversation together? Would you invite another person to have a one-to-one conversation? Would you encourage this to be done within a group you know (e.g. civic, faith based, school, at work)?

Once the discussion ends, please share it with others in your community:

- ✓ Be creative - snap a selfie from your phone, tag it with #EngagingDifferences and post it on social media.
- ✓ Visit the engagingdifferences.org website and use our video tool to create your own short message about why **you** believe it is important to engage across our differences
- ✓ Share the engagingdifferences.org website with 5 other people.