

How to Discuss Frightening Topics

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Sometimes having an honest, informed conversation about a frightening event or topic can make it seem a bit less worrying. If you end up in a situation where you need to discuss a scary subject, it's important that you proceed tactfully and sensitively. It's best to tailor your conversation to the other person's age and maturity, especially if you are talking with a child. Find a quiet place to talk where you will not be interrupted and let the conversation flow naturally. Actively listen while also providing as much information as you can.

Method 1

Method 1 of 3: Initiating the Conversation



1 Practice the conversation in advance. Stand in front of a mirror and talk through how the conversation might go. Or, ask a trusted friend or family member to act as a surrogate conversation partner. You could even lay out your main talking points in your head. The key is to have some idea of what you want to say.^[1]

- For example, you might decide that there are 3 main points that you'd like to cover.
- If your friend suffered a traumatic car accident and now refuses to drive, you might start the conversation by saying, "I've noticed you've been avoiding driving lately, would you like to talk about it?"
- Write out any questions you would like to ask ahead of time. Consider asking some of the questions over email or through a letter if it makes it easier for you. This also gives the other person time to answer without some of the difficult emotions that may appear if asked in person.



2 Stay calm and in control of your emotions. If you discuss the topic in a highly emotional way, then the other person may pay more attention to your feelings than to the actual conversation. A child, especially, may be scared by your responses and choose to stop talking. If you are feeling anxious before the conversation, take a number of deep breaths and count backward from 100.^[2]

- This doesn't mean that you have to be emotionless. It's okay to acknowledge if you are worried or sad, just don't let your emotions drive the entire conversation.
- For example, you might say, "This event really worries me and I think we need to talk about it."
- If you've experienced a home robbery, for example, and need to discuss this with your children, try to keep your voice level and controlled. It's fine to acknowledge that you are scared, too. But, panicking mid-conversation will only convince them to panic as well.



- 3 Choose a quiet moment to talk.** If you are talking with a family member, maybe pull them aside after dinner. If you are going to talk in public, pick a spot that is tranquil and conducive to conversation, such as a coffee shop. Being interrupted or unable to hear one another only makes it more difficult to discuss a frightening or scary topic.^[3]
- This also means that you'll be able to give all of your attention to the conversation at hand.
 - If you are discussing a recent school shooting with your children, talking with them after dinner might be a good option. You might also ask them to put away their phones so that they can focus on the conversation.



4 Start multiple short conversations. If you are dealing with a child especially, it's best to have realistic expectations regarding how long they'll actually want to talk. It's almost always better to break up your overall discussion into multiple brief sessions. This allows the person to absorb what you've discussed and think on it a bit.

- For example, in your first conversation, your goal might simply be to assess their general feelings about a frightening topic. Then, in subsequent talks, aim to provide detailed, factual information about the subject. Give them plenty of time to ask questions, too.
- If you are talking with someone who is worried about a potential terrorist attack, the first conversation might focus on getting them to explain exactly what type of attack or scenario that they are afraid of. The next time you talk it might be helpful to provide some statistics or general information on how to best survive an attack.

Method 2 of 3: Talking About the Issue or Event



1 Ask them about what they know. If the frightening topic is something on the news or a rumor, this is a great way to get the other person talking about what information they actually have. It will also give you an idea of what exactly concerns them about this information. Simply say, "What do you know about this?" Or, "What have you heard?"^[4]

- For example, if your child is frightened about a recent school shooting, letting them lay out both the rumors and facts floating around can help you to narrow down the discussion.



2 Intermix open-ended follow-up questions. Once the person starts talking, it's important to both listen and respond. Ask them questions that start with why, how, or what. If you can, use these questions as a way for them to explain how they might take action and some control over the situation.^[5]

- For example, if you are discussing a violent event, you might ask, "Why do you think that happened?" You could follow this up with the question, "How can we prevent this from happening again?"



3 Don't be afraid to say "I don't know." It's very tempting to act like you have all the answers, especially if you are a parent, but sometimes it's best to show your limits, too. If you're not sure of your answer, say so. If you are just guessing or stating what you think might be the case, it's fine to tell the other person that.^[6]

- For example, if you are asked, "Why do people do bad things?" You could start by saying, "I don't know," and then expand on your thoughts.



4 Offer continual reassurance. Tell the person that you are speaking with that you will keep the conversation private and that they are safe talking with you. Emphasize that they are safe and that no one will harm the people that they love. Let them know that they can always come to you with questions or just to talk.^[7]

- Providing concrete examples of safety measure in place can reinforce your message of safety. For example, if you are discussing school safety with a child, you might emphasize the importance of security guards and safety drills.

5 Suggest ways to help others impacted by a traumatic incident. Sometimes it helps to take action when you are feeling frightened or scared. Brainstorm ways to help, such as raising money for victims. Think about if more awareness or education would help and consider creating programs to fill these needs.^[8]

- For example, if you are talking with someone who survived an abusive relationship, then they might be interested in helping with a supplies drive for a local shelter.
- Remember that the size of the gesture doesn't matter, it is more about not continually feeling afraid or like a victim.



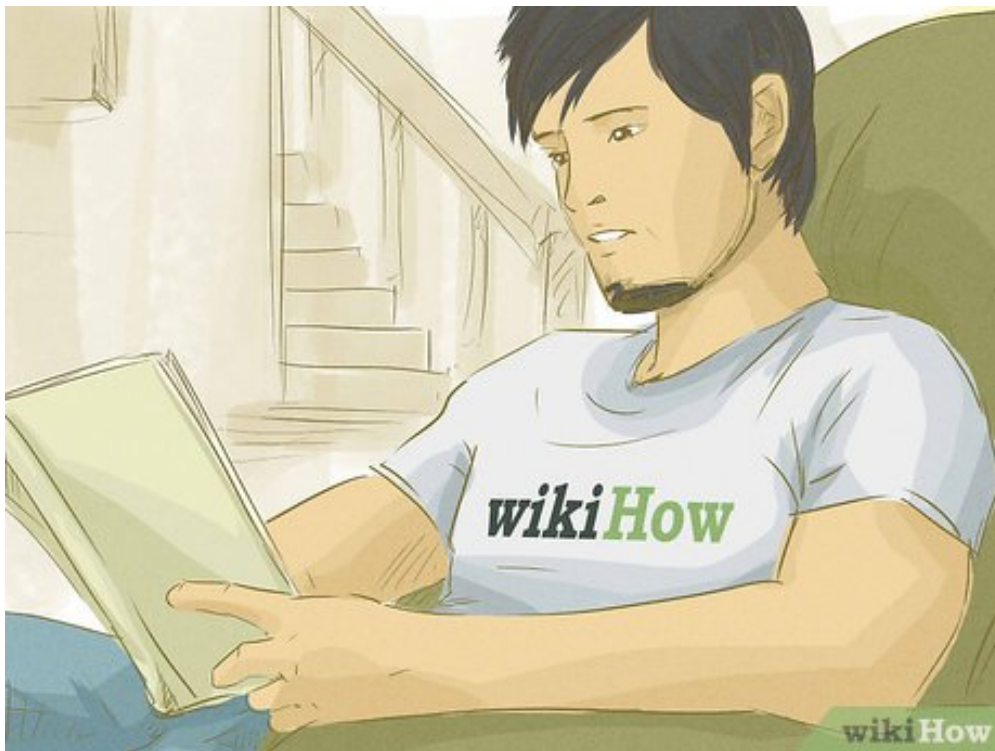
6 Discuss how to memorialize the injured or deceased. If you are talking with a child, this might mean something as simple as framing photographs. You could also plant a tree or create a public mural in memoriam. If the event was large-scale, raising funds for a plaque could be a good way to preserve the memories and teach others at the same time.^[9]

- For example, if you are talking with a child about the death of someone close to them, making a small monetary donation to a charity might be an option.

Method 3 of 3: Approaching the Topic in an Appropriate Way



- 1 Tailor your answers to the audience.** If you are talking with a child, keep your conversation appropriate for their age and maturity level. With a child or adult, consider any prior traumas that they might have undergone which could impact how the conversation should go. When in doubt, it's generally best to focus on listening and provide only minimal information.^[10]
 - For example, if a child is younger than 5, you might opt to shield them entirely from disturbing conversations. Instead of discussing the details of a terrorist attack, you might focus the conversation on the importance of good deeds and choices versus bad ones.



2 Read a book together introducing the topic if you're dealing with younger children. There are a number of books available covering everything from general fears to specific frightening events. Choose a book that fits the age of the child and the general scary subject matter. Read the book together and talk over the contents as you go along.^[11]

- For example, there are books that discuss deaths in the family and how they can make a child feel. There are even storybooks that explore what fear is and how it can affect you.
- A toddler, for example, might benefit from a book discussing how a visit to the dentist is a good thing and doesn't have to be scary.



3 Get help from a mental health professional. If you are uncomfortable discussing certain topics, then you may need to bring in a therapist or counselor to assist. You can find a therapist in your area by checking with the American Psychological Association or asking your primary care physician.^[12] Then, you can decide whether you'd like to sit in on the sessions or give them privacy.

- It's especially important to seek out professional help if you are worried the other person is suffering from trauma due to a particularly frightening incident or if they might self-harm.



Tips

- Try to listen as much, or more, than you speak. You can show that you are actively listening by nodding your head, making sounds of agreement, and asking good questions.



Warnings

- If you are worried that someone is depressed or even suicidal, reach out to mental health professionals for assistance and advice.

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This article was co-authored by **Paul Chernyak, LPC**. Paul Chernyak is a Licensed Professional Counselor in Chicago. He graduated from the American School of Professional Psychology in 2011. This article has been viewed 3,861 times.

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