

## Facilitating Safe Spaces – Quick Guide

The following is adapted from “Creating Safe Spaces for Courageous Conversations” by Stacey Holloway, 2021.

### Safe Spaces as Brave Spaces

A safe space is an environment where participants feel comfortable enough to honestly struggle with challenging issues; to have an opinion without fear of attack or ridicule. When a participant feels safe, they can be brave and grow from a place of discomfort.

**Give the participants an easy ‘out’.** If a participant finds the discussion traumatic or challenging, they may wish to protect themselves by leaving the discussion. There is no need to draw more attention than necessary to their exit. At the beginning of the session, state something like: **“We are all adults here so if anyone needs to grab a drink, take a bio break, answer the phone, or respond to family, please do so.”**

**Tell participants that everyone is learning and will make mistakes.** Everyone should be open to conversation and feedback. It is a chance to learn, to recognize and admit gaps in knowledge.

**Be vulnerable by modelling vulnerability.** You can share a personal story that emphasizes personal growth. You are not there as an expert but to share and learn with the group.

**Validate emotions.** Some participants, especially those who have experienced complex trauma, will react emotionally to the topics. Acknowledge their perspective but do not diminish the power of their story by trying to relate or identify with it.

### A Dialogue Not a Debate

Every participant will enter the conversation with their own feelings, opinions, and experiences about the discussion topic. The combination makes up an individual’s unique perspective on the topic and this is unlikely to be shared by all the other participants. The discussion should feel safe enough that everyone can add their meaning to the ideas being discussed. **It is a dialogue, not a debate.**

**A debate** assumes that there is a right answer. **A dialogue** assumes that many people have a piece of the answer that, combined with others, can craft a solution.

**A debate** is combative and assumes one side is wrong. **A dialogue** collaborative and works toward a common understanding.

**A debate** is about listening to find flaws, about critiquing another’s position. **A dialogue** is about listening to understand and find meaning, about re-examining all positions.

**A dialogue** is about searching for strengths and values in other’s perspectives.

### Facilitating Difficult Moments

There may be a ‘hot moment’, a sudden eruption of tension or even conflict. When this happens, it is ineffective to do nothing, sidetrack the conversation, appease the participants, terminate the discussion, or become defensive.

If tensions arise:

**Actively engage in the dialogue.** Do not allow significant statements or interactions to pass unacknowledged but do not cut off the dialogue. Be mindful of de-escalating the conversation but not silencing it.

**Use open-ended questions.** to help participants express emotionally charged thoughts and feelings in their own words by asking questions that start with ‘what’, ‘why’, and ‘how’.

**Try to depersonalize comments.** Move away from the person(s) and towards the topic. Instead of “X said this and Y said that” say “this disagreement is about topic X” or “this is about the use of phrase Y in this context”.

**Ask for additional points of view.** Other perspectives can move the discussion away from a particular person to the ideas or perspectives they are raising (“How else might one think about this question/comment?”).

**Help speakers find shared common ground.** This might involve a common value (“You both care passionately about achieving result X but have divergent ideas about how to get there”) or ask other participants to help (“What do these perspectives have in common?”).

**Seek to clarify comments that cause tension.** Sometimes people inadvertently say something insulting or marginalizing when they are struggling to understand a new perspective or are feeling intellectually uncomfortable. Give the person a chance to explain their thought process (“What did you mean by X?” “Would you like to saying that differently?” “Should we talk about why that initial phrasing is problematic?”).

### Helpful Phrases for Defusing Intense Emotion

<b>Acknowledge</b>	“This has been extremely stressful”
<b>Respect</b>	“So you believe _____ and I agree”
<b>Encourage</b>	“I would like to hear more...”
<b>Clarify intent</b>	“My intention is to understand...” “I’m hoping that we....”
<b>State assumption</b>	“My assumption is...”
<b>Validation</b>	“You have a right to feel hurt and disappointed”
<b>Open-ended question</b>	“What...?” “How...?”
<b>Empathetic</b>	“So you feel ... about ...”
<b>Summarize</b>	“What I’ve heard so far is...”
<b>Reframe</b>	“So you value...” “It is important to you that...”
<b>Agree in principle</b>	“I agree, it is important to me as well, that we are...”
<b>Apologize sincerely</b>	“I apologize for...”

There is a time when you may need to shut down a conversation. Someone might express an opinion that is clearly not in line, that is overtly (or even intentionally) racist, sexist, ableist, or that attacks someone personally. Take a deep breath, acknowledge it, address the inappropriateness in a polite but firm tone, and move on.