



When the going gets tough, **KEEP TALKING**

with Theresa Beran Kulat

In families, there always is *something* going on – might be something big like a wedding, might be something small like a head cold, might be something bad like cancer, or something good like a high school graduation.

Personally, I observe that people easily talk about the good stuff, the small stuff and the big stuff. But how do we talk about the bad stuff? Often we just avoid it. In the book, *Difficult Conversations* by Stone, Patton and Heen, the authors describe the discomfort that people feel when needing to address a difficult topic and lay out a methodology for having those difficult conversations.

The first step is to recognize that three different conversations occur at the same time – The “*What Happened?*” Conversation, The *Feelings Conversation* and The *Identity Conversation*. Let’s apply this to an example ... You observe a friend’s spouse having a romantic encounter with a person who is not your friend (think Vince Vaughn’s character in *The Dilemma*). You then speak directly to the spouse who admits the affair, describes all the ways that your friend has failed in the marriage and threatens to implicate you if you share this with your friend. Talk about a difficult situation!

As a rock star friend, you take this on.

After confronting all of your own doubts, concerns and fears, you choose to tell your friend in a helpful, compassionate way. Using the *Difficult Conversations* methodology, you first ask your friend if she is willing to participate in a conversation that may upset the status quo. You begin by telling your friend what happened – from your perspective. You saw Spouse with Hottie. You confronted Spouse who felt justified because Friend had an affair last year. (That is a new fact. Friend thought Spouse didn’t know about the affair.) You admit that you introduced Spouse to Hottie. Naturally, you start with what happened – trying to avoid judgement and moral assessment. Now you need to listen.

Friend may bounce between various aspects of The “*What Happened?*” Conversation – Where did you see this romantic encounter? How steamy was it? The friend may share reason she had an affair last year. Eventually, maybe with your guidance, Friend may see that under the nitty-gritty details, she has feelings. Does she feel angry? Guilty? Ashamed? The *Feelings Conversation* is just as valid, and even more important, than the factual conversation. You can share your feelings, too.

Most importantly, woven into both of these, you will catch glimpses of The *Identity Conversation*. Remind your friend that even though each person made mistakes, deep down, they are good people. Difficult conversations threaten our identity—the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. Support your friend in honest reflection on everyone involved. Objective, compassionate listening is very important during *The Identity Conversation*. The deepest identity issues reduce to three common identity concerns: Am I competent? Am I a good person? Am I lovable?

Don’t we all struggle with these questions at one time or another? Accept it, and know that the other person has these same questions. Stay open to authentic communication and watch as solutions arise and unfold.



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