



A guide to hard conversations

About vaccines or any other topic that can be difficult to navigate with people that have different views.

Key Reminder

Changing someone's mind isn't about winning an argument. It's about being a trustworthy, curious, and kind human being. Facts matter, but facts alone rarely change minds, and pushing someone too hard, or being mean, can backfire.

- Your anger, if you have any, is best aimed at bad actors spreading misinformation for profit — not at the confused, worried person in front of you.
 - You don't have to agree with someone to treat them with respect, or to help them feel heard. This doesn't mean you're condoning bad behavior.
 - It's okay to opt out if you don't have the bandwidth.
 - Your goal can be to become the person they're willing to keep talking to. Real change usually happens over time and multiple conversations, not in one exchange.
 - You're targeting the hesitant middle, not the rare people who may be combative and completely unwilling to engage.
 - Mentioning a false claim, even if you go on to debunk it, can lower confidence. Wait to hear what concerns they already have before bringing any up.
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Understand where someone may be coming from

Hesitancy or disagreement almost always traces back to one (or more) of these roots. Listening for which one is in play can help you have a better conversation.

Root	What it looks like	Example of what they might say
Distorted risk perception	A skewed sense of the risks vs. benefits. May believe the	"Flu is just a cold, I don't need to risk vaccination for that."

Root	What it looks like	Example of what they might say
	danger being prevented is less serious than the intervention itself	
Distrust	Lack of trust in the source — scientists, doctors, companies, or politicians etc...	<i>"The vaccine was rushed out without proper testing."</i>
Worldview and politics	Beliefs about how society and personal choice should work, more than the specific facts at hand	<i>"That should be determined by a doctor, not a politician."</i>

Source: Anderson, E. C., Holford, D., Gould, G., Lewandowsky, S., Karlsson, L., Taubert, F., & Verger, P. (2025). The Empathetic Refutational Interview – User Guide. JITSUVAX Project. <https://jitsuvax.info>

These roots are rarely resolved by just more information. Trust and relationship building is needed first.

Motivational Interviewing

We tend to assume persuasion and facts are what change minds. In practice, what actually moves people is connecting to their own values and accepting that ambivalence is normal. Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a well-studied, patient-centered communication style for helping someone find their own motivation to change and can be applied to many difficult conversations you may have, even if you're not a clinician.

Five Core Principles:

1. **Partnership:** You're working together.
2. **Acceptance:** Their autonomy and perspective are respected as starting points
3. **Compassion:** Their best interest guides the conversation
4. **Evocation:** Draw out their reasons and motivation, don't assume or supply your own.
5. **Empathy:** Understand their experience before responding to it

Skill	Why it matters	Example language
Open-ended questions	Curiosity! Helps you explore and understand the other person's stance.	<i>"Can you tell me about your concerns?" / "What potential benefits do you see here?"</i>
Reflections & affirmations	Improves engagement by helping the person feel supported, appreciated, and understood.	<i>"It sounds like you're worried about side effects." / "You clearly care a lot about this."</i>
Ask permission to share	Encourages partnership, deepens rapport, and helps the person understand their own motivations more deeply.	<i>"Would you mind if I shared why I care about this?"</i>
Autonomy support	Enhances the person's sense of control and puts them at ease.	<i>"Ultimately, this is a decision only you can make."</i>

Putting it into practice

1. **Open with empathy, not evidence.** Acknowledge what the person cares about before you share a single fact. Almost everyone hesitant about a decision is trying to protect someone they love.
 - a. "I know you're trying to make the safest choice for your family."
 - b. Leading with facts or corrections tends to trigger defensiveness, not openness.
2. **Be curious:** Ask, then really listen. Use the open-ended questions and reflections before responding to a concern. It is more important to understand why someone feels the way they do than being ready with a rebuttal.
 - a. "Can you tell me what you're worrying about? What have you heard?"

3. **Ask permission before you share information.** If they say no, honor that and try again next time.
 4. **Affirm identity and values.** People are more open when they feel seen, not judged.
 - a. "I can see you're a parent who really cares and wants to make the best decision they can. That's why I wanted to share this."
 5. **Use stories, not stat dumps.** A wall of statistics and jargon won't help. Studies show "data dumps" and fear-based images can actually backfire. One real, human, concrete story (that is grounded in evidence) can lend better than stats.
 6. **Close by respecting autonomy.** Remind them — and yourself — that this is their decision and leave the door open for them to come back to you with more questions.
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Things to avoid

Trap	Why it fails
Debating	Shifts focus from relationship to "winning," triggers identity-protection
Data Dump	Overwhelms rather than persuades; facts are necessary but rarely sufficient
Fear Appeal	Studies show scary images/statistics often <i>increase</i> resistance, especially among the most skeptical
Lecture	Removes the other person's sense of choice and autonomy. Makes people feel judged.
Anger/Shame	Divides further and pushes people toward those who <i>do</i> validate them

Additional Resources

- [Science Conversation Guides](#). Center for Unbiased Science and Health.
 - [Navigating Vaccine Conversations](#). Your Local Epidemiologist.
 - [Communicating with Families and Promoting Vaccine Confidence from the AAP](#)
 - [Vaccine Education Center at CHOP](#)
 - Sean T. O’Leary, Douglas J. Opel, Jessica R. Cataldi, Jesse M. Hackell, et al. [Strategies for Improving Vaccine Communication and Uptake](#). Pediatrics March 2024; 153 (3): e2023065483. 10.1542/peds.2023-065483
 - Anderson, E. C., Holford, D., Gould, G., Lewandowsky, S., Karlsson, L., Taubert, F., & Verger, P. (2025). The Empathetic Refutational Interview – User Guide. [JITSUVAX Project](#).
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The Evidence Collective

[The Evidence Collective](#) is a group of trusted health communicators who unite to deliver clear, evidence-based information directly on social platforms and other communities, meeting people where they are with empathy and speed. The collective includes 30+ subject matter specialists spanning infectious disease, chronic illness, nutrition, health policy, and more, with a combined reach of 150+ million monthly across trusted media and digital platforms and 10+ million combined social followers across their expert network. When health topics become complicated, this multidisciplinary team collaborates across disciplines and platforms to help the public understand the full picture, enabling them to spot falsehoods early and respond quickly to emerging health issues. Their vision is to empower the general public with timely, evidence-based information so they can lead healthy lives and thrive by translating science into plain language and addressing public concerns and confusion.

Contributors for this report include (in alphabetical order): David Higgins, MD, MPH; Elisabeth Marnik, PhD

Questions? Contact: liz@yle.health