

## Tips For Conflict Resolution - How to Approach Difficult Conversations Wisely

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Conflict is a natural part of human relationships, spanning personal, professional, and other social spheres. Imagine the strain of a family dinner turned tense over differing sociopolitical views or the challenge of navigating disagreements in the workplace. Often, the instinct is to sidestep these conversations to avoid potential negativity. We would, however, miss out on valuable opportunities to deepen our understanding and work together to solve problems if we avoided these discussions. Being able to navigate conflict effectively is key. But how can we transform these challenging conversations into constructive dialogue? The answer, in part, lies in a set of mental strategies known as wise reasoning.



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### KEYWORDS

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### What is wise reasoning?

Wise reasoning is a dynamic thinking process deeply rooted in ancient philosophies of wisdom, such as Aristotle's phronesis, the contemplation of change in the I Ching, and the insights in the Book of Solomon. It is a blend of five elements encapsulated in the HOPES acronym (Yang et al., 2024):

*Humility (recognizing one's limitations in knowledge);*

*Observer's viewpoint (looking at the bigger picture of the situation);*

*Perspective taking (trying to understand situations from multiple perspectives);*

*Evolving situations (accommodating for uncertainty and change in situations); and*

*Search for compromise (integrating different interests in the resolution).*

These components holistically facilitate conflict resolution. They encourage individuals to use adaptive approaches and behaviors in the context of the conflict to seek pragmatic and balanced solutions.

### What are the benefits of wise reasoning?

As research shows, when people engage in stronger wise reasoning when reflecting on a conflict situation, they tend to cooperate more (e.g., Brienza et al., 2018), show less polarized feelings toward outgroup (vs. ingroup) members (e.g., Brienza, et al., 2023), and gain respect from someone who holds a different ideology (e.g., Puryear & Gray, 2024). In our ongoing research, we also found that wise reasoning is associated with higher satisfaction in difficult conversations (Yang et al., unpublished). In a lab study, when we asked participants to interact with a partner who disagreed with their views on a sociopolitical issue, those who engaged in more wise reasoning also felt more satisfied with the interaction in the conversation and were more willing to interact with their partner again in the future. Overall, wise reasoning helps build more collaborative and harmonious relationships across differences.

## How can one improve wise reasoning?

Importantly, wise reasoning is not a fixed trait; we can all become wiser in a specific situation with different approaches.

*Linguistic approach.* When thinking about a personally relevant conflict, one's immediate thought might be: "What should I do?" This self-focused perspective may lead to biased perspectives in conflict resolution. In contrast to using first-person pronouns ("I/me"), using third-person pronouns (i.e., imagining yourself as an outsider and thinking about what "he/she/they" should do) can help "take ego out of the equation" and thus provide a more objective view of the situation, leading to stronger wise reasoning (e.g., Grossmann et al., 2021; Grossmann & Kross, 2014).

*Temporal approach.* Another approach to improving wise reasoning is to shift focus from the present to the future. When people reflect on a personally relevant conflict from a future-oriented temporal perspective (e.g., "What would I do 30 years from now?"), they engage in more wise reasoning (Zhang et al., 2023). As a consequence of this more adaptive reasoning process, people with a future-oriented temporal perspective also experience more positive emotions about their relationship(s) in the conflict and expect the(se) relationship(s) to grow (Huynh et al., 2016).

The next time you find yourself facing a conflict, take a moment to reflect on the principles of wise reasoning (*Humility, Observer's viewpoint, Perspective taking, Evolving situations, and Search for compromise*). Embrace the opportunity to turn a challenging conversation into a constructive and growth-oriented dialogue.

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