



Having Difficult Conversations

Learning Objectives

- ▣ To understand and practice a core component of our work
- ▣ Identify our discomfort in conversations
- ▣ Become more comfortable with tools for having difficult conversations

Training Agreement/FYIs

- ▣ There is intense content in this training. We do intense work! Please take care of yourself as you need.

Pathways Vermont transforms the lives of people experiencing mental health and other life challenges by supporting **self directed roads to recovery** and wellness in an atmosphere of dignity, respect, choice and hope.

We advocate for the rights of people to **live without stigma and discrimination** and promote civil rights, community integration, health care, affordable housing and employment for all.



Adversity is the first path to truth.
- Lord Byron

*If the road is easy, you're likely going
the wrong way.*
- Terry Goodkind

What is our job?

- ☐ ~~To be someone's friend~~
- ☐ ~~To be someone's family~~
- ☐ ~~To make people feel better~~
- ☐ ~~To find solutions to people's problems~~
- ☐ ~~To be a witness to someone's struggles~~
- ☐ ~~To console someone~~
- ☐ ~~To advocate on behalf of someone~~
- ☐ **To have difficult conversations**

What is a difficult conversation?

- ❑ An authentic dialogue that explores a topic that is challenging to discuss
- ❑ A framework to explore deeper struggles than what is immediately obvious
- ❑ A mutual conversation that may include vulnerabilities, pain, differing worldviews, assumptions, etc.
- ❑ An opportunity for change, hope, growth, transformation, possibilities...

A Note On Empathy



It's hard for me to talk
about....

- ▣ Self-harm
- ▣ Sexual behaviors
- ▣ Harm to others
- ▣ Cutting
- ▣ Body-odor
- ▣ Family relationships
- ▣ Wanting to die
- ▣ Criminal record
- ▣ Domestic violence

Write a list of at least
3 topics that are
difficult for you to
discuss (especially
with people you are
supporting through
your role)

Barriers to having difficult conversations

- ❑ Lack of relationship
- ❑ Worry about someone's feelings
- ❑ Worry about someone's reactions
- ❑ Our biases/judgments around what someone should/shouldn't be doing
- ❑ Inflated/deflated sense of power in relationships
- ❑ Discomfort of not knowing all the answers

Authentic Response Activity

In general, are you someone who says exactly what is on your mind or do you filter your response?

Key Phrases...

Initial Reaction:

- ▣ Wow
- ▣ Oh my goodness
- ▣ I'm really scared
- ▣ I'm feeling nervous
- ▣ I don't know what to say

Next Sentence:

- ▣ but I want to be here
- ▣ I'm sorry
- ▣ That's intense
- ▣ Can I sit with you



Suicidal Phone Call





Angry At Staff Phone Call





Homicidal Phone Call



Partner Activity

Spend a minute brainstorming a scenario you'd like to practice with the group.

Signs you may be avoiding a difficult conversation

- ❑ You walk into situations with a sure notion of the outcome
- ❑ You can't get past the “surface” (talking about the weather, etc.)
- ❑ You're looking to “debrief” interactions with someone else
- ❑ It's been awhile since you've learned something new

Tools for having a difficult conversation

- ▣ **Curiosity** (I'm not sure what you mean... Can you tell me more about that? What does that word mean to you? What kind of response are you looking for from me?)
- ▣ **Asking Permission** (Would it be okay with you if I share a little bit about my experience? I find myself having a strong reaction, would you mind if we talked about that?)
- ▣ **Owning your own part**
- ▣ **Opportunity for re-connection**
- ▣ **Timing**
- ▣ **Take risks!**
- ▣ **Feelings > Facts**
- ▣ **Say what you see, feel, need**
- ▣ **Listening for the Untold Story**
- ▣ **Hope!!**

Practice

1. You recently had a negative interaction with a participant. At the end of the last visit she said, “I never want to work with you again.”
2. A participant you’ve been working with has recently lost their housing. They were asked to leave due to non payment of rent and having their boyfriend move into their apartment without the landlord’s consent. They are now staying at a local shelter and looking for support in finding another apartment.
3. You’re having a conversation with a participant when they suddenly stop talking abruptly and tell you that there are snakes slithering up and down the walls. You don’t see any snakes.
4. A participant you are working with expresses interest in applying for a job in the food service industry. You have observed this participant to have poor personal hygiene and often observe community members responding negatively to her disheveled appearance.
5. You get a call from a landlord who has recently housed one of your participants. He is very upset about how the tenancy is going and demands you fix it.

Discussion

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