



Braver Angels

FAMILIES AND POLITICS HOW TO TALK WITH LOVED ONES ON THE OTHER SIDE

Goals of the workshop

1. A deeper understanding of why family differences over politics are uniquely challenging.
2. Insight into the common roles that family members play in political conversations.
3. Strategies and skills for dealing with family political differences in a constructive way.

Three proposed workshop ground rules

1. Confidentiality: Let's not quote what somebody says here about their family without their permission. You can share what you learned in general ways, but not: "Did you know that Janet's father-in-law is a neo-Nazi?" *Are we okay with this ground rule?*
2. Respect for family members who are not present: We all have difficult family members (and we are difficult for some of them!), so while we'll laugh and have some fun in this workshop,
 - Let's try to show respect when talking about our family members.
 - Although some of our stories will be entertaining, and others may make us wince, let's try to stay away from ridicule or contempt.*Are we okay with this ground rule?*
3. Respect for one another: Keep in mind that there may be people in this workshop who agree with your family members' political views, so let's try to avoid lumping everyone who holds certain views into stereotyped categories (like "one of those crazy Trump supporters," or "a typical arrogant liberal"). In other words, let's be respectful of the differences in political perspectives in this room. *Okay with this final ground rule?*

Workshop Overview

- We'll begin with the family dynamics of political differences, including roles that different family members play. (You can decide for yourself who constitutes a family member.)
- Then we'll get into strategies and skills for talking with family members who differ from you politically, particularly the ones you find most challenging.
- Along the way, you'll have a chance to reflect on your family and yourself in your family, share your reflections with others in small groups, and try out some new skills.
- Finally, the last page of your handout has tips for avoiding family drama on social media.

Part One: The Family Dynamics of Political Differences

1. **If you are family, you are part of me.** Because we identify with family members (my mom, my dad, my son or daughter, my brother or sister, my spouse), we may feel especially ashamed, disturbed, or infuriated over what they believe or say about politics. (“What? I can’t believe you think that way!”)
2. **Families have a history.** Family members have backstories that can infiltrate current political conversations. Examples of old resentments: “You’re not the boss of me,” “You’ve never taken me seriously,” “You’ve always been the favorite,” “You think you’re the smart/enlightened/holy one,” “I’ve always been on the outside in this family,” “Can I finally get some respect here?” Old coalitions can play out now: “You’re agreeing with dad to stay on his good side.”
3. **Six Roles that family members play in political conversations**
 - The Gladiator: initiates battles against wrong-headed relatives! (“I’m going to straighten you out on politics!”)
 - The Defender: counterattacks when others go first, often by misrepresenting their position (“So, you want to open the borders to everyone.” Or “You want to shut down the borders and keep the country for people who look like you.”)
 - The Sniper: gets in digs (in group settings, to get a rise) and then backs away. (“So what does our family socialist/Trump lover think about that one?”)
 - The Peacekeeper: tries to prevent or cut off all political conversation, including one to one conversations. (“Let’s stay away from politics and religion!”)
 - The Bystander: keeps mouth shut and head down (or on an iPhone).
 - The Engager: tries to have respectful conversations across differences. This workshop is for people who want to be better Engagers.

Reflection Exercise

1. Who in your family presents the biggest challenges for you in dealing with political differences, and which of the roles do they typically play?
2. What makes dealing with them particularly hard for you? (Focus on what’s challenging for you in these conversations, not on the personality of the family member.)
3. Which roles do you sometimes play when you are not being your best engager?

Part 2: Strategies for Dealing with Challenging Family Members

Strategy #1: Remind yourself that they are not you—they do not have to change for you to feel okay.

- This is about “differentiation”: You can calmly hold your own views, listen to others, and live with differences without cutting off important relationships.

Strategy #2: Remind yourself that you are now an adult who can have adult conversations without reliving the past.

- Nobody can make you regress into your old self—even if they regress.

Strategy #3: Because family patterns are usually consistent and predictable, you can prepare and practice how to respond differently.

- This is not your first rodeo with your family.
- You can regulate, or manage, your current emotions in the presence of family emotional tides from the past.

Here’s the Prime Directive: Do not try to change a family member. You can only change yourself.

Reflection Exercise: How might these three strategies and the prime directive be helpful to you in dealing with challenging family members?

- They don’t have to change for you to feel okay.
- Be in the present, not the past.
- Prepare for the next difficult situation.
- Don’t try to change a family member.

Part 3: How to be an Engager in Family Conversations about Politics

1. Protecting Your Boundaries with a Gladiator

- Don’t let yourself get baited into a political conversation that is doomed to go poorly, say, in a family group setting where people jump to take sides, or when you are not in the right frame of mind to use your strategies and skills.
 - **You get to decide** when to engage in a back and forth conversation.
- Key strategies:
 - Head it off (“Let’s not go there during dinner/at bedtime/just before I leave.”)
 - Friendly banter (“Hey, that was a good one, Uncle Joe!” and then change the subject.)
 - Serious response (“Not everyone around this table agrees with what you just said,

and now is not the time to get into it.” Optional addition: “Maybe you and I can talk later.”)

2. **Engaging the Gladiator (CAPP):** Clarify, Agree, Pivot, offer Perspective)—then Exit
Important: try your skills one to one before attempting them in a group where there is an audience for the Gladiator.

- **Clarify:** “I think your main point is....” “Are you saying...?” “I get that you’re really bothered by....”
 - Suggestion: If this is an issue someone brings up over and over, you could look for a time to ask how they came to feel strongly about it—the life experiences behind the passionate opinion. Be prepared to listen and ask follow up questions, and thank them for telling you their story.

Exercise: Take one or both of the Gladiator prompts and write down a brief clarifying response, word for word, as would you say it to the person. We will do the same after the other skills.

Red Gladiator prompt: I’m as upset as anybody about gun violence, but it’s bad people or crazy people, not guns, that are murdering people. No one should take away my right to own a gun because a small number of people are misusing their guns. We have to respect the Constitution. Liberals are being dishonest about gun control; they know that taking away people’s guns is not the answer because the bad guys will always find a way to get a weapon. Democrats are playing on the public’s ignorance and fears every time there is a mass shooting. It makes me furious.

Blue Gladiator prompt: These mass shootings have to stop. We have more guns than people in this country, and people are allowed to own weapons of war. The conservatives are completely brainwashed or controlled by the NRA and refuse to look at the simple reality that limiting access to guns reduces gun violence and suicides. Why can’t we be like other countries that limit guns to a few people who need them? I’ll tell you why: the Republicans stir up fears that the government is going to start by taking away guns, and then go after your other freedoms. It’s crazy thinking.

- **Agree:** Try to find something/anything you can agree with. (“I agree that this situation is a big mess.” “I’m with you on...” “Yes, I think that both parties have punted on this for too long.” “We agree that the media are making things worse.”)
- **Pivot:** signal that you are about to offer a different perspective. It can be helpful to make this personal, perhaps with an anecdote. (“This issue is important to me too, something I’ve lived with in my career, and I’d like to say where I’m coming from on it.” Or simply, “Can I give you my thoughts on this issue?”)
 - If the other person signals (verbally or nonverbally) that they are okay with you offering your perspective, then continue.

- o If they signal unwillingness to listen (say, by ignoring your pivot and making a speech, or rolling their eyes), then you can ask directly if they are willing to listen. You can also go back to Clarify and Agree and see if the person is now willing to listen to you.
- **Perspective:** Then give your own view with an I-statement, (“From my perspective...,”) not a universal- truth statement (“This is exactly what’s going on!”) Don’t label the other person’s position (“xenophobic,” “socialist”), or attack motives (“Your side is just trying to....”) Just calmly describe your own viewpoint and how you came to it. If you have a personal story behind your view, consider sharing it. Stories humanize issues and make passionate people come across as human beings who care.
- When the Gladiator pushes back, repeat Clarify, Agree, and Perspective: “I hear you on.... I agree with you on this part.... My own view is....”
 - o What you say next should take into account what the other person has just said. “I get that you think that I’m for open borders/against all immigration. What I’m saying is....”
 - o Don’t answer baiting questions: (Question: “Can’t you see that people on your side have been duped by the liberal/conservative media?” Your response: “What I’m saying is....”)
- **Exit:** Look for a good time to disengage. Settle for brief, more or less constructive exchanges the first few times you try out your skills.
 - o If all you are getting is lecture or attack, exit the conversation in a graceful way without criticizing the other person. (“Okay, it looks like we see this one very differently. Maybe we should leave it at that for now. I will think about what you’ve said.”)
 - o If the other person keeps going, listen politely and then disengage fully—which means not responding to the last thing they said. Don’t compete for having the last word on the topic. (“Okay, got it. Let’s move on.”) Physically exit if necessary. (“Gotta go.”)
 - o If the conversation goes better than you expected, express appreciation. (“I appreciated that we discussed this in a civil way; that doesn’t happen very often these days in our society.”)

3. Engaging the Defender

- **Clarify:** Calmly clarify your position or viewpoint. (“I am not really saying X. Let me clarify that I’m saying Y.”)

- **Acknowledge**: “It sounds like you think I’m saying that everyone who supports (this policy or politician) is ignorant or stupid. For me, it’s not about smart or stupid; it’s about where people are getting their information.”)
- **Push back**: If they just repeat their criticism, then push back. (“As I’ve said, that’s not where I’m coming from, so let’s stop arguing about something I don’t believe.”)
 - o If the Defender accepts your views as your own, stay in the conversation (if you want to), use the skills we discussed for Gladiators, and see where things go.
- **Exit**: If they keep at you, then disengage without criticizing back or defending your view. (“Okay, let’s move on.”) If you don’t disengage, you are likely to become frustrated and escalate—and that’s on you for staying too long!

4. Engaging the Sniper

The Sniper gets in quick digs about your politics or worldview (usually in front of other family members). If experience tells you that they are looking to get a rise out of you instead of engaging seriously, the basic strategy is to not take the bait and put the ball back in the Sniper’s court.

Scenario: (Uncle George at a family dinner): “What is the family redneck...socialist...Trump lover...Trump hater going to say about that?”

- **Deflect** option: “This redneck/socialist/Trump lover/Trump hater is going to keep enjoying this delicious food. Would someone pass the turkey?”
- **Question** option: “Is there a point you want to make, Uncle George?” After the Sniper’s (usually fumbling) response, say that you want to keep enjoying your meal. You will have made your point.

If you decide to talk with the Sniper about this pattern, do so privately and not in front of other family members where there is too much risk of defensiveness, side taking and a Peacekeeper intervention that will blame you for challenging “good natured” Uncle George.

5. Engaging the Peacekeeper

- **Reassure**: “I know politics can be dicey. I think we’re handling this pretty well, and I hope we can finish this part of the conversation.” Or
- **Postpone**: If the timing is bad or others seem to agree that the conversation is no longer useful, then pick up the conversation later with individual family members. But don’t accept the idea that family life should be off base for any political conversations.

6. Engaging the Bystander

- **Monitor**: Pay attention to the non-verbal signals of those not engaging in the conversation.
- **Options**: Keep going, ask for their input, or end the conversation if a lot of people have checked out.

Avoiding Family Drama in Social Media

Online communication, especially through Facebook, harms many relationships with family members and close friends in our politically polarized environment. Some of the damage comes from rants and responses to rants, and some of it comes from attacks on sources shared and on posts coming from friends of family members. Escalation happens quickly. If you want to avoid family drama, here are some options:

Never Engage on Politics: Never post or read political opinions online with family members, or with family members who hold different views. If you can't resist, here are other options:

Protective Options on Facebook

1. Block sources: If a family member mainly bothers you through their sources and friends, you can block those source or friends from showing up in your news feed. (The top right corner of any post gives you options about that person or the source.)
2. The "snooze for 30 day" feature allows you to take a break from seeing your family member's posts.
3. Unfollow someone (they won't show up on your newsfeed and they won't know it).
4. Unfriend someone (they will know it).
5. Block someone. They can no longer see that you even exist on Facebook.
6. If you've been battling with someone in the past and now want to disengage, you can do it passively (just don't respond anymore) or actively through an explanation (preferably one that does not blame the other person but says that you are doing this for your peace of mind, to preserve a good relationship, or another reason).

Advanced Options

1. Facebook lets you manually put people in lists. You can create "talk politics" or "avoid politics" lists and put people in those lists that you enjoy engaging or want to avoid engaging. When you create a Facebook status update, there is always an option to include all your friends, JUST a list, or all friends MINUS a list.
2. You can block highly assertive family members from putting themselves high on your timeline by setting a tag to have to approve efforts to go higher on your timeline.

Similar options apply to Twitter and other social media, although the change options vary. Social media platforms are continually changing, so check for current options.

Appendix A

CLARIFY

Gladiator: We're going to lose our freedoms if the liberals have their way. They are mostly socialists these days even if they won't admit it. They're all about big government running the whole country. I can't believe you can support them.

Engager: For you it looks like most Democrats are going down the path of socialism.

Gladiator: Right you are! Some of them are even admitting they're socialists.

AGREE

Engager: Yeah, some Democratic leaders are using that word. I don't agree with socialism myself. Knowing where you come from politically, I can see why you are upset.

Gladiator: Yes! There will be no stopping big government if the Democrats take over.

PIVOT

Engager: I have my own thoughts about where most liberals like me are at with socialism. Can I mention what I am thinking?

Gladiator: I guess.

Engager: For real, are you willing to listen to what I have to say on the topic?

Gladiator: Go for it, but it won't change my mind.

Engager: I'm not trying to change your mind; I just want to say what's on my mind. Is that okay?

Gladiator: Sure.

PERSPECTIVE

Engager: Let me be clear: I'm not a socialist if that means the standard definition that the government controls the economy and everyone works for the government. I think that would be a disaster, as it has been whenever true socialism has been tried in other countries. When some Democrats talk about "democratic socialism," they mean a mainly capitalist economy and a strong social safety net. That's what I want and what I think most liberals want too.

PUSHBACK

Gladiator: If that's the case, why do you want so much government regulation of the economy? It's socialism by another name.

Engager: I hear you on government regulation. I agree that there should only be just enough regulation and not too much, although we may disagree about what is necessary regulation and what is too much. Maybe we should talk about specific examples of regulation.