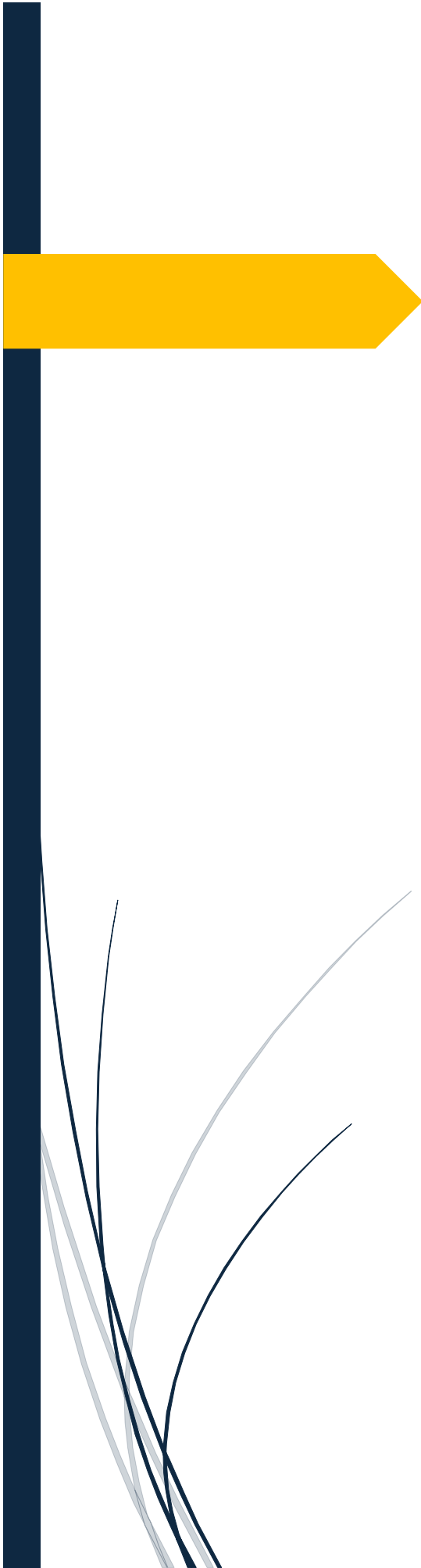




Language for Challenging Conversations

Neutral prompts for slowing
down, getting curious, and
staying connected

**Tracy Henderson
Counseling**

When Conversations Get Difficult

When conversations become emotionally charged, our communication can become more **reactive, defensive, assumptive, or absolute**. We may respond before fully understanding what happened, what the other person meant, or even what we're experiencing ourselves.

In these moments, having a few familiar phrases can help us **slow the conversation down and create space for curiosity**. Neutral statements aren't scripts or magic words. They provide a starting point when you're unsure what to say next.

Pause → Get Curious → Clarify → Understand → Respond

When You Don't Know Where to Start

Instead of immediately **assuming, interpreting, defending, correcting, or reacting**, try a neutral prompt.

The goal is not to eliminate emotion. It's to create enough space to better understand **what is happening before deciding what it means**.

Neutral Prompt Statements

Invite the Conversation

- Are you open to talking about something right now?
- Can I ask you a question?
- Is now a good time, or should we come back to this?
- Can I get your perspective on something?

Clarify What Happened

- I'm confused. Can you help me understand?
- I think I'm missing something—can you fill in the blanks for me?
- I want to understand what you meant by that.
- Can I make sure I heard that correctly?
- Tell me if I'm interpreting that the way you intended.
- I noticed a change in your tone. Did something shift for you?

Share What You're Noticing

- My instincts are telling me something feels different. Is it?
- I'm noticing I'm starting to react to this.

- Something about that landed differently than I expected.
- I'm realizing I may be making an assumption.
- I want to slow this down before I respond.

Stay Oriented Toward the Relationship

- I want to understand your perspective.
 - I believe we can figure this out.
 - I'm listening.
 - Tell me more.
 - What do you need from me right now?
 - How can I show up for you in this conversation?
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Language for Naming Your Own Experience

Sometimes the most useful statement isn't about the other person. It's simply communicating **what is happening inside you**.

- Something is happening for me right now.
- I'm noticing some _____ coming up.
- My body is telling me I'm getting activated.
- I'm sitting with this feeling for a moment.
- I'm trying to understand what I'm feeling before I respond.
- I need a couple of minutes to let this settle.
- I'm noticing an old reaction showing up.
- I'm not ready to respond yet, but I want to stay with the conversation.

Naming your experience can help separate: **What I'm Feeling → What I'm Assuming → What Actually Happened**

Watch the Story Grow

An initial feeling or thought can quickly recruit additional thoughts, memories, assumptions, and emotions.

“Feeding the Pigeons”

Imagine tossing food to one pigeon. Before long, more arrive.

Our thoughts can work similarly: **One Thought → Another Thought → More Evidence → Bigger Story → Stronger Emotion**

"I'm trying not to feed the pigeons right now."

The goal isn't to suppress the original thought or emotion. It's to notice when you're **adding more to it before you know whether the story is accurate.**

"Walking Past the Barking Dog"

Past experiences can teach us to anticipate danger. When something in the present resembles an earlier difficult experience, our mind and body may respond as though the same thing is happening again.

Sometimes the challenge is learning to notice the "barking dog" without automatically **avoiding, attacking, defending, or retreating.**

"I'm noticing an old reaction showing up. I'm trying to stay with what's happening now."

Ask: **Is this about what is happening now or is something from before influencing how I'm experiencing it?**

Find Your Language

These statements aren't meant to be memorized or used word-for-word. Some will feel natural; others won't.

Experiment → Adapt → Practice → Notice → Keep What Works

Develop a few phrases that sound like **you** and help you remain curious when conversations become difficult.

The goal isn't perfect communication.

Slow it down. Stay curious. Understand before you respond.