

Tools for communicating about violence, peace and social justice

Never before has there been such potential for violence, yet such prospects for peace and justice. Improving people's daily living conditions, and contributing to the creation of a peaceful and just world depends on our ability to understand the issues, recognise and manage our feelings, confront our prejudices, and develop new and creative solutions.



Communicating about violence, peace and social justice

People are becoming increasingly concerned about the problems of violence at all levels of society. They are concerned about issues ranging from child abuse and family violence; to injustice, discrimination, inequality and the treatment of asylum seekers; to concerns about terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and war. Communicating with others about these issues is an important part of acknowledging the problems and finding solutions.

Importance of communication

Communication is important in helping us address issues for a number of reasons.

- By talking to each other we can come to recognise and acknowledge the very real, appropriate and adaptive concerns that we have about violence and injustice. Only when these concerns become a daily reality in our minds will we be motivated to take action.
- Our usual and understandable reaction to horrific ideas is to avoid them, although we cannot afford to react in this way. Talking about our fears can enable us to understand how and why we have avoided facing them, and how we can change this response.
- Communication can also serve as an important action against direct and indirect violence. If we can find others who share our views, we can exert considerable influence through a collective effort and ensure that our representatives understand how important the issue is to us. There are many examples of the weight of public opinion directly influencing government policies (e.g. moratorium marches leading to the end of the Vietnam War; forest protests leading to a reversal in the decision to dam the Franklin River). At other times, action may have brought about government intervention (e.g. granting visas to certain asylum seekers through special dispensation), or at least put the government on notice and raised the issue as one of great importance (e.g. sorry marches, peace rallies protesting a non-UN sanctioned war in Iraq). Even individual letters from members of the community to their government representative can bring about a response, government intervention, a question being raised in the House, or even an internal inquiry into the matter.
- Communicating with others is an important way to gain support and keep your motivation and enthusiasm alive. It also prevents you from becoming disillusioned, burnt out, overwhelmed, or succumbing to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
- Maintaining discussions at any level is important in recognising our shared humanity. It is not always easy to start conversations on difficult topics. This tip sheet offers suggestions about how to talk to a range of people about these challenging and controversial subjects.



Why is it so difficult to talk about war, violence and injustice?

People often find it difficult to talk about war, violence and injustice, as they are unaware of how to bring these issues into a conversation. The difficulty often lies with the person/people you are talking to, as they may try to avoid the conversation, cut it short, or dominate the discussion. Listed below are some reasons why people find it difficult to talk about these issues.

Protecting ourselves from feeling distressed

- We tend to avoid issues that make us feel helpless or overwhelmed. We numb ourselves so that we are not affected by what we fear or block out problems that seem to go on and on without resolution. By doing this we can minimise our distress and continue our 'business as usual'.
- Once we believe that we cannot do anything to change a situation, we tend to react in all sorts of unhelpful ways. We become dependent on others (i.e. the government, world leaders); resigned ('if it happens, it happens'); cynical ('there's no way you can stop terrorists'); or fed up with the topic.

The issues are very complex

- When the issues are very complex, and when we have very emotional reactions to them, it can be difficult to understand and make sense of what's happening.
- Sometimes it feels easier to think in 'black and white' terms and ignore the complexity.
- Fear can also lead us to underplay the subtlety of options and opinions.
- Rational discussion can become difficult because we argue in over simplistic ways.

Fears and concerns about how others may react

- Fear that we may appear morbid, uninformed, naïve, boring, paranoid or radical.
- Fear of disapproval by people who have power over us (e.g. in the workplace).
- Fear of putting a 'dampener' on good conversation.
- Fear of causing distress, especially in children (although research on children's fears has clearly shown that information and positive discussion is preferable to leaving them uninformed).
- Concern that other people are too uninformed, closed-minded, aggressive, irrational or conservative to respond to your thoughts.

Unfortunately, avoiding talking about difficult topics for any of the above reasons will prevent us from building peaceful, just communities.

What can you do to communicate better?

Given the problems that people experience in both listening and talking about peace and justice issues, there are a number of strategies that can assist you to talk easily and constructively about these issues.

1. Look after yourself!

People who talk about peace and justice need to look after themselves. There are a number of steps you can take to help you withstand fears of appearing ignorant, crazy or radical, and to increase the chance of you 'sticking with it'.

- Associate with like minded people to get support, ideas, reinforcement and praise. Group approval and identification is a great source of reward.
- Make the experience of active involvement in peace issues as pleasurable as possible (e.g. by going to festivals and peaceful rallies with friends).



2. Reward yourself

You can consciously reward yourself with positive self-talk. In doing this you are challenging negative feelings caused by real or imagined responses from the people you are talking to. Use positive self-labels like: 'politically responsible', 'a thinking, contributing member of society'. Do things that are intrinsically rewarding and that add to your understanding of the issues (e.g. tutor a refugee or new arrival in English; donate your old computer to an organisation that refurbishes them for disadvantaged communities).

3. Become informed

It is important to be informed when talking about issues of violence and injustice.

- Having a clear understanding of your topic and the facts will give you confidence and authority. Back your statements by citing books and respected sources.
- Ensure you are familiar with common arguments and useful counter-arguments that will help you respond more comfortably and smoothly.
- Present clear, but not overwhelmingly horrific, information that will educate the person/people you are talking to without provoking denial or defensiveness.
- Cite well-known or respected figures who are also working to reduce injustice or the threat of war. People perceived to be prestigious, powerful and most like your audience are the most influential.
- Remember that you don't have to know everything. Admitting that you 'don't know' does not invalidate your concern about these issues. It shows your audience that acting responsibly does not require a high degree of expertise.

4. Do things in easy stages

The best way to learn new behaviour is to begin with an easy task and progressively take on more difficult tasks until the final goal is reached. Begin with a role-play discussion, followed by a conversation with people likely to respond favourably, then move on to discussions with those likely to be more critical and argumentative.

5. Look for points of contact

Once you have clarified your own beliefs, values, attitudes and opinions, it is important to understand other people's opinions, and to look for points of contact between your ideas and theirs. Often people have the same goal, e.g. a peaceful solution in the Middle East, but different ways of achieving these goals. It is useful to understand where people stand on these issues, in order to know how to talk to them.

- Ask what the other person thinks and why.
- Acknowledge what the other person has said.
- Avoid labelling alternative views or behaviour in a derogatory way.
- Acknowledge criticism or legitimate concerns.
- Comment on similarities that you see between your views and theirs.
- Present your view as an alternative, rather than the correct interpretation.

6. Cue yourself

It is useful to be surrounded by as many cues as possible to prompt discussion of challenging issues. The pressure of daily living can make it extremely difficult to attend to the bigger problems of violence and injustice. Cues can remind us of these issues, and also provide a starting point for discussion.



Some examples of cues include:

- Posters, books and cartoons.
- Calendars with daily or monthly quotes, pictures or facts about social issues.
- Subscriptions to independent news magazines that provide regular coverage of world events or social justice issues.
- Email lists that send regular updates about certain issues.

7. Be positive

When you are talking about violence and justice issues, it is important to suggest that something can be done about these issues and that it is our responsibility to do something about them. Provide your audience with short-term manageable goals, as well as examples of when and where similar action has been successful. These suggestions are aimed at replacing the audience's feeling of 'learned helplessness' with a sense of 'learned resourcefulness'. 'Learned resourcefulness' is a term used by psychologists to describe how people can overcome helplessness by becoming active and re-asserting control over the environment, both individually and collectively.

8. Share your difficulties and rewards

It can be helpful to acknowledge your own tendencies to ignore, deny or avoid thinking about the threat of war and problems of injustice. This will help the people you are talking to, identify these reactions in themselves and acknowledge them. Talk about the activities you have been involved in and their rewards (e.g. increased satisfaction and optimism; reduction of anxiety and helplessness; making new friends with similar beliefs; or belonging to a community with shared goals).

9. Be assertive, not aggressive

- Maintain a nonverbal as well as a verbal stance of calmness, nonaggression, confidence and interest, by keeping a relaxed posture, direct eye contact and a controlled voice.
- Always end your conversations in a positive, hopeful or enabling way.

Seeking professional assistance

We can all contribute to making the world a more peaceful and just place. We can choose to focus on more local issues (such as domestic violence and bullying) or more global ones (such as war and refugee issues). One small but important way to contribute is to express your concerns and stimulate informed conversation on challenging and controversial subjects.

Talking with a psychologist may be helpful if you feel you need further assistance with communication techniques that will assist you in discussing important issues. Your APS psychologist has at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide a professional and efficient service.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/