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New York Times opinion columnist David Brooks writes about the art of connecting, even in time of dislocation. His list of “non-obvious lessons for how to have better conversation, which I’ve learned from people wiser than myself,” are applicable to non-Covid times as well.

These tips are, of course, relevant for forging deeper bonds with intimate partners, and with family members, friends and colleagues. The following is a shortened, edited version of [his longer article](#).

Nine non-obvious ways to have deeper conversations:

1. Approach with awe.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that if you’d never met a human and suddenly encountered one, you’d be inclined to worship this creature. Every human being is a miracle, and your superior in some way. The people who have great conversations walk into the room expecting to be delighted by you and make you feel the beam of their affection and respect.

2. Ask elevating questions.

Some questions, startling as they seem at first, compel us to see ourselves differently, or from a higher vantage:

What crossroads are you at? What commitments have you made that you no longer believe in? Who do you feel most grateful to have in your life? What problem did you used to have but now have licked? In what ways are you sliding backward? What would you do if you weren’t afraid?

3. Ask open-ended questions.

Many of us have a horrible tendency to ask questions that imply judgment: Where did you go to school? Or we ask yes/no questions: Did you have a good day? This basically shuts off thoughtful or interesting answers. Better questions start with “What was it like. ...” or “Tell me about a time. ...” or “How did you manage to cope while your wedding was postponed for a year?”

4. Make them authors, not witnesses.

What is important to people is not so much *what* happened to them, but how they *experienced* what happened to them. Many of the best conversations are not just a recitation of events, but rather involve going over and over an event, seeing it from wider perspectives, coating it with new layers of emotion, transforming it in a way that gives new meaning.

5. Treat attention as all or nothing.

Good conversation requires total focus of attention, as if there is an on/off switch with no dimmer. I have a friend who listens to conversations the way congregants listen to sermons in charismatic churches – with amens, and approbations. The effect is magnetic.

6. Don't fear the pause.

Most of us stop listening to a comment about halfway through, so we can be ready with a response. In Japan, businesspeople are more likely to hear the whole comment and then pause, sometimes eight seconds, before responding; this is twice as long a silence as American businesspeople conventionally tolerate.

7. Keep the gem statement front and center.

In the midst of many difficult conversations, employ (what mediator Adar Cohen coined) the "gem statement." This is the comment that keeps the relationship together: "Even when we can't agree on Dad's medical care, I've never doubted your good intentions. I know you want the best for him." Offering up that gem statement often helps point to a solution.

8. Find the disagreement under the disagreement.

In the Talmudic tradition, when two people disagree there is generally some deeper underlying philosophical or moral disagreement undergirding the contentious topic. Conversation then becomes a shared process of digging down through the underlying layers of disagreement.

9. The midwife model.

Sometimes people talk in an attempt to solve a person's problem. A good conversationalist in many cases is like a midwife, helping the other person give birth to her own child. This involves patiently listening as the other person talks and teaches herself through her own narrative. "To influence others' actions," neuroscientist Tali Sharot tells us, "you need to give people a sense of control."