**After the American Hangover: Unpacking Politics at Home**

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Our country is going through an intense time period. Polarization is at an all-time high. Divisions run deep, and are affecting many of our personal and professional relationships. Many individuals and communities feel sad, scared and angry right now. These feelings are reflecting in the many ways people interact with each other (e.g. social media, in-person conversations, etc.). So many of us are asking “where do we go from here?” and “how do I even begin to talk about these post-election matters?”

This guide hopes to help you to begin to answer these questions. It aims to be a simple starting point for engaging in these difficult conversations particularly with individuals who may share different political views and opinions. It is not a complete guide. Consider it more a small first step in helping to alieve our current collective political hangover.

**I. You**

"The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them." — Ralph Nichols

Active listening is *essential* for effective conversations especially with individuals who may have different political viewpoints than you. But what is “active listening”? Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding.[[1]](#footnote-1) The goal is to better understand the other person’s views, opinions or perspective. It is *not* about agreeing or resolution. *The difference between understanding and agreeing is an important difference* between active listening and other conversations.

**Listen to understand not to argue or agree.**

In conversations, sometimes we focus more on “trying to win the argument” or “trying to persuade someone.” This is not the goal of active listening. And in the context of post-election politics, it is even more important to avoid these unproductive dynamics. Active listening simply focuses on trying to understand another person’s views or experience even when its difficult and even when it may make you uncomfortable. The goal is understanding each other better. And of course “understanding each other better” does not mean being in full agreement with what is said. It is okay to disagree.

**Prepare for discomfort.**

Disagreements are natural. And difficult conversations may cause a variety of emotions to arise. This is okay. But it is important to exercise some self-control and focus on listening as the key objective with these type of post-election conversations. Be prepared to be uncomfortable. And recognize that being uncomfortable does not mean that the conversation is going in the wrong direction or you are not listening properly.

**Remember the big picture.**

Is your goal to vent? Is your goal to debate? Or is your goal to have a conversation where you understand another person’s political views better and for them to understand your views better? If the answer is yes to the last question, then active listening is essential.

**Consider your word choice.**

Keep your language accessible. Words like “racism” and “sexist” tend to disengage certain listeners. Find other words, more neutral words, to describe the ideas or points that you want to communicate.

**Reflect forward**.

With every exchange, interaction and conversation it is important to reflect. What does it mean to “reflect forward”? It means that you can ask yourself: What did this conversation teach me about myself? About my own views? What would I say differently? What would I do differently? What do I need to find out more about so that I can be more effective?

**II. Your Audience**

"Our personal relationships are the key to a political movement that can win in homes, neighborhoods, places of worship, union locals and city halls." - Nate Merrill

Applying active listening in the context of an audience means understanding some of your audience’s background, experiences or values. This may mean entering the conversation at a point where you do not fully agree. But more importantly it means using the information during the conversation to create a space of empathy. Empathy in this context refers to perspective taking and is what helps the conversation to move forward in a productive fashion.

**Set an unstated goal**.

What is your goal for this conversation? You are not likely to change someone’s world view in one sitting. This point is important to remember. Setting a reasonable goal even if that goal is just to listen may help set your own expectations and control your emotions as you begin or continue a conversation. Perhaps you just want a family member to agree that certain statements are derogatory towards certain identity groups or that any one political issue is not simple. Before you start a conversation related to post-election politics, consider keeping in mind a small or reasonable personal goal as you talk to someone.

**Make a personal connection**.

Whatever your goal, sometimes it is helpful to start conversations from a place of agreement. A “place of agreement” can be something related to values, a shared positive memory or a common goal. This place of agreement helps create a space of empathy. Empathy creates the space for change that you seek. Regarding post-election politics, it may be difficult to find a place of agreement. But many difficult conversations may have more points of agreements than you realize. And often our personal relationships are enough for beginning these conversations.

**Prepare for defensiveness.**

Be patient as you listen to someone and speak with them. When people feel attacked, they become defensive. This is a natural response. Some individuals, especially family members, are expecting a heated conversation regarding post-election politics. Many folks have already had multiple heated exchanges about the election. What does this mean for you? This means that if you engage contacts, family members or other persons about these topics recognize that they may already had similar conversations. And they may feel even stronger about their opinions, because of previous conversations that went poorly or where they felt they were offended by someone. To de-escalate defensiveness, review the active listening resources included in the last section. It may also be helpful to practice de-escalating with a friend to prepare for responses you would receive.

**Know your limits**.

In this tense political climate, strong emotions and stubborn opinions are abundant. Of course, listening to your audience (e.g. family or community) or counterpart may require being uncomfortable, hearing false information, or hearing un-agreeable viewpoints. Individuals may also use degrading or insulting language. But this does not mean allowing yourself to be degraded. If you feel unsafe in a conversation or if you feel a conversation has gone too far, you can pause it or end it.

**III. The Conversation**

“You don’t persuade by arguing, you persuade by questioning, and engaging in dialogue” - George Kohlrieser

So where do you begin? How do you start “the conversation” about the election, politics, or Trump? There is more than one way to have this conversation. Someone may bring up the election during the holidays. A random comment may spark an argument. Whatever the case, your decision to engage or participate should reflect your goals, your active listening skills, and empathy. You may even want to start the conversation yourself. At the end of this section is a guide that provide specific examples for participating in or starting the conversation.

**Practice makes perfect.**

Before reviewing the suggested resources that include scenarios, scripts and perspectives. It may be helpful to find friends who can practice these conversations with you. You can take turn with friends practicing listening, responding and preparing yourself for receptive or defensive reactions. Each of you can take turns and assume different roles (e.g. “devil’s advocate”). This type of practice builds the skills necessary to engage difficult topics with loved ones and other people.

**Be patient with yourself.**

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges with these conversations is the emotional and mental exhaustion. At times, you may feel like you beating your head against the wall. This is normal and expected. Progress may not happen at an exponential rate. Most things do not change overnight. Positive social change is an incremental process, but often is most promising with our personal relationships. “Be willing to do the work because you believe in it, because you can, because it’s the right thing to do. Persist despite uncertainties and second-guessing. Do it consistently today, tomorrow and every day thereafter. Walk the talk. Actions speak so much louder than words.” - Marc and Angel Hack Life

**IV. Resources**

**Practice “Active Listening”**

A. UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center, “Active Listening” [Link: <http://bit.ly/1HjwHim>]   
B. MIT Sloan Communication Program, “Active Listening” [Link: <http://tinyurl.com/z3o35rn>]  
C. YouTube: “How To Become An Active Listener” [Link: <https://youtu.be/0eHxNdIyo7g>]  
D. YouTube: “How To Improve Your Listening Skills” [Link: <https://youtu.be/D6-MIeRr1e8>]

**Understand “Empathy”**A. YouTube: “Brené Brown on Empathy” [Link: <https://youtu.be/1Evwgu369Jw>]  
B. YouTube: “Brené Brown on Blame” [Link: <https://youtu.be/RZWf2_2L2v8>]  
C. UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center, “Empathy” [Link: <http://tinyurl.com/hxr5k44>]  
  
**Scripts, Videos and Other Resources**

Article: [Thanksgiving Toolkit: Bringing Justice Home](http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/thanksgiving) (Includes Scripts and Talking Points)  
Article: [A hostage negotiator’s simple strategy for difficult political conversations with people you love](http://qz.com/836979)  
YouTube: [How To Talk Politics Without Fighting](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWPyAyuBNqI)  
YouTube: [Surviving Thanksgiving with Your Family Members](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYWrzpLc8IE)  
Website: [Huffington Post: Active Listening](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/active-listening/)  
Website: [The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley](https://ggia.berkeley.edu/%20)   
 **Personal Perspectives on Discussing Post-Election Politics**Nate Miller, “[How to talk to your conservative relatives this Thanksgiving](http://themacweekly.com/2016/11/how-to-talk-to-your-conservative-relatives-this-thanksgiving/)”  
J. Bryan Lowder, “[The Post-Trump Thanksgiving](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/family/2016/11/how_to_do_thanksgiving_with_trump_voting_relatives.html#lf_comment=606229710)”   
Maura Judkis, “[Fight, flight or drink: Surviving when you hate how your family voted](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/food/wp/2016/11/18/fight-flight-or-drink-surviving-thanksgiving-when-you-hate-how-your-family-voted/?utm_term=.d0394185776f)”  
Marie Solis, “[Here’s how to talk to your Trump-supporting relative this Thanksgiving](https://mic.com/articles/159451/here-s-how-to-talk-to-your-trump-supporting-relatives-this-thanksgiving#.a7EGjTB8S)”  
Sabrina Tavernise and Katharine Seelye “[Political divide splits relationships — and Thanksgiving, too](https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2016/11/15/political-divide-splits-relationships-and-thanksgiving-too)”

1. The Beyond Intractability Project, The Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado [↑](#footnote-ref-1)