



crucial
conversations®

A PERSONAL SUCCESS STORY

Personal Relationships: Overcoming Abusive Conversations

"I have used crucial conversations and crucial confrontations skills in many situations, and know through first-hand experience that I can not only master the stories that kept me locked in old behaviors, but I can also reduce stress and gain renewed confidence in my day-to-day conversations and decisions."



– **Cathy W., Indianapolis, Indiana**

My first husband was abusive. As a result, my three children grew up in an extremely violent home. They never saw me physically abused, but they saw the aftermath and experienced emotional and mental abuse.

After sixteen years and eight attempts to leave, I finally broke free. My physical wounds are now healed but I still struggle with the long-term psychological effects the abuse caused me and my children.

When emotions run high, I tend to go to silence or sarcasm. And after hearing so many unhealthy conversations, my (now adult) children simply mirror behavior they saw as children, fall into old patterns of disrespect, and expect me to respond the same way I responded in the past.

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– Cathy W.

I have used crucial conversations and crucial confrontations skills in many situations, and know through first-hand experience that I can not only master the stories that kept me locked in old behaviors, but I can also reduce stress and gain renewed confidence in my day-to-day conversations and decisions.

I recently used these skills to increase safety

in conversations with my daughter who, because of drug abuse, lost custody of her children. In previous conversations, I became silent when she displayed her father’s hot temper, but I wanted to help her regain the ability to care for herself and ultimately, visitation rights with her children.

My goal is to be my daughter’s friend and to speak honestly and directly without making her feel threatened. I try to make it safe for her to share her story by watching her body language. As soon as she shows signs of frustration, I stop and remind her that I am on her side.

I use contrasting statements such as “I know this is difficult and I don’t want to upset you, I just want to make sure we consider everything we are dealing with.” Next, I ask for permission to explore those areas, and if she is willing, we continue. If not, I apologize for upsetting her and ask her to tell me when she is ready to talk about it.

I have also found tentative statements to be effective. Instead of saying, “Are you upset with me? What did I do?” I now say, “I’m beginning to feel that you are upset with me. Did I do something to make you angry?” Her response to this question opens the door to the real issue at hand.

In the past, the first five minutes of a visit with my daughter were agonizing. I found myself fighting my old tendency to go to silence or be sarcastic. I was afraid to open my mouth, because no matter what I said I always seemed to upset her.

I have now mastered my emotions and rethought the story I told myself that convinced me I would never be able to hold this crucial conversation with my daughter. I state my path with confidence because I know my intentions are good and I know she wants to get better. As a result, we now have longer discussions and she is usually able to leave the conversation without having an outburst. This is amazing progress and gives me hope for the future!

About VitalSmarts

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VitalSmarts is home to multiple training offerings, including Crucial Conversations®, Crucial Confrontations®, and Influencer Training™. Each course improves key organizational outcomes by focusing on high-leverage skills and strategies. The VitalSmarts authors have written three New York Times bestsellers, Influencer, Crucial Conversations and Crucial Confrontations. VitalSmarts also offers on-site consulting, research, executive team development, and speaking engagements.

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