

# Want to avoid heated arguments? Try this technique before having a difficult conversation

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Listening to people talk about views that clash with your own can be galling. Families all over the world avoid controversial topics. In the UK, for example, mention Brexit and watch everyone in the room tense up.

But if you only speak to people who think the same way you do, you live in an echo chamber. Being around people who think differently from you can increase your self-awareness and acceptance of others and is vital for learning. That's why we carried out our recent study into whether focusing on your core values can help you engage more openly with others.

Conflict is part of life. Difficult conversations may feel uncomfortable but research shows there are things you can do to make talks with people who have directly opposing views more productive and less combative. For example, one study published in 2019 found that reminding people they have more in common than they think with members of groups they dislike can diminish people's hostility towards those groups.

Researchers have argued receptiveness to opposing views and intellectual humility lie at the heart of healthy debates. Intellectual humility is owning or accepting your own shortcomings out of a genuine desire for knowledge and truth. It is about developing an increased awareness that you do not have all the answers and it is possible your views might be mistaken. An unassuming attitude makes people more open to appreciating others' views. It doesn't mean you have to suspend critical thinking though.

Our mission is to share knowledge and inform decisions.

About us

## An open mind

We tested whether there's a way to enhance intellectual humility. We used an approach called values-affirmation, in which people reflect on one or two cherished personal values, such as freedom, equality or family security. Previous research found a brief period of reflection on personal values may increase people's sense of integrity when they feel threatened. Contemplation also seems to make people more thoughtful and open-minded in response to text that challenges their views.



Talking with people who hold different views to us can feel uncomfortable. [fizkes/Shutterstock](#)

In our experiment, we invited participants in groups of two or three to the lab. After completing a range of psychological questionnaires assessing personality, intellectual humility, and self-esteem, half of the participants were asked to reflect on their most important value (for example freedom and equality) by writing about the significance their chosen value has in their lives and how it informs their behaviour. The second group, the control group, instead wrote about their attitudes to beverages such as tea and coffee. Afterwards, participants took part in a 15-minute group discussion about the pros and cons of raising student tuition fees to pay for university education.

Recordings of the debates were analysed by linguists from our team for conversational markers that indicate high or low intellectual humility. They coded participants' contributions to discussions along with several other features including tendency to dominate the discussion, to engage with others' opinions, or to convey their own convictions as certain, obvious and unchallengeable.

Participants who reflected about their most important value engaged in the discussion in a more humble way compared to participants in the control group. For example, they were more supportive of other speakers even when they were at odds; they tended to avoid dominating discussions; they were less likely to treat their own opinions as facts. Afterwards we asked participants to rate how they much they were feeling different emotions on a five-point scale (ranging from very slightly to extremely). The values-affirmation group reported feeling more empathic, giving, grateful, and humble compared to the control group.

## **Broaden your horizons**

Our research showed how a simple intervention can enhance intellectual humility in conversations. More than half (60.6% of participants) in the values-affirmation group showed more intellectual humility in debate than the average person in the control condition. This finding, as well as the enhanced feelings of tolerance people experienced, suggest reflecting on values can improve the quality of discussions on controversial issues.

Many conversations about controversial issues happen online, however. Face-to-face dialogue is very different from online communication, particularly when the people involved don't know each other or obscure their identity. In theory, an intervention that supports intellectual humility in face-to-face dialogue may help online dialogue, but we can't be sure without more research. If one thing is clear from science it's that we shouldn't avoid discussions about controversial topics, but we do need to change the way we approach them.

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## Disclosure statement

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