



Difficult conversations - text

Chapter 2

Defuse the drama

Defuse the drama

Our brains sometimes work in paradoxical ways. When they recognise something as dangerous, like an upcoming difficult conversation, they try to warn us away by issuing threat responses that create emotion and drama for us. By trying to keep us 'safe' they actually create more problems!

Knowing this gives you the power to defuse your brain's reactions. And defusing these reactions will remove or at least reduce the difficulty of many conversations.

When the limbic system is in charge

As you learned in Chapter 1, certain conversations are challenging because they create threats to our limbic needs. In its efforts to protect us, our limbic systems can manipulate our behaviour. If we do not recognise and manage this, it can result in us behaving in unhelpful ways.

You have already reflected on conversations that your limbic system might have been telling you to avoid, that you now want to have. But it might be causing other behaviours too.

Think back over difficult situations that have come up at work in the last few months.

Have you done any of these unhelpful things?

- I have let a problem fester
- I have judged others
- I got angry or frustrated
- I have tried to get others to fix a situation

You are human!

It's likely that you have used one of those behaviours. And it might be helpful to recognise that these are normal human behaviours. They are not pretty and they are not helpful, but the good news is they are not necessary. You can change your reactions; it just takes some work to do things differently. If you can do this, you can reduce the difficulty level of many conversations.

Rewiring your response

Now you can get ready to leave those unhelpful behaviours behind you.

This chapter will help you defuse the limbic system's warning signals so you reduce the level of difficulty and engage in necessary conversations with calm confidence.

Powerful limbic threats

Your brain is trying to keep you safe. It might be fully justified in the warnings it is giving you or it might be basing its worries on assumptions. It doesn't really matter at this point, the fact is that you find these conversations difficult because of these warning signals and threat responses.

Experience it for yourself

You are invited to experience and explore a strong emotion in order to recognise your reactions and responses and understand how to rewire them. Follow the three steps below and take note of your responses.

Make sure you are in a place where you feel comfortable to engage in this exploration, which might be a little emotional.

Step 1:

Bring to mind an upcoming conversation that evokes a strong feeling of fear.

Step 2:

What reactions do you get in your body when you think of this conversation?

- Sweaty palms
- Feeling sick
- Increased heart rate
- Pins and needles or pain
- Tightness in throat or chest
- Other

These are normal responses because as soon as you anticipate your difficult conversation, your brain starts generating threat chemicals of adrenaline and cortisol. You can detect them in your body (e.g., tension) or you might label your experience as an emotion (e.g., frustration or worry).

Step 3:

Continue to focus on your difficult conversation. Which of these behaviours might you be tempted to use to protect yourself? These follow naturally from limbic reactions and usually feel quite satisfying. Please be as honest with yourself as possible.

- Blaming others
- Being defensive
- Ignoring others
- Sarcasm or disdain

Where toxic behaviours come from

This sequence of events shows that unhelpful behaviours are often the result of limbic threat reactions. These are called toxic behaviours, or 'toxins'.

So what is really going on to trigger toxins?

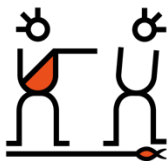
The brain feels safer when we are *right* and *good*; it also likes to *judge* and get *revenge*. So we become **defensive** to avoid being at fault, we **blame** others for being wrong. We use **contempt** to justify our superiority and we **stonewall** to prove our personal power or to get some revenge through silence.

Throughout this section, keep noticing how toxins may be showing up in you - they may shift and change as you keep considering your difficult conversation.

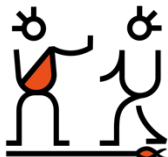
Limbic feelings are also expressed as toxic behaviours

We know that toxic behaviours are the result of limbic threat reactions, but what is really going on? The brain feels safer when we are *right* and *good*; it also likes to *judge* and get *revenge*. So we become **defensive** to avoid being at fault, we **blame** others for being wrong. We use **contempt** to justify our superiority and we **stonewall** to prove our personal power or to get some revenge through silence. Toxins are also contagious. If someone else uses one toxin, you are likely to respond with another one.

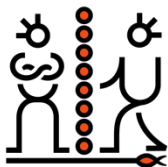
As you plan your difficult conversation, consider which toxic behaviour you would be most likely to use in your conversation.



Blame / Criticism: Blaming or attacking someone's personality or character.



Defensiveness: Feeling like a victim, wanting to defend your actions or intention with a form of blaming. It's like saying: "It's not me, it's you!"



Stonewalling: Includes withdrawing, cutting off communication, giving someone "the silent treatment".



Contempt: Includes sarcasm, eye rolling, belittling, cynicism, name-calling, hostile humour, disdain and belligerence.

Defuse powerful reactions

Now that you are aware of your neurochemicals and their impact, you can work to release them. If you are able to get rid of adrenaline and cortisol, you will be able to think more clearly, have more control of your behaviour and have a more productive conversation.

There are three techniques you can use to defuse strong emotions

- **Ventilation**, to burn off hot emotions.
- **Labelling**, to name the emotions that remain.
- **ABC**, to return to your PFC.

1. Ventilation

Ventilation is like burning off steam. Think of yourself as a volcano that needs to release its hot lava. If you are able to get rid of adrenaline and cortisol, you will be able to think more clearly, have more control of your behaviour and have a more productive conversation. Here are three ways to burn off steam.

Vent the emotion

Turn on the audio recorder on your phone or call your own voicemail and vent out the emotion: scream, yell, growl, swear, whatever it takes to let off steam. Imagine telling that person (or someone) how frustrated you are! But please do not direct this at the person you need to speak with.

Physically expend energy

Go for a run, punch a pillow, stomp your feet, jump up & down and use up that adrenaline. Going for a slower walk may also be helpful. You need to find what works for you.

Release tension from your muscles

Tighten all your muscles as tight as possible while you inhale, then release all muscles with a big exhale. Repeat several times if you need to.

2. Labelling

After the adrenaline burn off exercise, you might be feeling a little more calm. But it is likely you still have some emotions swirling around in you. This next activity will help you further defuse your emotions.

You can do this exercise out loud, alone or with someone else (ask them to just listen and not respond), you can note them down or even just say the words in your mind.

Give yourself a moment to tune in and notice how you are feeling. Often, beneath anger or fear, is something more nuanced like hurt or embarrassment. Be as honest as possible with yourself. No-one will see this but you.

Use one or more of these feeling words in this expression:

I feel _____

- sad, sorry or regretful
- insulted or offended
- hurt, violated or betrayed
- nervous, shy or uncertain
- jealous envious or restless
- mortified or embarrassed
- angry, incensed or furious
- displeased or disappointed
- disgusted
- afraid, scared or uncertain

This approach is useful when you still have some strong emotions present but you are not maxed out on adrenaline that is trying to send you into battle.

Labelling what you feel interrupts the limbic system's tendency to repeatedly fire its fight or flight messages. As you label the emotion, it tells the limbic system that you get it and it doesn't need to keep signalling you.



An important note about labelling emotions: this is about *your response*; **It is not about what others did or what you anticipate they might do**. Looking at details of the past or future stories will only fire up your limbic threats again. So set the details aside, and focus only on your own feeling response in the present moment.

3. ABC

Now that you have burnt off some adrenaline and labelled your emotions, it is time to get your PFC back online. This is an essential step if you want to have a productive conversation. Engaging your PFC is not easy to do in the grip of emotions, so if you still feel very strong emotions, it may be helpful to revisit the previous steps first.

We will use the ABC process to tap into your PFC: Aware, Breathe, Choose.

The ABC model – a reminder

Here is a quick refresh of the ABC model of mindfulness.

- Be **aware** of what's happening in your mind, brain and body. This will help you be aware of any fear you have so you can address it before it escalates. Take a moment to just notice what neurochemicals are driving you or what behavioural impulses you have.
- Take a mental step back and give yourself a chance to **breathe** and let stress chemicals dissipate. You can even reorient yourself before your limbic system dumps stress chemicals into your body. Take a moment to breathe and relax and let your body metabolise those chemicals of emotion.
- Then **choose** how you want to move forward: you can choose a mindset or attitude, you can choose to set your own needs aside, you can choose to be reasoned in your response, you can choose to express your feelings responsibly and/or you can choose a full-out limbic reaction. If you are tapped into your PFC, you have many choices available. In this case, you are choosing to move ahead with a difficult conversation rather than letting it go completely – which might lead you to avoid or ignore something important.
- Then **choose** how you want to move forward by choosing to:
 - adopt a particular a mindset or attitude
 - set your own needs aside
 - be reasoned in your response
 - express your feelings responsibly
 - a full-out limbic reaction

If you are tapped into your PFC, you have many choices available. In this case, you are choosing to move ahead with a difficult conversation rather than letting it go completely – which might lead you to avoid or ignore something important.

Reflect on how you feel now

With all of that work on addressing and releasing emotions, you are likely feeling different than you did at the beginning of this exercise.

Consider how you feel now.

- Notice your body again.
- Notice the actions you are compelled to take.

You have made great strides in reducing your threat responses and the likelihood of using toxic behaviours.

Subtle limbic threats

Milder threats can be even more manipulative than strong reactions: they're quiet, but they are still there, subtly scheming and guiding your actions. All you know is that you don't feel like having the conversation, even though another part of you knows it is necessary. Consider this scenario:

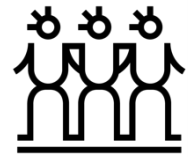
Alice and Rene were working on a press release when Alice makes a novel suggestion. Rene rolls his eyes and dismisses the idea. It was unusual as they were normally quite in sync. The next day Alice found herself feeling defensive and avoiding Rene. She knew she needed to clear the air with him, but did nothing. Finally, she decided to investigate why she was avoiding the conversation. She looked through the Be SAFE & Certain elements to find out where her discomfort was about bringing it up.

Subtle threats to Be SAFE and Certain

It is easy to ignore subtle messages from the limbic system, but they are still manipulating you and encouraging you to avoid a necessary conversation. Take a look at the threats to Be SAFE and Certain that you might be experiencing. Note down which are preventing you from having these conversations.

Belonging

A mild Belonging threat might appear as a concern that your relationship with the other person may be damaged or they will reject you.



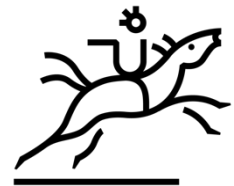
Status



A mild Status threat might appear as a concern that you will not be respected or your position or authority may be questioned.

Autonomy

If you feel a mild Autonomy threat, you might be concerned that you will be told what to do and that your contribution will not be included.



Fairness



A mild Fairness threat might appear as a concern about being unfair yourself, or that your conversation will lead to an unfair result.

Expectation

If you have a mild Expectations threat, you might worry that you will be disappointed and will not get the result you want.



Certainty



A mild certainty threat might appear as a concern that their response will be unpredictable and you will not know what to do next.

Defuse subtle threats

Often, when you look closely at a subtle threat you are experiencing, you will find that it is based partly on truth and partly on unfounded concerns that your brain has made up.

Both the truth and the made-up parts need to be addressed if you are to move forward calmly and confidently with the conversation.

- **Dealing with assumptions** will address the made-up elements.
- **Metacommunication** will help you with the realistic threats.

Let's start by considering how this is currently showing up for you.

Bring to mind a difficult conversation that you know you should probably have, but you are putting off.

Perhaps you feel indifferent about it or have a nagging concern at the back of your mind that's stopping you from starting the conversation. Tune into the resistance you are feeling. Ask yourself:

- **What is the grain of truth in my concern?**
For example, it might be true that the news you will deliver may hurt them deeply.
- **What is my limbic system assuming, despite not having any evidence?**
For example, you might be assuming that they will never forgive you and your relationship will be broken forever.

Recognising assumptions

We know the brain manufactures ideas, fills in blanks and exaggerates. If you find that you have made some assumptions, please understand that this is normal, and it does not make you a bad person. Your brain is only trying to be efficient, but it takes a few too many shortcuts sometimes and you are left with made up concerns. Recall what you have previously learned about assumptions and interpretations.

Assumptions



Our brain fills in gaps in information automatically. Why? For one, not knowing is like torture to the brain – it's better to make up something than to remain in the dark. Also, this function of assuming, making conclusions and drawing on history can be quite helpful – imagine if you had to check out or think through every little thing that you are not 100% sure about – it would be exhausting!

The problem is that most of our assumptions are partially correct at best, and more often inaccurate. But we regularly take these short cuts and the problem is that we believe what we have made up. And the limbic system bases its responses on these made-up stories.

It would be normal for you to assume that someone is doing something for one reason when in fact, they might be motivated by something completely different. You might wholeheartedly believe that you have the full truth. But you don't. When you understand this dynamic, it can help you build curiosity and let go of your viewpoint so you can see their perspective and the whole situation more clearly.

Challenge your own viewpoints and your understanding of what is happening: what else might be true about this situation?

Dealing with assumptions

It might be a relief to know that your stress and anxiety about a conversation is based on something made up. This means you have full control to change it and to free yourself from the stress or avoidance related to those assumptions.

Try these three steps to take responsibility for your assumptions.

If the steps seem hard, remember that it is just your brain desperately wanting to be right and to keep you safe.



- **Check:** To be certain that you are operating on fictitious assumptions, check them out by asking others about what they know to be true.
- **Accept** that your assumptions were completely manufactured by your brain and let them go. It might be helpful to replace them with other thinking that is more fact-based.
- **Acknowledge:** Consider letting others know that in the absence of information, you had filled in some gaps in a way that seemed obvious, but you now realise you were wrong.



These options may require a little humility.

Reflect

Now you have uncovered some false concerns that have been making your conversation seem more difficult than necessary. These concerns will likely show up again later in other situations. Write them down and watch out for them in other areas of your work and life - they are probably not helpful there either.

- What have you discovered is untrue about your concerns/fears?
- What is true and how will you remember that?
- What will you choose to share with others about your unfounded fears?

Dealing with real concerns with metacommunication

Sometimes our limbic system warns us about something that is **very real**: It might be absolutely right that someone will reject you if you bring up a sensitive subject; your worst expectations might come true and the other person might react in some unfair way, exactly as you fear. Sometimes these will happen. So if you honestly think it is likely, then prepare for it.

This is a time when your limbic system is truly helping you. It will be useful for you to learn when you can trust it as a powerful ally.

The best way to handle these concerns is to speak to them. You can do this with your metacommunication skills.

- **Start-up:** Before the primary conversation, set a tone for how you want the conversation to go.
- **Working Agreements:** Afterwards, set agreements for how you will move forward.

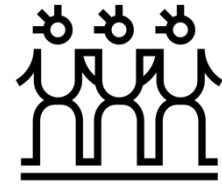
Below are metacommunication examples for each Be SAFE & Certain element. You will find suggestions on how to address your concern before you jump into the conversation and then how to create some agreements so you can create some safety around this element.

Belonging

It is entirely possible that someone may break relationship with you if you speak up; the other person may not want to talk to you about this.

Start-up: "I want to have a conversation about what happened last week in that not-so-great pitch we did together. Before we start, I just want you to know that maintaining our working relationship is a very high priority for me."

Working Agreements: "Moving forward, how do we make sure we don't put our relationship at risk and create this discord again in the future?"

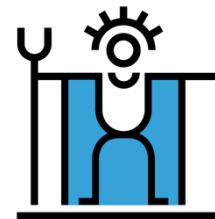


Status

Of course it is possible that someone will think less of you because you choose to address a situation, or the topic may threaten your position or authority. You might choose to move forward with the conversation out of need and principle anyway. And there are some things you can do to secure your status.

Start-up: "I want to have a conversation about the meeting last week where we had that very public disagreement. Before we start, I just want you to know that your respect means a lot to me and while this topic is important to talk about, I really would hate it if you thought less of me because I'm bringing this up."

Working Agreements: "Moving forward, how do we make sure we don't put so much at risk and create this misalignment again?"

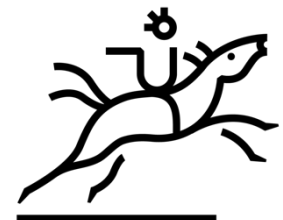


Autonomy

It is completely possible that you will not get your way after the conversation. Your limbic system might be right to worry about your autonomy and creativity being limited by others.

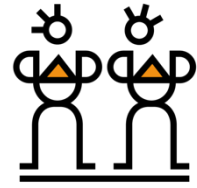
Start-up: "I know we need to talk about the abnormalities in this project and it's a bit scary for me. Before we start, I just want you to know that my autonomy is really important to me and I'm grateful for the amount of freedom I have had. I'm afraid that it might be taken away. I'm hoping that we can fix the problem and I can still retain some of that freedom."

Working Agreements: "Moving forward, how will we find a balance between autonomy and toeing the line?"



Fairness

Fairness is completely subjective. The conversation you need to have with someone may absolutely raise feelings of unfairness in them and even a desire for revenge from them - which would be normal if they feel you are unfair. It's a feeling and a perspective they have; there's no real objective truth in it. But you can certainly consider their view.



Start-up: "Before we head into this conversation about bonuses, I just want to say that I've thought this through and I feel I am being fair. I know you might not see it the same way. Would you commit to listening to my whole view before you give your response and then we will talk it through?"

Working Agreements: "Moving forward, how can we stay on top of what seems fair to both of us?"

Expectations

You have hopes and dreams and you have things you dread. It is quite possible that either your hopes and expectations will not be met or that your worst fears will become reality.



Start-up: "I'd really like to have a conversation about our mismatched expectations. Before we do that, I want to let you know that I've put a lot of energy into getting this position - perhaps too much - and I'd just like you to be a little sensitive about that. I've worked really hard for this and I know I might not get what I wanted."

Working Agreements: "Moving forward, how do we set expectations together and keep on top of how they shift and change?"

Certainty

It is entirely possible that engaging in a sensitive conversation may lead to some unpredictable results. Your limbic system may be absolutely right that there will be some uncertainty moving forward.



Start-up: "I'd like to have a conversation about what's going to happen next as I suspect there are some big changes coming. Before you tell me, I'd just like to let you know that uncertainty really rattles me. Anything you can do to create some certainty for me would be really helpful."

Working Agreements: "Moving forward, can we check in a little more often so I can get as much of a sense as possible for where we're headed?"

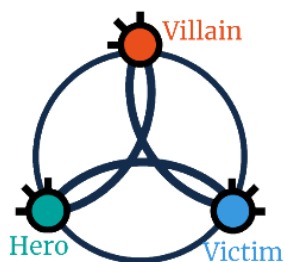
Drama triangles

A drama triangle is a typical human dynamic involving a **victim**, a **villain** and a **hero**. They are a systemic expression of the limbic system - a common dynamic between people that creates and perpetuates drama and upset.

This dynamic is often behind those situations that feel like soap operas... especially the ones where you had good intentions and a great idea to resolve a tricky situation peacefully, but it didn't work. And not only that, but more and more people seem to be getting involved and getting upset!

The good news is that drama triangles can be deactivated.

How a drama triangle works



Any of the three roles can start the drama triangle dynamic, but it often starts with the **victim**: someone perceives that they've been wronged, or victimised, in some way by a **villain**.

A third person, the **hero**, usually with good intentions, gets involved and then often becomes a new villain and all the roles shift and change.

The drama triangle in practice

Consider this fictional drama triangle and see if you recognise any of the characters or events from dynamics in your own workplace.

A team are preparing for a customer review...

Roisin has assigned various tasks to the team in preparation for a customer review. One of her colleagues, **Bea**, is new.

Bea embellishes a few slides with extra graphics and some useful information that Roisin hadn't asked for.

When a misunderstanding occurs

When Roisin sees the extra graphics and data, she knows it will confuse the client. Upset, she calls a meeting with Bea to tell her to fix it. Roisin also thinks this will be a good learning opportunity for Bea.

They call a meeting to discuss it...

In the conversation, Roisin asks about the changes and Bea proudly says that she thought it would be helpful, and asks if there was something wrong with the information.

Roisin loses her temper: "IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG WITH IT!?? You changed something that alters the meaning of the whole presentation! Fix it!"

Which leaves one person devastated...

Bea, shocked and devastated, calls up **Gary** to ask for help. Gary is the project manager and the person who had hired her; he had strongly encouraged her to use her experience and creativity.

...and reaching out to someone else for support.

Gary tells Bea not to worry and that he will handle it. He assumes this is Roisin's fault because he has had problems with her before. He is sure that Roisin was being overly hard on Bea. He aims to fix this problem for good.

Is their involvement helpful?

Gary calls Roisin. He tells her that she was wrong and that she should be more tolerant with Bea. He feels good about having set that straight (and his limbic system rewards him for getting back at Roisin after past slights).

And it doesn't end there...

Hurt and confused by Gary's involvement, Roisin speaks to her manager about it, who calls Gary up to have a word with him. Gary makes a sarcastic comment to his colleague, **Sharisse**, when he gets off the phone. Sharisse asks what's been going on, then calls Bea to see if she's ok.

And so it continues...

In the example above, the face value interpretation is that Roisin was the Villain, Bea the Victim and Gary the Hero.

This dynamic appears in many different workplace interactions.

Bear in mind that in a drama triangle, the roles are often not that clear cut. People see different things from different vantage points and step into different roles in the triangle.

For example, Roisin was certainly the villain from Bea's and Gary's points of view, but she actually sees herself as the victim in the situation. And, when she sat down with Bea to have a learning conversation, she felt like the hero, taking time out to help Bea learn.

As other people get lured into the situation, they will take up these roles as well.

Deactivate the drama triangle



Drama triangles happen in a lot of ways; they especially happen around difficult conversations. When a conversation feels really difficult, we may avoid a direct conversation and try to get others to do the hard parts. But it will create drama. It's a much better idea to learn to get through the discomfort, take responsibility, and just have the direct conversation.

You do not have to remain in drama triangles. You can use your PFC to consider situations from all perspectives and have direct, calm conversations.

Choose a different approach

Consider what these three people, **Gary, Roisin and Bea** could have done differently instead of falling into these common drama triangle roles. How might deactivating the triangle allow them to build better relationships, with more trust and understanding?

Roisin, the Villain, could have...

calmed herself first, then had a conversation with Bea to explain why the extra information was not helpful for this meeting.

Taking a moment to use ABC or another calming technique would have prepared Roisin for the conversation she originally wanted to have. It would have been empowering and helpful for Bea's growth and for the project.



Bea, the Victim, could have...

given Roisin some time to cool off, then had another conversation to better understand her role in this project.

Approaching Roisin again with curiosity, a learning mindset and a willingness to be a team player would take Bea firmly out of Victim status. This may require setting her limbic needs aside for that conversation.

Gary, the Hero, could have...

supported Bea to have a conversation with Roisin herself, rather than taking over.

It would also be worth asking himself why he was so keen to solve Bea's problem; what did the situation trigger for him? Fixing a problem that is not your own will often create a drama triangle.

Reflect

Consider your list of upcoming difficult conversations.

Notice anywhere where you may have an impulse to involve other people who are not directly involved with the topic.

Also notice any conversations that are not yours to have - maybe you were going to step in as the hero.