



A Guide to Navigating Difficult Conversations: The Nuance of ADHD

Navigating difficult conversations with an ADHD person can be, well, difficult. These conversations are generally not fun for most people, but empathy and understanding are imperative when talking with those who struggle with ADHD.

Executive Functions (EF), the management system of our brains, work together to regulate thoughts, actions and behaviors. They are the inter-workings of self-control. For those who have ADHD, they experience impairment and daily struggles within the Executive Functioning management system. There are six main departments in this management system, which reside in your prefrontal cortex, located behind your forehead:

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|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Working Memory | 4. Planning & Problem Solving |
| 2. Inhibition | 5. Self-Awareness |
| 3. Emotional Regulation | 6. Self-Motivation |

Let's walk through some of the EF struggles of the ADHD brain during an emotional conversation.

WORKING MEMORY (WM) is a temporary holding spot in our brains that allow us to get things done. WM is impaired for people with ADHD and they experience forgetfulness often. When emotions are at play, this is even more difficult. Sometimes, people with ADHD will forget what they just said within seconds or minutes after saying it. The frustration of forgetting adds to the complexity of the conversation and may result in the ADHD person talking in circles.

What to do: Encourage the team member to take notes during the conversation. Writing will help them keep track of what is being said and will also allow for space to process their emotions and thoughts. People with ADHD may also interrupt so they do not forget what they want to say- taking notes allows them to write it down so they can continue listening. It's also great to use these notes as a reflection tool to acknowledge their emotions and form a deeper understanding of what was at play. A recap at the end of the conversation may also be a helpful tool to ensure shared meaning.

INHIBITION is the ability to practice self-restraint. It's how people think before they act. However, for those with ADHD, the natural pause is missing. Along with WM, inhibition is also at play when they interrupt, which may make you feel they're not listening, or think they are narcissistic, or egocentric, which may not be the case. Additionally, their emotional brain may take over when they feel shame, fear, or hurt.

What to do: Create a safe environment for them as they may be feeling very vulnerable. Ask kind questions such as, "would you like a minute to think before you answer?" If they do interrupt, it may be easy to let your own emotions come into play. Allow space for you to consider their perspective

and feelings. Inhibition difficulties comes with the challenges of a neurobiological difference in the brain.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION is the ability to control emotions, and when ADHD is a factor, emotions are harder to manage. The emotions they feel are valid, however the degree to which they feel them may be an extreme. They can also react very quickly- like a light switch. They can come off as reactive or defensive. People with ADHD tend to try to make meaning out of difficult situations, and therefore may misinterpret what is being said. In a difficult conversation, controlling emotions can be even more difficult, especially because those with ADHD tend to feel shame and sadness when they receive negative feedback.

What to do: Employ Psychological Safety. Making unintended mistakes is often a struggle for those with ADHD, and the ability to admit mistakes is one key element of Psychological Safety. Additionally, folks with ADHD often fear the impacts of the stigma that exists around their neurodivergence. They may not speak up if they are in fear of being fired, won't be offered new projects or opportunities, or may fear they will not get promoted. If you feel their input and contributions to the team are valuable, let them know.

PLANNING & PROBLEM SOLVING is the ability to organize, prioritize, plan, make decisions, and employ cognitive flexibility. For those with ADHD, they do well solving complex problems but can be deficient in handling simple problems or managing the minutia of tedious work. Time blindness is also a part of this executive function, which is the inability to sense how much time has passed or how much time is required to get something done. When emotions are high, a person with ADHD may not be able to see- or perceive- beyond the moment in time. They are only focused on the present moment and short-term gains. Additionally, they understand time is passing by quickly and may feel distracted, distressed, or overloaded as a result.

What to do: Be clear as to what topics will be discussed and addressed. Additionally, if appropriate, you can also let them know more time can be scheduled if necessary. The higher the emotions, the more difficulties they may have in managing and organizing their thoughts. Working Memory will also become a factor here.

SELF-AWARENESS is the ability to reflect, evaluate, and think about what you think, say, and do. To control actions and improve them, one must have awareness of them. This is how we shift behavior and pivot when we are getting less than desirable results. In a difficult conversation, a person with ADHD may not take responsibility for their actions or may not acknowledge the impact of their behavior. Shame, regret, and failure to think through their behavior and actions may be a factor when they seem to lack self-awareness.

What to do: Use self-reflective questions with the person with ADHD, such as "what are you doing that is working?" Or "what do you need to do right now?" Consider making the conversation a walking discussion to give them an outlet for any excess energy they may have when emotions are high. This may help them focus on the conversation. Repeat back what is said to help them remember, as working memory is also a factor in self-awareness. If they cannot remember what is

said, it's hard to reflect on it and build awareness of what to do differently. Coaching with an ADHD-informed coach is a very effective way to build strategy around and strengthen self-awareness.

SELF-MOTIVATION is the ability to self-start, achieve, and continue moving forward. For those with ADHD, their brains produce less dopamine, the reward center of our brains. Oftentimes people with ADHD will be thrill-seekers or shift their attention to short-term gratification. Mundane tasks are difficult to start and stick with. People with ADHD are oftentimes people pleasers and may commit beyond their capability and capacity. This can create feelings of overwhelm and deplete their motivation. Inhibition may come into play here as well if they don't stop and think before agreeing to taking on work.

What to do: Navigating difficult situations is important to create strong empathy and connection to those who are on your team. During the difficult conversation, take the time to understand their emotions and how they may be influencing their motivation. When overwhelm is at play, be open to reconsideration. Acknowledge any disappointment and their hard work, and then reframe: "I think it would be great to see you take on fewer projects and narrow your focus to make deadlines more attainable. What are your thoughts?" Or "how would you like to problem-solve this issue? What supports do you need to achieve success?"

TIPS for a productive conversation:

- ✓ The shorter the time between letting them know about the need for the conversation and the actual conversation, the better. The longer the gap between, the more likely the person with ADHD will stew and be emotional.
- ✓ Be specific about the topic of discussion. Instead of "we need to talk," include specific feedback. "I noticed you are struggling to complete tasks and projects on time. Are you open to working together to figure out how to meet our deadlines?"
- ✓ During the discussion use open-ended questions that are direct, but kind and respectful.
- ✓ Let the person with ADHD be heard. They may be more open to dialog and vulnerability if they know you're willing to hear and respect their perspective.

What is ADHD?

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development. It is a neurobiological disorder affecting all aspects of a person's life.

While inattention is described by the name, it's better explained as an overabundance of misdirected attention. It's paying too much attention to surroundings. It's an invisible disorder meaning many of the symptoms people experience may be perceived as a moral failing- one that could be fixed through willpower. However, by focusing on strengths instead of flaws, people with ADHD will THRIVE in the right environment.