Managing Difficult Conversations

This tipsheet focuses on providing strategies on how to build empathetic communication, build confidence when approaching difficult conversations about education and career choices and to identify symptoms of anxiety and how to manage them.

> Made some changes to your programs or career decisions?

> Can't get into a program?

> Not sure how to tell someone that you are not doing well in your classes?

> Not sure how your degree will get you the job you want?

> Can't meet your career goals?

> Don't like your courses and want to switch programs?

SMARTIES

SMARTIES is an acronym to help you communicate effectively when having difficult conversations.

S	M	A	R	T	I	E	S
Show Initiative	Manage Anxiety	Avoid Judgment	Research Options	Time It Well	"I - Statements"	Empathize	Seek Support

Scenario. "I have failed my class due to poor mid-term performance. I do not enjoy the classes I am in and want to change programs. The people closest to me think that a certain degree will guarantee good career prospects. How do I tell them that I want to change programs?"

Be true and honest about your academics. In dealing with sensitive issues such as the desire to change program disciplines due poor grades etc., it is important to stay informed about academic regulations, program or career options; taking these actions can help you build confidence and be clear in your message.

- **Show initiative.** Be proactive by keeping the people closest to you in the loop. For example, "Hey, I got an A on my paper; I really like the courses I am taking this term."
- **Manage Anxiety.** You may be anticipating the worst, and perhaps it won't be so bad.
- **Avoid judgment and take responsibility for your actions as rage or blame limits growth.** For example, "Now I realize that I should have gone to my professor's office hours to seek help." vs. "My professor wasn't very good, so I didn't do well in my class." "I know that you want me to get a university degree and I want that too. I'm just not doing well in my current program and I want to change into another program."
- **Be prepared: research and educate – share information and strengths.** Understand degree requirements/course calendar/explain possibilities (ie specialist, majors and minors, career information career cruising, labour market, tipsheets etc.). Review career assessment results to see/understand your interests, qualities, values and skills. Share your learning/discoveries from information sessions, panels, etc.
- **Time it well.** Find the right time and place to start the conversation.
- **Speak from your own perspective and without blame.** Use "I - Statements" to communicate your desires. For example, I feel _____ when _____. www.traumacentral.net/i-statements.htm
- **Empathize.** Find a common ground by spending time thinking about your own values and where they overlap with those of the people closest to you. It is also important to highlight strengths about culture by focusing on the things that you respect and revere. Demonstrate sensitivity and show that you really care.
- **Seek Support.** There are many resources on campus to help you manage difficult conversations.

Empathy

Empathy includes the:

- Identification with and understanding of other's situation, feelings and motives.
- Understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings.
- Awareness of and interest in the other person's cultural beliefs, values and traditions.

Communication Strategies

- **Focus on the other person, their thoughts and feelings.** Consciously focus to quiet your own internal commentary, and step away from your own concerns and think about those of the other person. Give them your full attention.
- **Pay attention to non-verbal messages, without letting yourself be distracted**. Notice body language and non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and tone and volume of voice. This allows for a richer understanding of the other's point. However, avoid getting distracted from the verbal message. It is also important to be aware of your own non-verbal messages as the person you are speaking with might not fully understand your point of view.
- **Listen for the essence of the other's thoughts: details, major ideas and their meanings.** Seek an overall understanding of what the other person is trying to communicate, rather than reacting to the individual words or terms that they use to express themselves.
- **Be genuine, be yourself, honestly and openly.** Be honest with yourself, and focus on building and maintaining good relationships with the people you care about.
- **Speak from your own perspective.**
- **Seek clarification while communicating and listen more rather than interrupting or talking too much.**
- **Honour cultural norms as you communicate.**
- **Find a common ground.**
- **Understand that effective communication is a process.**

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a state of apprehension, uncertainty, and fear resulting from the anticipation of a realistic or fantasized threatening event or situation which often impairs physical and psychological functions.

Some common ways that anxiety can be revealed or perpetuated include:

- Avoidance of phobic situations
- Anxious self-talk
- Mistaken beliefs
- Withheld feelings

- Lack of assertiveness
- Lack of self-nurturing skills
- Muscle tension
- Lack of meaning or sense of purpose

Resources Available at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC)

Many students struggle with sharing difficult news for the fear of disappointing the people they care about. In order to help you manage your anxiety, seek out some of the resources available on campus.

- Academic Advising & Career Centre (AA&CC) (Room AC213) has academic advisors as well as career counsellors to help you plan and manage your academic and career journey. www.utsc.utoronto.ca/aacc
- Health and Wellness Centre (Room SL-270) has trained health professionals to provide medical, nursing, counselling, health promotion and education services to students. www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~wellness
- International Student Centre (ISC) (Room SL-151) is an international education support service focused on student learning and development. Through its services and programs, the Centre promotes an internationally informed and cross-culturally sensitive university community. http://studentlife.utsc.utoronto.ca/isc
- AccessAbility Services (Room S-302) provides personal counselling to students with a disability. www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~ability

Remember, you are not alone.

For more information, please visit the Academic Advising & Career Centre
AC213 • aacc@utsc.utoronto.ca • 416-287-7561 • www.utsc.utoronto.ca/aacc

Waiver: While every attempt was made to provide accurate information on this tipsheet, information may change at any time.