

Two articles that will help you design for this challenge...

1. How to Turn Down the Tension in a Conversation

Research finds that if our language shows someone we're open to their perspective, they are more likely to be open to ours.

Nerenberg, J. (2024, October 30). How to turn down the tension in a conversation. *Greater Good Magazine*. University of California, Berkeley, Greater Good Science Center.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_turn_down_the_tension_in_a_conversation

From election cycles to workplace committees to family dinners at home, conversations can be tense. While many people are getting into heated debates, others are self-censoring online and offline as a way to avoid conflict. In our modern era of increasing polarization, we would all benefit from learning to face disagreement and conflict more gracefully and communicate more effectively.



[Julia Minson](#) at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government has spent decades as a researcher in a field she calls “the psychology of disagreement.” Minson and her colleagues have published numerous papers on topics ranging from negotiation to trust in the media to the concept of “conversational receptiveness”: language that shows people you are engaging with their perspective.

In a series of papers, they found that learning conversational receptiveness only takes a few minutes, and using it during tense disagreements can soften the words of your conversation partner. In other words, it’s “contagious”—when one person learns and implements it, it affects the people around them, therefore creating a ripple effect of better communication.

I spoke to Minson about her research and new insights, which are vital for today’s tense times.



Julia Minson, Ph.D.

Jenara Nerenberg: How do you define conversational receptiveness?

Julia Minson: Conversational receptiveness is using language to show your counterpart that you are actively engaged with their point of view. It's a cousin to ideas like open-mindedness, perspective taking, and intellectual humility. But all of those things happen in your head, so your counterpart often can't tell if you're doing all this work in your mind to engage with their perspective or not. Conversational receptiveness is specifically using language—words and phrases—to convince your counterpart that you are paying attention and thinking hard about what they're saying.

JN: Are words that convey conversational receptiveness the same across various topics and contexts?

JM: Yes, there are a finite set of phrases that people mostly agree on that signal engagement. That's what's nice about analyzing conversational data—transcripts of many, many conversations. In any conversation, there are of course [thematic] pieces that are specific to particular topics, like gun control or abortion or affirmative action. But there are words that are the same that pop up in all conversations—words that signal engagement and listening, such as “I hear you,” or “I understand,” or “we both want....”

The way we've been teaching this and making it easy for people to remember is the acronym HEAR. We take great pride in that this framework is experimentally validated—we know it works, and we know exactly how much it works.

The H is hedging—as in hedging your claims with words like “sometimes, maybe, perhaps, some people.” The idea is that you don't change your message, but you make your claim with a little less dogmatism. So people are less tempted to counter-argue.

The E stands for emphasizing agreement, so words like “We both want to” or “I also think” or “I agree with some of what you're saying.” It doesn't mean that you're compromising or changing your view or meeting in the middle, it just means that you recognize that most disagreements are multidimensional, so there are some things you agree on.

The A is acknowledgment, and that's the one that is most familiar to people as it's closest to things that are commonly taught in active listening, for example. It's essentially taking the time to restate your counterpart's perspective so they understand that you actually heard them. I like to remind people that there's a good way to do acknowledgment and there's a bad way to do acknowledgement. So the bad way is, "I hear you, but here is where I'm coming from." So you say you heard but you didn't do anything to demonstrate you heard. You have to demonstrate, like "I hear that this topic is really important to you because you feel like if we don't address it, then these bad things are going to happen." So you have to really show that you heard, and then you get to move on to making your own point.

And then the R is reframing to the positive, which is trying to get rid of some of the negation words, so avoiding "no, don't, can't, won't" and then adding positive emotion words. So instead of "I could never agree to a project that wastes resources with no known benefits," it's "I would love to look for opportunities to evaluate the benefits of any potential projects."

JN: Can you talk more about how conversational receptiveness is contagious?

JM: One of the things we've known for a long time is that people mimic the emotional content of language. So if I'm more positive and warm, that makes you more positive and warm—and if I'm more negative, that makes you more negative. And so one way you might think you can improve the quality of your conversations is **to use a more pleasant tone**, because if you're being warm and pleasant, it is harder for your counterpart to start being a jerk to you because they're fighting against all this wiring that makes people naturally mimic each other.

Mimicry does happen with receptiveness. This is important because you can imagine that the opposite might happen where one person might take advantage of another's receptiveness and stomp on that person's point of view.

And so people have more agency as a result [of practicing conversational receptiveness] because I'm increasing the chance that the other person will be more receptive to me, as well. The other point that's important is that we went through a lot of trouble to disentangle "**direct**" versus "indirect" **accommodation**—direct is like *monkey see, monkey do*; **I say a word, you say a word**. With indirect accommodation, I don't know if you mean it when you say it because you just heard me say it.

Indirect accommodation is when I say a different word from you, and that shows receptiveness—what that implies is that you're not just *saying* receptive words, you are actually *being* more receptive [because **you've internalized and demonstrated understanding rather than just repeating**].

So we were very excited about those two pieces—that you can actually increase how receptive people are to you by being more receptive to them.

*“You can actually increase how receptive people are to you by being more receptive to them”
—Julia Minson, Ph.D.*

JN: Can you share more about what you set out to do with this new paper and what your findings were?

JM: In an [earlier paper](#), we identified conversational receptiveness as a distinct linguistic style—and we knew we could train people in it, and their counterparts would evaluate them more positively, thinking they’re more trustworthy and reasonable. And so the question was: Beyond just liking someone better, would you actually treat them better?

In [one of the studies featured in this new paper](#), we had people in a lab who disagreed with each other talk for about 20 minutes over multiple rounds of conversations. We found in our analysis of the data that the amount of receptiveness in their language converged over the conversation—and so it became clear that people were affecting each other’s receptiveness. They were converging toward a common average in each pair.

This new paper was about nailing this point and figuring out exactly what happens. So the studies are about pairing people up who strongly disagree on something and we train one side in conversational receptiveness—and by “train” I mean four bullet points of instructions, and it takes less than two minutes to read and internalize. Half of the people don’t get those instructions. The participants exchange messages with people they disagree with, and what we’re interested in are the messages that come back.

What we see is that the messages that come back in response to those who are trained are, in themselves, more receptive. And so that suggests that receptiveness changes behavior.

Let’s say you have two liberal participants trained in receptiveness who send messages to conservative counterparts who haven’t been trained. The conservative counterparts now sound more receptive [as a result of the conversation]. And then we take two different liberal participants [who are not trained] and they read the messages from those two conservatives, and they all have no idea that there’s any such thing as conversational receptiveness. What we find is that the liberals want to have further conversations with the conservative counterparts who two rounds ago had talked to participants who were trained in conversational receptiveness.

So it’s not just that the counterpart’s language changes, it’s that it changes enough that another human—who has no clue that anything is going on—notices it.

JN: Is one of your goals to implement and train people in this worldwide, or even in elementary schools?

JM: We've been using [the HEAR acronym] in the classroom with college students and master's students. And I'm now putting together a high school curriculum. Elementary might be a little too early, but middle school and high school teenagers could very much benefit.

These issues are not just about polarization; they're about disagreement on any topic with anybody. And it's a skill set, so the more you practice it, the easier it becomes. I'd love to have this go into as many places as possible. And I think another place where this would be beneficial is health care, because that's a space where there is a lot of conflict, and our health care workers get very little training in how to handle it (and almost none of it is evidence-based). So given how much time we put people through medical school, I think an hour of conversational receptiveness would be a worthwhile investment.

JN: What are your thoughts on how people can implement conversational receptiveness at home?

JM: Every disagreement when you are tempted to tell the other person how it is—just don't. I think the HEAR framework applies so easily to so many situations. So take it and stick it with Scotch tape on your fridge. It might feel awkward in the beginning to find the right words, and people often say that. It can be hard in the beginning, and it doesn't feel authentic because your authentic response is to argue. But I would rather have some inauthentic receptiveness than have you authentically fly off the handle. And it becomes more comfortable with time.

It's useful to observe when you struggle, because you think, "Why is it so hard for me to acknowledge this person's perspective?" And that's an interesting moment of reflection. So I apply this to my kids, my husband, and my colleagues.

JN: How can people show conversational receptiveness online, especially on social media?

JM: I think the best way to avoid conflict on social media is to not disagree on social media—there's just no reason to. There's no reason to respond on Facebook; just call the person and have a conversation. I think social media is performative and riles people up, and that's the structure of it. Talking face to face without an audience is much more likely to result in positive things. Conversational receptiveness, by definition, requires more words—it's not going to fit into 280 characters. So I'd say just pick up the phone.

The Five-Step Path From Rupture to Repair

PACER: A relationship model born from decades of clinical work with couples.

Borg, M. B., Jr., & Miyamoto-Borg, H. (2025, December 10). The five-step path from rupture to repair. *Psychology Today*.

Key points

- The PACER model gives couples a clear, repeatable path through conflict.
- Pausing and taking accountability can help reduce reactivity and increase clarity.
- The collaboration and experiment steps can help partners create new patterns together.

- The reset stage strengthens the relationship's sense of "us."

Most of us enter relationships believing that love will help us handle conflict. But we learned, as partners and as clinicians, that love doesn't automatically teach us **how to slow down** when we're triggered, how to be vulnerable with what we're feeling, how to stay connected while disagreeing, or how to return to each other after a rupture. These skills are learned, not inherited. The PACER is a model for conflict resolution that we present and explicate in detail in our book, [Love. Crash. Rebuild.](#)

Before the PACER model existed, we (Mark and Haruna) were a couple with a strong bond but very different emotional languages. We had the intensity, the affection, the commitment. What we didn't yet have was a reliable way to interrupt the patterns that emerged when we felt hurt or scared. Even small misunderstandings could escalate quickly. We tried to repair, but sometimes our attempts made things worse. Our reactions—shaped by history, culture, and family dynamics—often took over.

The PACER model didn't come to us in a moment of genius. It accumulated over time—piece by piece, conflict by conflict, session by session. And eventually, the same five steps we used to steady ourselves became the framework we now teach couples who are trying to find their way back to each other.

1. Pause: Interrupting the Reaction

The earliest seeds of PACER were planted in moments when we kept talking long after we had stopped thinking clearly. In one of the first arguments we ever deconstructed together—one that started with something trivial but spiraled quickly—we realized that the problem wasn't the issue itself. The problem was that **we couldn't stop ourselves from reacting** to each other. Pause became the first step because nothing that follows matters if partners can't interrupt the emotional surge. We learned three important lessons:

- A pause is not withdrawal.
- It's not [punishment](#).
- It's not disengagement.

It is the deliberate act of creating just enough space to allow the body and mind to come back online. Interpersonal [anxiety](#) is an experience that can spread rapidly between partners, often without either fully understanding how or why. Pause is the antidote to that contagion. When we started practicing pause seriously, the quality of our conflicts changed. We were no longer fighting in a fog. We were **taking a moment to breathe, regulate, and remember** who we were talking to.

2. Accountability: Turning Toward Ourselves Instead of Each Other

Accountability grew out of the humbling realization that we were both contributing to the friction we experienced. Not intentionally, and not maliciously. But inevitably. We each had sensitivities and interpretations that preceded the moment itself.

In one moment that reflects many early conflicts, we found ourselves arguing about a plan that had gone sideways. Each of us felt misunderstood. Each assumed the other *should* know our internal experience. Underneath [anger](#) were softer emotions—[fear](#), disappointment, longing—that neither of us named until much later.

Accountability means saying, “*Here is my part of what’s happening.*” Not as self-blame, but as self-awareness.

Erich Fromm (1956) described love as an active discipline, something that requires [attention](#), intention, and honesty. Accountability is one form of that discipline. It is the willingness to examine what we are bringing into the moment: the fears we don’t speak, the stories we tell ourselves, the reflexes we inherited from past relationships or early life.

When both partners take accountability, [shame](#) decreases, and curiosity increases. We start seeing the pattern instead of the villain.

3. **Collaboration:** Facing the Pattern Together

[Collaboration](#) is where the relationship starts to become its own entity. We began to see that neither of us was “the problem.” The problem was the choreography we unconsciously performed when we were upset. The narrative therapist Michael White (2007) wrote about the externalization of the problem. He stresses that people (us!) are *not* the problem; it’s how they (we!) are communicating that is the problem.

Once [we could name our dance](#), something loosened.

Instead of Mark feeling pressured and Haruna feeling dismissed, we could articulate what happened *between us* in those heated moments. We began saying things like:

- “This feels like the pattern starting.”
- “I think we’re in that loop again.”
- “Let’s figure out what’s happening to us.”

[Collaboration is the step where the couple becomes a team.](#) Not because the conflict disappears, but because both partners can look at it together rather than through the lens of threat.

4. **Experiment:** Trying Something New When Old Habits Don’t Work

Experiment was born out of [trial and error](#) in our own [marriage](#). We realized we couldn’t think our way into new patterns—we had to *try* them. Sometimes the experiment was tiny:

- Changing the way we open a hard conversation
- Agreeing to start a conversation when we catch ourselves blaming the other

- Practicing saying, “I need a pause,” instead of going silent or escalating
- When things were really heated in the beginning, we would hold hands and say, “Just for today, no fighting.”

Emmanuel Ghent (1990) wrote about the difference between *surrender* and *submission*. Submission is compliance; surrender is the willingness to drop defenses in service of genuine connection. Experiment is a form of surrender, **an openness to discovering something new** about ourselves and each other.

Our early experiments were awkward, imperfect, and sometimes laughable. But they worked. They created new emotional experiences that slowly rewired old expectations.

5. Reset: Returning With a New Story

Reset is the quiet, steady emergence of a new relational **identity**. Not because the relationship goes back to what it was, but because the couple integrates what they have learned and becomes capable of resolving conflict more quickly.

Reset showed up for us in small, almost unremarkable moments: places where we expected a rupture but instead felt steadiness. Times when we didn’t spiral in the ways we once had. Moments when we found our way back to each other without losing ourselves.

Reset is the recognition that *“we are not who we were before, and our relationship isn’t either.”* It represents **confidence**—not just in each other, but in the process the couple has built.

Why PACER Works

The PACER model works because it gives couples a way to organize what feels chaotic. **It takes something overwhelming (rupture) and turns it into something manageable. It invites partners to move from protection to connection, from fear to curiosity, from instinct to intention.** And it keeps the couple oriented toward the most important truth of all:

- Rupture is inevitable.
- Repair is learnable.
- Every time you repair, your relationship grows stronger.

References

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