

Sensitive Topics for Conversation



It is important to avoid sensitive topics unless you are speaking to someone you know very well, such as a close friend or close relative. In some cases, it may be appropriate to talk about sensitive topics with a trusted professional such as your GP, but it is probably best to check with a close relative or friend first if you are unsure. Additionally, sensitive topics should generally only be discussed in private places such as your home or in a room away from other people, such as a meeting room or doctor's office.

If someone you don't know well, or who is not a suitable professional, starts speaking to you about a sensitive subject, this is not appropriate behaviour. For example, if someone you don't know well starts talking to you about sex, this is not acceptable and you should excuse yourself from the situation by saying something like "I'm sorry, I'm not comfortable discussing that with you. Please can we change the subject." or "I'm sorry, I'm not comfortable discussing that with you. Please excuse me." and walk away.

Occasionally, someone might choose to talk to you about something bad that happened to them such as someone they know dying, or an injury they had. In this situation it is best not to ask questions as having something bad happen is very personal and upsetting, and asking for further information could upset the person further and make you come across as insensitive. Instead, respond by expressing sympathy, for

example say “I’m sorry to hear that” and practice active listening but instead of saying ‘yes’ try saying “I’m sorry” or “oh dear”.

Here are some examples of sensitive topics:

These are topics that it is best to try to avoid unless it is with people you know very well and trust

- Money (e.g. “How much money do you earn?”)
- Critical comments (e.g. “That top makes you look fat”.)
- Personal questions about relationships (e.g. do you love your boyfriend?)
- Hygiene-related comments (e.g. “He smells bad, he needs to bathe”.)
- Physical appearance (e.g. “How much do you weigh? How often do you wash your hair?”)
- Politics (e.g. “Who did you vote for at the last election?”)
- Religion (e.g. “Do you believe in God?”)
- Someone’s disability
- Someone’s injuries or illness (e.g. “What happened to your arm?”)
- Alcohol (e.g. “you’re drinking a lot today.”)
- Parts of the body (could be misconstrued as flirting or being rude e.g. “you have lovely legs.” or “you have nice breasts”.)

Inappropriate topics:

These topics must be avoided other than in exceptional circumstances

- Sex and sexuality (e.g. Are you gay or straight?)
- Violence

- Death or bereavement
- Using swearwords or blasphemy
- Drugs