



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Hello, hello, hello! How are you? Welcome back to the podcast - episode number 30 already. I can't believe it. I remember when I was doing like number 10, and it felt like it was so many. I keep coming up with these amazing things to talk to you about.

Listen, when we were in Peru and coming back from Peru, actually, both ways, we ended up having overnight flights, like red eyes, which we weren't excited about but there is seriously ... There were no other options. It's just how it was. When we were flying home, we flew through Dallas, so we flew from Cusco to Lima, and then overnight from Lima to Dallas, had a layover there, and then went from Dallas home to Milwaukee. When we were in Dallas, we have a five and a half or six-hour layover, and so we were there for a long time.

We got through customs which was so funny because it was so early in the morning and the customs agent was like, "What are you bringing back?" I was like, "Souvenirs." He was like, "Welcome home," and like we walk through like that was the extent of it like no questions at all.

Anyway, we had all this time. We were so happy to be back in America, mostly because we could drink the water and everyone spoke English and just life is easier in your home country; it just is. Anyway, so we got through customs, got our bags, all rechecked and everything, and then we had all this time. Of course, it was early morning and I immediately wanted some coffee, so we found ourselves a Starbucks. It was actually cool because it was a Starbucks, but it was connected to a bookstore, and I love bookstores. I actually don't spend a lot of time in bookstores anymore because I mostly end up buying my books on Amazon, but a good bookstore is a great place to spend some hours in my opinion.

We got drinks and my son got some breakfast. We were sitting at the bar in Starbucks looking at this bookstore, and I noticed that they had a couple of those leather club chairs that are more comfortable. I'd much rather sit in there and read to pass the time than in those usual airport seats that they have. We finished up our drinks and went over and sat there. Then I just couldn't resist so I told my son, "Just stay here with our stuff. I'm going to browse."

I'm looking around, looking around, and I found one of those displays that's like those things that spins around. You know what I'm talking about? I don't even know what that's called, but you basically spin it all around; you can see different things. They have these little books that are by the Harvard Business Review Press. I had never read a book by them. They had all these fun, cool, little business-y topics. I was just

looking through them all and I immediately, my eyes just zeroed in on this one. It was called *Difficult Conversations*, and I thought, oh, that would be really interesting. That would be really a cool book to read, I think, just to get more like the business aspects idea of how they manage conflict resolution, difficult conversations. I was like, "Ugh, you don't need to buy another book right now. You have other ..." I've got a stack; plenty of books to read.

I went and looked at other books and different things. I sat down for a while then my son got up, and he had looked at a bunch of books and he sat down. I could not stop thinking about this book about difficult conversations. Finally, I thought, you now what? I am just going to buy that book, because I want it and I want to read it right now. I went and bought it and started reading it. I thought right away this is going to be a podcast topic for sure, not because this book itself is necessarily so applicable to physicians, but because of the framework of it and how I could basically roll that over to work for some information that would be helpful for you guys.

I had talked a couple podcasts ago about criticism and feedback and things like that. This is like a natural partner to that, because sometimes when we're getting criticism or feedback or giving those, those are in conversation form. Sometimes we need to have conversations but it's not really about my feedback or criticism. I thought this was really a great, great topic for us to talk about. I just found it super, super interesting.

If you're interested, the book is called *20-Minute Manager: Difficult Conversations* by Harvard Business Review Press. I actually have to say though, unless you're really interested, I probably would not buy it if I were you. The reason why is because all of their examples are super-duper business-y. I was chuckling to myself as I was reading it because it had all this business lingo and all this terminology and stuff that if you're in medicine, I just don't think that we really identify with that much. I, of course, could immediately see how it would apply to those who are in medicine too.

This is the thing: I don't think these are just about difficult work conversations, but you can apply this to any difficult conversations. This is a difficult conversation with your spouse, with your parents, with your in-laws, or brother-in-law, sister-in-law, or maybe you're serving on a board of a foundation or volunteering. Literally, the sky is the limit. Any difficult conversation that you need to have or you want to have, you probably don't want to have it, but you think you need to have it, you can apply what I'm about to tell you.

Basically, what I did was I took their framework outline on how to go through preparing and having a difficult conversation and basically added a life coach touch to it. If you're really looking to purely read what they were talking about, please look for that book; but otherwise, I think I can just give you, in a few quick minutes, the rundown here. I think that will be all you're really going to need.

The first thing we want to talk about is what makes a conversation difficult in the first place, like why are some difficult and some not. Definitely it's because of our thinking about that conversation. This can vary in lots of different ways. We might have conflicting interests with the other person and we have thoughts about that. We might have different personal styles, like different personality types, from the other person, different communication styles, different work styles, different life experiences, and different core values, and so that might make it difficult or more challenging. We might lack trust with the other person or they might not trust us. We might have very different views of the facts and then usually, often, there are strong emotions involved too.

At first, you need to think the situation through. You need to coach yourself or be coached to make sure that you clean up all of your thinking about the circumstances or the neutral facts. This is where you get introspective you ask yourself what your involvement is in the situation. Because what we really like to do - or maybe just me - but I think most of us, we really like to blame the other person. We want to have a conversation so that they'll change and then we can feel better, but guaranteed you are contributing to the situation at least some way in your own way. You want to ask yourself honestly if the situation will even benefit from a conversation. Those of us who avoid conflict would rather just silently stew with rage than have a conversation; that's remotely hard. Then those of us who are more confrontational might jump into conversations that don't necessarily even need to happen.

Communication is always good but just like I talked about to in the podcast about criticism and feedback, you need to make sure that you like your intentions for confronting the other person. Should you act? Should you ask to have a conversation with the person? We get nervous, right? Many of us would rather just ignore the problem and let it blow over than confront it. We're worried that there might be some sort of blowup or damage to our relationship with the other person or maybe even damage to our reputation.

We also sometimes avoid a difficult conversation because we have a whole story in our heads about how the conversation would go down if we had it, so we make that mean that we should just be passive-aggressive and shoot daggers at the other person from our eyes. You know what I'm talking about, right? If I want to have a conversation with my husband about why he doesn't help out around the house more often, but then I tell myself that he doesn't care and he won't listen and nothing will change anyway, then I avoid the conversation but nothing gets better, and I live my life miserable and in martyrdom. If your boss or department head treats you in a way that you find disrespectful, you might want to avoid a conversation because you have a whole story you've created for yourself that he's just a misogynist and doesn't respect any women and is basically just a miserable human being so why bother, right?

In the book, they list a series of questions to ask yourself when you're trying to decide if you should confront the other person with a conversation. Number one, does my short or long-term success rely on addressing this problem? This is again very business focused and so you can apply that to work. You can think like does my short or long term marriage success rely on addressing this problem, right? Or does my short or long-term relationship with this person rely on addressing this problem? It doesn't have to necessarily just be success.

Number two, does the situation I'm facing concern a direct report or my boss? Again, very business related so that might be like your actual boss at work or a direct report like your medical assistant or a nurse or receptionist, somebody like that. It also might concern someone you're in charge of. It might concern your teenager. It might concern someone who thinks that they're like your boss like your mother-in-law or your mother or somebody like that. Is the relationship with this person short-term, like a one-time interaction, or just like a discrete project or is it ongoing? For example, am I working with my boss' boss or a coworker I rely on to get my job done? We have to work in a team often and so we can look at that. Also, like if the relationship is this one person you're volunteering on a committee with and you're struggling with that person, you might go, "Okay, well, we're almost done with the project. I'm not even going to really focus on this. I'm going to just change my thinking about it." Or if it's ongoing like you've signed up for a four-year position, you're going to have to work with this person, you might decide you want to have a conversation.

Next question, how important is it to me and to the organization to improve the relationship or the situation? If your personal life, of course, how important is it to you to improve the relationship with the situation, right? It might be pretty important or it might really not be. Or with the organization that could be your practice, it could be the hospital system you work for, how important is it to them that you improve the relationship with the situation?

Next question, is the issue affecting my ability to concentrate or how I feel about going to work every day? If you're just driving going to work every day because you have to work with this MA who's driving you nuts, you probably need to have that difficult conversation, right? Or if you have somebody who's really distracting in the office and you just can't even concentrate or focus and it's making you leave later every day because your efficiency is so much worse, you might decide it's time to have that conversation.

Does the situation I'm grappling with involve other colleagues or customers? It's important to not put off these conversations just because they are hard. In the book, they list five bad reasons for avoiding a hard conversation. Number one, you fear conflict, and for most of us, these conversations will literally be the very last thing we feel like doing. I know for me I end up going straight into a fight or flight mode. My heart rate immediately starts raising, my face gets flushed, my eyes widen; it's like my body is thinking I'm heading into a real battlefield and something terrible is most certainly about to happen. Even when I can rationally remind myself that that's not the case, and I believe it, physically, I still feel that way. Of course, other people are much calmer about it.

Number two, you deny there is a problem. Sometimes in order to protect ourselves, our brains will try to convince us that everything's fine. If you're sensing tension or frustration or there is a lack of productivity in any of your relationships, that might be what's holding you back from doing your best work or having the relationships or results that you want.

Number three, you're sure the other person won't change. This has been a big one for me. Remember that the goal here is not to change someone else which is great news because you actually can't even do that. You can't ever change another person even though we try so hard and even though life would be so much easier and better if they would just do everything we think they should do, right? The goal is also not to assign blame to the other person; this is very important.

Number four, you think you can work around it. Here, you can do a simple pros and cons list of having a conversation with them. Sometimes, say, if you have a new MA who's struggling, you may not want to have a big conversation every day over every little minor thing she's doing that isn't to your liking. You might want to address the big things occasionally as they come up and then let her work evolve and see if she can improve on her own before deciding if you need to revisit all the other minor items.

Number five, you think the problem will solve itself. Most of the time, real true problems, not once we just make up in her head, but real true problems don't just go away if you ignore them. If you simply need to adjust your thinking about something, that's a totally different story. Putting off solving a problem, a real problem just to avoid a difficult conversation, can make the problem even worse.

Once you've decided to have the difficult conversation, there is some personal work for you to do to prepare yourself ahead of time. First, you want to name what you feel. You want to identify what the emotions are that you're experiencing when you're thinking about the situation or addressing it. Ask yourself why you're feeling that way, have a story, and ask yourself why again. You'll probably get a slightly different answer then keep asking yourself why again and again until you've really teased out all of your thoughts and emotions about the situations. You really, really know what's going on for you in regards to that situation. Then you identify what the neutral facts are in the situation; there's generally very few.

I have a patient. I wrote an order for medication for that patient. An hour later, you changed my order to a different medication without talking to me first. You see that? Very, very neutral; there's no emotion. We don't say it was the wrong medication. No qualifying words here at all. We take all the drama out of it and are left with just the neutral facts.

Then look at what your assumptions are. These are the stories that your brain has created about the situation and the other person so more questions to ask yourself. Are there relevant factors that I don't know about? Chances are there are some. Are past experiences coloring my interpretation of the events? Basically, am I using my past to assign meaning to this current situation? Am I making unwarranted negative assumptions about the other person's motives? I find that the answer here is usually at least a little bit, right?

Then want to address the feelings that you're experiencing that you identified earlier. If we think it will be a difficult conversation, then these emotions are often pretty strong and intense. There's a few things to consider when dealing with these emotions. You can ask yourself, is my self-image being threatened? This means do you feel like the core of who you are is under attack? If yes, then ask yourself why you're making it mean that. What might my counterpart's emotions be? It can seem really hard to do this especially if you're all fired up, but it's really essential to think about how the other person might be feeling. Could they be trying to cover up some sort of insecurity they have? Might they feel isolated? When you work on looking at the situation from the other person's perspective, you work on developing empathy for them. Creating genuine empathy for the other person helps you to be more likely to have a successful conversation.

What feelings could the conversation trigger? If you go into the meeting as though it's a battlefield where one side wins and the other side loses, then no matter what the other person says, you'll take it as a personal attack. It's good to identify how you might feel during the conversation, defensive, angry, offended, disappointed, embarrassed? Then identify the thoughts you might have that would be creating those emotions and ask yourself, are they even true?

Next, acknowledge that you're part of the problem. This is so good. A problem is never one-sided. Write down what your view of the problem is and then write down what you think the other person's view might be, so you might not really know. You have to get creative here and really put yourself in their shoes and then do the same for emotions. What are you really feeling about the situation? What you think the other person is feeling about it?

Now that you've looked at your perspective and the possible perspectives of the other person, you identify a range of positive outcomes. Ask yourself what you hope to achieve in initiating the conversation. Make sure you keep yourself clear on the objectives of this particular conversation. The more focused you are with your goals for it, the more likely you are to achieve them. Identify what your preferred outcome is like your ideal outcome, but then also consider other results that would work for you as well. Then do a reality check of your goals against the other person's perspective. Might they be okay with that outcome too? That's what you're looking for. Is it possible that that might be okay for them?

Then finally, create a strategy for the conversation but definitely not a script. Plan for different scenarios based on various ways the other person might respond. If you're nervous, do a dry run in front of the mirror or even try a mock conversation with someone who's unbiased where you have a hypothetical discussion. The point of this is to practice neutral facial expressions and open body language as well and as to gather and focus your thoughts before the real conversation.

Also consider the timing of the conversation. If you plan a meeting for the very end of a brutal day in the OR or clinic where you know you'll be physically and emotionally spent, and also it will be right before your period starts or something, maybe reschedule that to a better day and time for you; probably a good idea.

Let's review here. These are the questions to ask yourself as you prepare for the conversation. What is the issue I'm trying to resolve? What are the neutral facts? What is my counterpart's view of the issue? What assumptions are we making about the situation and each other? What underlying interests are at stake for me for my counterpart? What feelings does the situation trigger for me or for my counterpart?

Now, I don't love that trigger word because the trigger word makes it sound like it just happens to us, right? What feelings does the situation trigger for me? Like all of a sudden, the situation which is the circumstance in neutral has triggered these feelings, right? When you think about that thought model was between the circumstance and the emotion, the feeling, the thought, right? There are always thoughts that create all of our emotions; nothing just triggers us. It's what we make something else means, so just be careful about that. That trigger word is really, really popular right now. People always talking about like, "She triggers me or that person. That situation just really triggers me or I read that and it triggered me." It's not really how it works, right? You interacted with somebody or you read something or you saw something and you had thoughts about that. You gave that circumstance meaning that created the feelings, that feeling of being triggered or being very upset.

Okay, next question. What do I want to achieve from the conversation? Last, how can we break the impasse? I also want to add that the conversation doesn't really ever have to be hard or difficult if you carefully choose your thoughts about it in addition to preparing yourself for the conversation. You can decide how you want to feel during the conversation. If you have to fire someone, you can choose thoughts to think that genuinely creates the feeling of gratitude or empathy or even love for the person you're firing. It's so good to decide this ahead of time so when the conversation time approaches you're super intentional about how you're showing up for it and not just flying by the seat of your pants, right?

Now we have the conversation. You start by acknowledging the other person. You thank them for taking the time, making the effort to talk with you. You don't just launch right into your grievance. Then you frame the problem. You want to keep your tone neutral and your body language open. You want to watch the other person's body language too. If they look surprised or put off by something you said, take a moment to explicitly check your assumptions with them. Ask if you missed or misinterpreted something.

It's a good idea to explicitly describe your views and the problem using "I" statements. That means, "I this," "I see it as that," always using "I." This shows that you're not assuming that your perspective is the truth of the situation. You're also showing the other person that you're acknowledging your role in the problem and not assigning blame. Make sure you express your feelings. You can talk about your feelings without being overwhelmed by them. You can tell the person how you felt when something happened or what you might have meant and how you felt when they did something. Make sure to focus on the issues and not on personalities. You don't want to attribute the problem to the other person's personality.

Then ask questions and listen, so zip your lip, right? Really stay focused and listen to what the other person says. Ask them for their version of the situation so that you're reinforcing that the point of the conversation is to have an opportunity to jointly solve the problem, not just vent about what they're doing wrong. Show the other person that you are genuinely trying to understand their position. They will fill in those blanks you had before about what their take was of the problem so then you really. Then you need to start looking for common ground and possible solutions.

Now, what if the other person gets upset despite your best intentions and careful preparation or what if you find that your feelings and emotions are flaring up and now you're feeling confused or angry or embarrassed? Know that unexpected things can and will happen, and when they do, you don't have to panic. You don't have to let this throw you off. If you get angry, take a breath and then maybe even a few more, maybe excuse yourself to go to the bathroom for a second or get a drink of water. Actively remember your intentions for the conversation and try to get back on a positive track. If you really can't do that, then ask if you can continue the conversation the next day. You can literally say something like, "Wow. I'm feeling super reactive right now, and I think that whatever I say is going to not move us forward here, can we meet again tomorrow at the same time?"

If they get angry, remember that you can't control someone else's emotions; only your own so stay calm and keep a neutral tone. You can say something like, "It seems like you're having some strong feelings about this. Can you help me understand why?" If they'll explain why, that will often cool them down. If not, go ahead and table the conversation for now and then meet again at another time but let them decide.

If you feel misunderstood, then what's probably happening is that the other person isn't hearing you. They might be stuck on something you said or not really understanding what the root issue is. They might feel threatened by you or whatever they're feeling might be making it so that they aren't really able to listen to you. Acknowledge that you're concerned, that you haven't been clear; make sure they know that. Ask what else they want to know. The more you ask and the more you show that you're trying to understand, the more likely it will be that they'll be able to get beyond their preconceptions and their emotions and really listen to you.

If you don't know where they stand and you can't tell, ask more questions and check your understanding. You might, despite all your good planning, find yourself baffled by their response or they might be really quiet and you can't pick up on any clues for how it's going. Or they immediately agree with you but you sense that it's not really authentic. You can say, "I'm trying to understand your perspective on this but I'm not quite there yet," and then ask more questions to keep the conversation open and moving.

If they dig in their heels, acknowledge that their positioning concerns are legitimate and ask how they think things could be better. You might find that you're coming up with solutions but you sense that the other person is still totally dedicated to their way being the only way. If you can focus on a common goal, then that gives the other person the opening to acknowledge that creative solutions are possible and that they exist.

Then finish up the conversation by establishing commitments. You might not have a neat and tidy solution all wrapped up in a pretty bow. You might have just barely ripped the Band-Aid off of a deeper and more complicated issue but you can see that the conversation moved you forward even if it's ever so slightly forward. Make sure you clarify what you both agreed to do and set up another time to talk if it's needed. Thank them for their time and the conversation is over.

After the fact, of course, you want to follow through on the things you said you would do. It's good to spend a little time debriefing with yourself after the conversation. You want to see how well you met the goal that you initially set for yourself for the conversations. You can ask yourself these questions. Do I feel proud of how I managed the conversation? Do I feel strong or do I feel let down, embattled, embarrassed, or just happy it's over? Did I meet the objectives and cover the topics I outlined for myself? Did I present my perspective in ways that are consistent with my intentions? Did I show respect? Do I feel differently now about the person or the problem? Did I learn anything that changes my view of the problem?

Take some notes about the conversation as soon as you can so that you don't forget what happened for the next conversation. You want to make sure that you write down the details as they happen rather than relying on your memory then letting your memory fade and be replaced with your interpretations of what happened. You could even get really specific and detailed with yourself if you want to and write notes about your and their body language, tone of voice, emotions, description of the problem, objective stated, questions asked or missed, listening, common ground, and solutions proposed. Then follow up with the person in writing if it makes sense. You can share with them some of your notes or what you both agreed to do. You're probably not going to do that with your husband, your mother-in-law, but if it's somebody at work or a volunteer position or some other side gig or something that might be appropriate, then, of course, you keep your commitments and do what you said you would do and follow up with them as needed.

In going through this process, you're also working on being a better communicator and that skill transfers to every area of your life where you interact with other humans. You learn to reflect before you speak. You can ask yourself, who do I want to be? How do I want to behave in this situation? What do I want others to take away about me? You practice connecting with others. You learn to listen before you talk and to make your words count. You ask for a feedback from others in the situation. You address problems head on instead of avoiding them, because you think it will be too hard or nothing will change. This has the potential to make a huge difference in your life and also to bring you closer to what you want your life.

All right, so give this a try and let me know how it goes. You can find the transcript with all these questions in the comments area for this podcast at katrinaubellmd.com/30. The last 5 or 10 minutes, you might have heard some sounds. I'm still having work done in my house, and literally, there is a man on a ladder outside the window just now. I think I started when they were on their lunch break, and they are no longer on their lunch break so you're hearing regular human life happening. Oh, and there's the drill, time for me to be done. Okay, have a great week. I will talk to you so very soon. Take care. Bye-bye.