

# My wife doesn't understand a thing I say

A new book from America promises you'll never have to yell at your partner again.

TIM DOWLING tries it out on his bolshy missus

The latest book to come out of the Harvard Negotiation Project (“a think tank to produce ideas useful to real people”) is *Difficult Conversations*. In 1981, the think tank produced the best-selling *Getting to YES* a guide to effective negotiation and problem solving. *Difficult Conversations* brings 15 years of research to bear on the kinds of discussions had every day by couples, colleagues, friends and family, and to shed light on the dysfunctional rag-bag of bickering we all call communication.

By the time I had finished the introduction, I realised the book presented an almost perfect antithesis to the kind of conversational style favoured by my wife and myself. My wife is the foremost practitioner of a negotiating method called Getting to F--K OFF, and all our conversations are difficult ones. A typical dialogue goes like this:

Me: What are we having for supper?

Her: Why are you asking me?

Me: To find out what you want.

Her: rm not having that larnb.

Me: Oh... Pasta?

Her: All right, but if you think rm cooking you can fuck off.

Faced with the prospect of continuing in this vein for an hour, you can see how *Home Front In the Garden* suddenly becomes must-see viewing.

The bad news is that nowhere in *Difficult Conversations* is there a chapter on how to avoid them. “You can't get rid of these conversations,” says Bruce Patton, one of the authors. “They're part of life.” The trick, according to the book, is to look at what is going on in the conversation, which is actually three conversations. The “What Happened?” conversation is the process of presenting one's own conclusions, and of laying blame. An underlying “Emotional Conversation” proceeds according to the shifting feelings of the participants. Finally an Identity Conversation” has to do with the things we say primarily to safeguard our idea of ourselves.

Patton and his co-author Douglas Stone wear their conversational mastery highly, although they have the disconcerting habit of slipping into role-play, so that one of them is suddenly being me, and I realise I'm supposed to be my wife. In showing me some alternative approaches to our domestic conversational brinkmanship, Patton says things that have never come out of my mouth before, and I say “F--k off.” But Stone and Patton are by no means a pair of touchy-feely self help gurus, and their qualifications are impressive. “I trained both sides,” says Patton, “both the white cabinet and the ANC's negotiating committee in South Africa, before they went into their constitutional talks. Doug's worked with both sides in Cyprus for years.” With their know-how, they could probably teach Michael Winner how to order a meal without getting thrown out of the restaurant.

The book is no quick fix, rather a practical system based on a thorough understanding of what works and what doesn't, one which has helped the authors in their lives. Stone says his conversational skills have gone from “slightly below average to five times better”. Their analysis of conversation is complex, but the kernel of their technique is to avoid a confrontation based on convincing the other person that they are wrong, and to start instead with the “Third Story”, the gap between each conversant's version of the same event.

My wife's technique is strangely similar, but it also allows her to win almost every argument on a rhetorical level. She somehow manages to exploit the gap between our versions of events, and second-guess my emotional response. In fact the half leg of lamb in the fridge (which she bought) is rapidly approaching its sell-by-date. I know she feels stupid for buying it in the first place. I know she feels guilty about not wanting to eat it night after night, and I know she will feel worse when, at the end of the week, it is thrown away. So why do I feel guilty for raising the issue? Why do I feel like I'm playing conversational tennis with a hole in my racket?

There is some hope for me however. I gave her *Difficult Conversations* to read, having first been assured by its authors that the techniques cannot be used for evil, and she found it extremely interesting. Perhaps now we can begin to get beyond these petty conversational games, and I can stop losing.

While reluctant to comment on my case directly, Patton and Stone pointed out to me that much of wife's pre-emptive aggression probably stems from her feeling chronically underappreciated. I went home and told her, apropos of nothing, that I appreciated everything she did, even if I didn't always say so. A small, strange smile formed on her lips before she turned away and said "Oh, f--k off".

*Difficult Conversations* is published by Michael Joseph, £12.99.