

Residents discuss how to reduce toxic talk

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It's a problem that few people feel comfortable talking about these days: in a time of political turmoil, how can civil discourse be maintained among family, friends and people we don't know? Last week, a group of Charles County residents gathered in a Waldorf West Library meeting room to try and find ways to restore civility to those conversations.

"We often seem to be simply shouting at one another," said Julie A. Walton, the director of the Charles County Community Mediation Center, who moderated Wednesday's discussion. "This is the way we're dealing with politics today. I think most people here have felt this," she added, as several people nodded their heads sympathetically.

The discussion, which was sponsored by the Southern Maryland Regional Library Association, was titled "A House Divided: How Do We Get The Political System We Want?" It was one of many similar discussions that have taken place, or are scheduled to take place, around the country under the auspices of the National Issues Forum Institute.

Over 20 participants gathered in a circle to share their stories of how "toxic talk" — rude and negative language that shuts down discussion and ridicules others' viewpoints — had made it difficult to address civic issues that affect them, from national issues like immigration and health care, to issues that are closer to home like schools and suburban sprawl. To help everyone feel at ease, most people used their first names only.

Deborah discussed how, on a recent family trip across the United States, most people were wary of engaging in a conversation about local issues. "Once people knew you were not from that area," she said, "they were willing to open up and talk."

Sharon said that she had noticed that people have become more sensitive and defensive in their discourse.

“It’s very difficult at times to talk about things that a few years ago you could have talked about with anyone,” Sharon said. “Nowadays, people feel like they’re being attacked, which is not necessarily the case.”

Robbie said that one of the ways she has seen conversation becoming more divisive is in the use of race as a separator. She said she has witnessed this particularly among youth in school.

“Five years ago it wasn’t the case,” she said. “It’s extremely disturbing that our children from this political era that we’re living in are being taught not to respect each other for who you are, but we’re back to [looking at] where you come from. That should not define a person’s character.”

Many of the participants commented on how they find themselves having to steer around increasingly toxic arguments on social media. Several said that they have left Facebook and Twitter because of it.

Much of the blame for the current atmosphere of hostility, many attendees agreed, could be traced to the quality of political discourse at the national level.

“More people feel that they can just come out and say things that they wouldn’t necessarily have said years before,” Nicole said. “People feel they have a right to do it because the political parties are doing it.”

Several participants noted that societal divisions are increasingly playing out within families, sometimes with emotionally devastating effects.

Jeff said that in his extended family, lines have been drawn and he has seen them choose their friends based on their political affiliation.

“It’s just hard to watch family units crumble over this line that is drawn,” Jeff said.

Some of the participants said that they have had to put distance between themselves and some family members in order to maintain a sense of balance.

“It’s not that we’ve been cut off from the family,” Nikki said, “but we choose not to get engaged in the conversation.”

Larry described how it has become difficult to talk with his sister because they have different viewpoints that are seemingly irreconcilable.

Walton asked Larry what he could do to solve that problem.

“Not invite her to my house?” he joked as the room rippled with ruefully sympathetic chuckles.

A key to civil discussion, everyone agreed, was finding a way to reclaim common ground.

“I believe people from both parties deep down really want the same things,” Frazier said, “but there are hot button topics that keep getting wheeled out time and time again.”

“People have the same worries and the same pressures,” he said.

“We need to stop demonizing people we disagree with,” said Cheryl. “We need to step back and listen to what they have to say, and they need to do the same for us.”

“You have to respect people’s right to disagree,” Robbie said. Whether it’s over religion or politics, “whatever it is, it comes back to simple respect.”

Sharon said that it’s too easy to put people into categories. “Remember first and foremost that everyone is a human being,” she said.

Other solutions offered by participants included personalizing the conversation by using “I” statements” — saying “I believe” and “I think” — rather than saying “You said” or “You did,” which can come across as accusatory.

Another approach is to set ground rules and healthy boundaries so that people know what is off-limits. A genuine curiosity about the other person’s point of view will afford people the space to discuss it without defensiveness. And sometimes the appropriate thing to do is to steer clear of the issue altogether.

“Sometimes,” Deborah said, “you just have to talk about the weather.”

Walton asked the participants to consider how these techniques could be used to reform politics at the local and national level. Some of the suggestions they offered included practical considerations like limiting campaign spending and addressing voter suppression, as well as things that voters could do individually like writing to their elected officials to voice their opinions, electing people who truly represent their communities, and of course voting.

The discussion continued until the library’s closing time. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the participants lingered afterward in the parking lot, continuing to talk to one another, seemingly unwilling to break the spell of civility that they had mutually created over the previous two hours, but perhaps also feeling a little bit more empowered to try sharing that feeling with others in the morning.

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