



A GUIDE TO DIALOGUE ABOUT ABORTION



2022

A Note on This Guide

Abortion is one of the most polarized topics in American politics, yet Americans themselves hold nuanced, complex, sometimes contradictory perspectives on abortion. It is a peculiar irony that the complexity of those views also creates the circumstances for polarization. People have had vanishingly few opportunities to talk about abortion in their lives. It is so often taboo. Just as often, people find it too difficult to articulate their views—and they choose silence instead.

This reticence has allowed the most extreme voices to dominate in the media, in our politics, and in our communities. On abortion, few, if any, political leaders express the views of the people they represent. Polarization is antithetical to a functioning democracy.

Last week the Supreme Court handed down a decision that effectively reversed *Roe vs. Wade*. This turns one polarized national conversation into fifty distinct deliberations unique to the history, context, and communities within each state.

As you navigate conversations about this topic in the coming months—whether in direct response to the Supreme Court decision or not—it is essential to honor both the complexity and the urgency around this conversation. It is also vital to the future of our nation that we empower the voices of everyday people, so they are able to articulate and advocate for their own genuine, nuanced views.

Because of that, this guide is designed to invite you to make space for conversations about abortion that bring in both deep beliefs and complexity. To transform the conversation about abortion in your context, it is important to allow space for whatever comes up for people, even (or especially) if it is messy.

Our founder Laura Chasin, who co-led our dialogues on abortion for the better part of a decade, often spoke of “liberation through structure.” It is so easy for conversations on this topic to go off the rails and devolve into unproductive venting or harmful, polarizing rhetoric—especially in times like these. Structures and norms like the ones we suggest in this guide may feel awkward, but they create the possibility of a new kind of conversation. You have to step out of your normal way of speaking and relating to one another in order to free yourself of dysfunctional, polarizing patterns.

This guide is designed to help you give any group an opportunity to reflect on the impact of the Supreme Court decision in a way that builds empathy, understanding, trust, and compassion—and then, if you choose, help people wrestle with how they want to come together as a community moving forward to support people in a variety of ways.

This resource will offer general tips as well as guidelines and prompts for more formal dialogues that you can hold in your classroom, community space, bible study, book club, or organization.



General Tips and Guidelines

The following sections of this dialogue guide reflect the wisdom of all these tips. No matter where you have your next conversation, here are some general recommendations.

On starting a group conversation

It is easy to assume that people in your classes, community, or faith groups are all celebrating or grieving—or that “the other people” must be grieving or celebrating while “your group” does the opposite. Try to avoid starting the conversation with an assumption about whether people are celebrating or grieving, which could make someone who already feels isolated or unseen feel even more alone. If you can, check in with individual people ahead of time, even via email or text. Try to understand where they’re coming from before the group conversation. In those early connections, you can help people build the strength to hear from and talk with people who feel something different—relief, fear, grief, hope. If you can avoid triggering someone’s fight, flight, or freeze response, you can lead a group conversation that is more thoughtful, nuanced, and supportive.

On keeping the conversation going

In moments where you’re not sure where to go next, invite people to tell stories from their own lived experience. It is easy for these conversations to become debates about elections, the law, and policies. Slipping into debate can make it hard for people to have meaningful conversations with each other. When someone makes a broad statement that feels like it might shut down conversation or escalate a conflict, you can help them shift into a more constructive gear. Ask them to tell you about a life experience or person who shaped their values or perspective in that way. Sharing personal stories has been proven to build empathy and understanding, even across deep differences.

On lowering the tension

These conversations can become heated quickly. In those moments, we lose the ability to be flexible and empathetic. If that happens, don’t be afraid to take a short break or a moment for reflection. People need time to process before they can come back to the conversation. When those moments of high emotion happen, acknowledge them directly. Note that the emotion is welcome and you want everyone to have what they need. Recommend taking a few minutes for folks to care for themselves. Grab a cup of tea, get some fresh air, or write down some thoughts about what came up. Then, come back to the conversation. Don’t let it end there.

On moving the conversation forward

In moments of change, there is always a temptation to discuss next steps right away. In the coming weeks and months, organizers and coalitions will be rushing to further or fight the law and its application in their states. Building trust and understanding through dialogue first, though, might make it possible to find unexpected paths forward together—on this issue or others—even if you disagree about the question of abortion itself.





Using Communication Agreements

Our hope for this guide is that it will help disrupt any unproductive, harmful, or dysfunctional patterns of communication that have emerged organically in your community. One way we do that is to invite everyone in the conversation to commit themselves to communication agreements.

Communication agreements are guidelines and intentions that provide some common guardrails for a hard conversation. They can be used in large and small groups, at public meetings or in private. While we encourage you to create your own agreements, below are six agreements we have used in abortion conversations:

- I will respect time limits and share air time
- I will speak only for myself and avoid speaking in generalizations
- I will not interrupt others while they're speaking
- I will respect requests for confidentiality
- I have the option to pass on my turn, or to pass for now
- I will refer to people with the terms they prefer (e.g. "pro-choice")

Structures to Support Speaking and Listening

Simple structures can have a big effect on the quality of a dialogue. They help people find the right words, helps them listen more closely, and allow them to build connections across differences. Below are three conversation structures that we use frequently in community conversations:

- Read each question aloud twice. Pause for two breaths before reading it the second time. Share the question in writing too.
- Give your participants a moment to reflect on the question. Encourage them to take notes about what they want to share when it's their turn to respond.
- Offer each person the same amount of time to respond to the question. Be clear about the speaking order.

We sometimes call this model Think, Write, Speak. It helps people let go of worrying about what they're going to say and focus on listening deeply to one another. Two more suggestions:

- Consider varying the speaking order between question prompts so one person doesn't always speak first.
- Set as much time aside as possible for this conversation. We recommend at least an hour.

An Opening Statement or Language for an Invitation

“We know that there are a range of emotions in this room and across the country. Some people are grieving or angry. Others are relieved or celebratory. Still more feel conflicted or unsure. Abortion is top of mind right now, so people will be having conversations about the issue. We want to offer a more intentional, more constructive space for those conversations. We know talking about abortion can be hard but this dialogue offers an opportunity for us to build trust and deeper mutual understanding as we talk about this issue and imagine what might happen next.”

A First Conversation or Stand-Alone Dialogue About Abortion

This dialogue is designed to help people talk about abortion — across clear differences, in groups who might have more similar viewpoints, or in spaces where people aren't sure—in a way that builds trust, belonging, and deeper mutual understanding.

Introductions (choose one)

- What is your name? Who was the first person in your life that you thought of when you first heard the news about the draft Supreme Court decision? Why do you think that is?
- What is your name? Who in your life shaped your beliefs and values related to abortion? What values did they teach you?

Prompting Questions

- What personal life experiences shaped the values that inform your current views or feelings about abortion? Could you tell us something about one or two of these events or experiences
- What is at the heart of this issue for you, as an individual? What do you most wish others understood about your experience or perspective?
- Many people have said that within their general approach to this issue they have some tensions about their own beliefs—for example, some sets of values conflict with each other around the issue, or they have some ambivalent feelings. Where do you experience mixed feelings, value conflicts, uncertainties, or other tensions within your overall perspective on this issue?
 - OR: If you generally identify with Pro-Life or Pro-Choice groups, where do you feel tension between your own values or experiences and that identification? Where is your thinking more complex than others may guess?

At this point, you may want to invite people to ask questions about what others have said—to better understand their stories, to follow their curiosity, or to connect on a deeper level. We ask folks to avoid advice, rhetorical questions, or problem-solving.

Closing Prompt (choose one)

- What is something from this conversation that you want to continue thinking about, talking about, or working on?
- As you think about what has impacted you the most after this decision, what is something you're taking away from this conversation? What is a question you still have?





A Follow-Up Conversation or Dialogue

In dialogue, people often discover surprising similarities and differences. This dialogue is designed to help you create new, innovative, constructive paths forward based on those common touchstones and key points of divergence. This conversation is designed to build on the foundation of trust and understanding that was established in the first dialogue.

Introductions

Please share your name and one thing that has stayed with you, one thing you learned, or one thing you took away from the first conversation.


Prompting Questions

- Tell a story about a time when you saw people work together on something to make their community better. At that time, what did you see people do or not do? What made that possible?
- Thirty years from now, what story would you like to be able to tell about the way this community navigates their differences / comes together following this Supreme Court decision?
- What is one surprising commonality or one surprising difference you discovered between yourself and someone else here? How does that discovery impact how you want to move forward—either on your own or in collaboration with others?

At this point, you may want to invite people to ask questions about what others have said—to better understand their stories, to follow their curiosity, or to connect on a deeper level. We ask folks to avoid advice, rhetorical questions, or problem-solving.

Closing Prompt (choose one)

- What is something from this conversation that you want to continue thinking about, talking about, or working on?
- As you think about what has impacted you the most after this decision, what is something you're taking away from this conversation? What is a question you still have?



We know these conversations will take many different forms over the coming weeks and months depending on your context. Here are some additional prompts for conversations about specific topics related to the issue of abortion. If you'd like help adapting a conversation for your context, please reach out to us at training@whatisessential.org.

For Communities Where Conversations About Abortion Feel Taboo

This conversation can be helpful in circumstances where people hesitate to even begin a conversation about abortion, or where conversations about abortion often remain at the most surface level and the same people take up most of the airspace. It is designed to build a foundation of trust and understanding about what makes this topic so challenging to discuss. This conversation may be an important place to begin before holding the conversations outlined earlier in this guide.

Introductions

Share your name as well as a place, space, or group where you feel a sense of belonging or connection.

Prompting Questions

- Have you ever felt stereotyped by those who hold different views on this issue? If so, how? Which of these stereotypes was most painful to you? Most inaccurate? Why?
- Think about ideas or feelings about abortion that you tend to keep to yourself, for whatever reason. (You won't be asked to share the views themselves!) In those moments, what makes you pause before sharing your perspective? What are people doing or not doing?
- Have you ever had a constructive conversation about abortion with someone who has very different views? If you have, what made this conversation possible? If not, what do you wish had been different about a conversation you've had that didn't feel constructive? What might have made it feel more constructive for everyone?

At this point, you may want to invite people to ask questions about what others have said—to better understand their stories, to follow their curiosity, or to connect on a deeper level. We ask folks to avoid advice, rhetorical questions, or problem-solving.

Closing Prompt

What would change for you if you were able to share your thoughts—even those that currently feel impossible to share—with others? What would need to be in place for you to join that conversation?



For People to Grieve Together and to Find Strength in Each Other

This conversation is designed to specifically offer a space for people who request time to process and come together before thinking about what will come next. It is often a precursor to the conversations outlined above, and can help build a community of care strong enough to withstand challenging moments.

Introductions

In order to show up to this conversation as you are, what do you first need others to understand about what's going on for you?

Prompting Questions

- Share a recent experience you have had that would help others understand any sense of loss, fear, or grief you may have, connected to this moment. What might that experience reveal to you about what you value most?
- Speak about an experience or moment when you discovered or rediscovered something about yourself that feels meaningful to you—some strength or internal resources, or some deeper knowing or wisdom. What happened and what does it mean to you?
- As you reflect on the moments of meaning and mourning you've just shared, what do you feel moved to do or what shifts seem possible—in you and/or in the world? What needs attention now, that calls for your energy and commitment?

At this point, you may want to invite people to ask questions about what others have said—to better understand their stories, to follow their curiosity, or to connect on a deeper level. We ask folks to avoid advice, rhetorical questions, or problem-solving.

Closing Prompt

As you consider all that you've heard and shared, what gift do you have that you can offer as a resource for others?



A Conversation About Serving Families Well in Your Community

This conversation is designed to invite conversations about how people might support the preservation of life and human dignity in their community—including but not limited to vulnerable populations—following the Supreme Court decision.

Introductions

Share your name and a person you consider to be an example for treating others in a way that supports life, human dignity, and respect. (This can be someone from your own life, or a public or religious figure that you admire.) What value or lesson did they teach you?

Prompting Questions

- Share a story from your life that influenced your value or commitment around supporting the dignity of people and families. It might be a story about your own experience of feeling supported or unsupported. Or it might be a story about a time you witnessed a supportive or unsupportive response to a family or community hardship, injustice, or moment where preservation of life or human dignity was not protected. What did people do or not do at that moment? Is there anything you wish could be replicated, or anything you wish people might do differently next time?
- As you think about supporting the dignity of people and families in your community following this decision, what value or lesson do you want to keep in mind? What is at the heart of this value or commitment for you?
- When you think about what it means to you to support the preservation of life and dignity of people and families in your community, are there ways or situations in which your values compete or conflict with one another? What makes these issues or situations challenging for you?

At this point, you may want to invite people to ask questions about what others have said—to better understand their stories, to follow their curiosity, or to connect on a deeper level. We ask folks to avoid advice, rhetorical questions, or problem-solving.

Closing Prompt

What is something you want to continue working on, committing to, or talking about in your community as you move forward?



A Conversation for Religious or Inter-religious Groups

Abortion access is a particularly thorny question for many religious communities. This conversation is designed to help you explore your own values around the issue as well as points of complexity, tension, or uncertainty between your perspective and your faith.

Introductions

Share your name and a place in the world where you feel connected to your faith.

Prompting Questions

- Share a story from your life that shaped how you see your personal faith connect—or not connect—with your perspective on abortion, human life, and dignity.
- What personal value is at the heart of your faith life around issues of abortion, human life, and dignity?
- Where do you experience complexities, tensions, uncertainties, or questions as you think about the intersection or application of your religious or faith beliefs with your perspectives on abortion access, human life, and dignity?

At this point, you may want to invite people to ask questions about what others have said—to better understand their stories, to follow their curiosity, or to connect on a deeper level. We ask folks to avoid advice, rhetorical questions, or problem-solving.

Closing Prompt

As you think about what you've heard here, what is one thing you're taking away that you want to consider thinking about or talking about with people of faith? What is one question you're still curious about?

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