What we mean by difficult conversations

Here's a list of things that can make conversations feel difficult for different people in different contexts.

Which difficulties are you grappling with? Are there other difficulties that aren't on this list that are pertinent to the conversation you're thinking about?

⚔️We feel **heightened or unwelcome emotion** as we enter the conversation - feelings of shame, anger, sadness, confusion, fear or embarrassment.

- *Eddy explains: "Conversations are difficult when it feels like something is at stake, and that leads to a heightened state of emotion. This shows that it's something we care about."*

⚔️**We have different priorities** which we each feel defensive of, and sense conflict may be on the horizon.

⚔️We have had **negative experiences in the past** of conversations that haven't gone well.

⚔️There's an **unacknowledged uneven power dynamic** in which one party feels they don't have control over the outcome of the conversation

- E.g. Having a conversation about removing a child from their home environment; letting someone know what their future direction at work is going to look like; inviting someone from a marginalised community to share their views with you about their experience in your workplace.
- Neelam: *"Speaking to people in positions of privilege, when they're not aware of that privilege, is very hard".*
- Gabriel: *"Power inequalities can reduce the feeling of trust and agency that one or more party has."*

⚔️We anticipate that the conversation will be **extractive** (taking from us) **rather than reciprocal** (mutually beneficial**).** This can lead to people feeling unsafe, excluded, extracted from and tokenised.

⚔️We **don't feel prepared** for the conversation - perhaps because we don't know enough about what will be discussed, or don't feel we've had time to prepare.

⚔️**Cultural differences** in how we approach and engage in conversations.

- In the UK there tends to be a preference to prioritise politeness when conversations feel difficult for those involved, which is different when compared to the Netherlands where difficulties tend to be addressed directly.
- *Gabriel recommends making these differences explicit as our attitudes towards conflict can be very different, both individually and culturally.*

⚔️The **conversation topic is sensitive or distressing.**

- Traumatic subjects such as dying, suicide, injury, assault, illness, loss, witnessing

violence, natural and man-made disasters can feel difficult to talk about.
- What feels sensitive or distressing can vary between individuals and between cultures.
- Thempra's learning zone / comfort zone model is a helpful mental model here. We need to step outside our comfort zone into our learning zone in order to have a difficult conversation, but we shouldn't step so far that we enter the panic zone.

⚔️We feel **the other person has fixed views and an entrenched position** that they are unwilling to deviate from.

⚔️The conversation required us to **open ourselves up and be vulnerable.**
- E.g. sharing personal information with a range of professionals to be able to access the support you need or to influence a law or policy; professionals offering more of themselves to a person who needs a human response in a service environment; sharing that you don't know how to respond to an issue that's your responsibility; sharing new and alternative perspectives in historically traditional cultural spaces.