Lesson Manuals

Lesson 6: Challenging our culture of contempt

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In the previous lesson, we learned that we can challenge our misconceptions about those who disagree with us by exploring other people's worldviews. When we enter into explorer mindset, we can use our curiosity as a tool to reveal the mysteries of what people truly believe and why they believe it.

Anyone can master these explorer skills if they put in the time. But as we think about applying these skills in the real world, it's important to zoom out and recognize the unique challenges of our current culture.

In this lesson, we're going to explore aspects of our current culture that are making difficult conversations even more difficult. We'll also teach you specific strategies you can use to successfully navigate this challenging environment.

As we've acknowledged throughout the course of this program, something is broken in our society. Increasingly, it feels like we're living in a culture that values outrage over compassion and mutual respect.

We frequently see people getting called out, shamed, and "canceled" on our news and social media feeds. At the same time, misinformation and conspiracy theories are gaining traction and fueling hatred against "the other side." The economist Arthur Brooks refers to this climate as a "culture of contempt."

In these circumstances, it's no wonder many people find it hard to communicate constructively with one another. But there's reason for hope.

Let's remember that this isn't what most people want. As we mentioned at the beginning of this program, 77% of Americans say they are fed up with our social divisions and want to come together as a country to solve our collective problems. And as we’ve discussed:

- We're actually less divided than we think
- People have less extreme views than we assume
- We have more in common with others than we tend to think
We have the power to change our culture — especially in the places we inhabit every day, like our classrooms.

We can break the cycle of contempt, so that we can make progress towards our collective goals.

So what does that mean for me?

Over the course of this lesson, we'll show you how breaking the cycle of contempt will:

Let's begin by exploring what contempt even means, and why it can be so toxic to us as individuals and to our culture and society.

Okay

Contempt isn't just about anger. It goes a step further. Contempt is anger mixed with disgust.

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer defined contempt as “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another.”

When we view others with contempt, we begin to dehumanize them. We cease to see them as fully human, and as a result we no longer believe they deserve human dignity.

This can have dangerous consequences for our health, our personal lives, and our society.

How does contempt harm us?

Contempt's impact on democracy

On a national level, the inability to find common ground and solve our shared problems has resulted in political gridlock, where lawmakers are unable to come to agreement on public policies to solve critical problems.
By far the most dangerous consequence of a culture of contempt is that it can lead to violence. Dehumanization has been associated with some of the greatest atrocities in human history. When people dehumanize other groups, they often begin rationalizing inflicting harm on them.

In 2018, political scientists found that 15% of Republicans and 20% of Democrats agreed that the country would be better off if large numbers of the opposing party "just died." The same poll found that 9% of U.S. voters believed that violence would be acceptable if their opponents won the 2020 presidential election.

Let's go even closer to home

Contempt's impact on relationships

Unfortunately, our culture of contempt is having profound negative impacts on our most intimate relationships with friends, family, and significant others.

According to a Reuters/Ipsos poll, almost 1 in 6 Americans said they stopped talking to a friend or family member after the 2016 presidential election. A study from 2018 found that even Thanksgiving dinners among families that contain political differences are getting shorter!

Contempt is also impacting our dating and marriage choices. Research shows that growing numbers of partisans prefer dating within their party. In 2010, 49% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats said they would feel "displeased" if their son or daughter married outside their political party.

But it's not just our interpersonal relationships that are suffering.

What else is going on?

Contempt's impact on physical health

Research shows that people who feel excluded and rejected — direct consequences of being treated with contempt — can suffer from poorer sleep and weaker immune systems. They can also develop greater levels of anxiety, depression, jealousy, and sadness.
But contempt can also be harmful for people who express it. When we show contempt for others, we secrete the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline. Over time, this stress takes a toll on our physical health, and can even lead to early death.

Before we go any further, let's take a moment to review.

| What are some of the negative consequences of a culture of contempt? [Select all that apply.] |
| A. It can lead to increased stress |
| B. It can harm our relationships |
| C. It can lead to violence |

A, B, & C

Exactly! Unfortunately, increased contempt in our society can result in all of the outcomes you indicated.

Anything else

Not quite. Unfortunately, increased contempt in our society can negatively impact our physical health and our relationships, and it can even lead to violence.

Now, you might be thinking, "If outrage is so bad for us, why does it feel so good?"

Your brain on moral outrage

Moral outrage is an ancient emotion that served an important purpose throughout our evolutionary heritage. In ancient human societies, the expression of moral outrage was often used to promote cooperation.

Because moral outrage helped our ancestors coexist in ways that benefited our survival, our brains seem to have evolved in such a way that we experience satisfaction when we punish transgressors.

When researchers scanned people's brains, they found that a region of our brain's reward system is activated when we punish others. This finding suggests that punishing people really does feel good.
But as we mentioned way back in Lesson 1, many of the tendencies that served us well hundreds of thousands of years ago are no longer so great for us in our current, tech-saturated society.

**What do you mean?**

According to psychologist Molly Crockett, social media creates an outrage feedback loop that becomes addictive.

We can now easily express outrage with just the click of a button. And when we do so, we're often rewarded with likes and shares. This social feedback loop reinforces our habit of expressing outrage more frequently and more readily.

Think of outrage like fast food. We need food in order to nourish ourselves, but it's unhealthy for us to overindulge. Like fast food, outrage gives us quick bursts of satisfaction, but it's bad for us in the long run.

In this outrage-filled media ecosystem, it's no surprise that "calling people out" has become commonplace. While calling people out can at times be driven by malice, public shaming is often used to advance important social causes.

The problem is, even if our intentions are good, calling people out rarely works to change other people's behavior. It turns out that shaming people and calling people out often backfires.

**How are you feeling about this?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intrigued</th>
<th>Angry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great!</td>
<td>That's totally fair!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is definitely a sensitive topic, and a lot of people believe that call-out culture is an important tool in making social progress. We're totally with you on the importance of social progress. And we're not asking you to compromise on the values you care about, or to be less bold or less committed to equity.
In contrast, we're going to show you how there are far more effective techniques to achieve the social progress we all care about.

We also hope that you don't feel like we're calling you out. That's certainly not our intention. Our goal is to teach you techniques that will help you be even more effective in spreading your message about the issues you care most about.

Before we explain why shaming people often backfires, let's take a moment to do some self-reflection.

Think about a time when someone was rude or mean to you, or publicly embarrassed you. How did you feel?

Enter text...

Thanks for sharing.

As a result of how you were treated, did you become more or less motivated to listen to what the other person had to say?

More
That's pretty unusual. People are typically alienated by rude behavior.

Less
That makes sense. People are usually alienated by rude behavior.

The problem with shaming people is that it rarely motivates them to change their ways. People who are subject to shaming often grow increasingly bitter and hostile, and sometimes become even more entrenched in their beliefs. This has been shown in research.
Motivating vs. Pressuring

Psychologist Lisa Legault and colleagues ran an experiment where she tested two competing methods of reducing prejudice. She distributed brochures that fell into two categories. One type of brochures offered participants positive reasons to abandon any hateful feelings they had about other kinds of people. These brochures contained statements like "You are free to choose to value nonprejudice."

The second type of brochures pressured participants to actively combat prejudice. They asserted that we all have a social obligation to fight hatred and discrimination, and they suggested that people who don't combat prejudice will face negative social consequences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which type of brochure do you think was more effective in reducing people's prejudice?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The one that gave people positive reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yup!</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When people were presented with positive reasons to reduce their prejudice, they were more likely to become less prejudiced, because they felt like they were making a choice out of their free will.

In contrast, highlighting the threat of social consequences simply didn't work. Legault's experiment actually found that people who received the brochures that took a more aggressive tone actually showed more prejudice than they had demonstrated earlier. In other words, the threat of shame backfired.

This may sound counterintuitive. After all, the culture of contempt tells us that the best way to respond to people we disagree with is to shame them and make them feel bad about who they are. But we can see why this is generally ineffective if we think back to what we learned in an earlier lesson.

Let's refresh our memory on the elephant (automatic thinking) and the rider (controlled thinking).
As we learned back in Lesson 1:

\textbf{You need to appeal to someone's elephant before you can move their rider.}

When we approach someone with shame or contempt, we often provoke their elephant. This tends to cause them to react to us with negative emotions such as anger and resentment.

Even if we have good intentions in calling them out, once we have set their elephant against us, we're very unlikely to have any success in persuading their rider.

They will likely put their guard up and refuse to listen to what we have to say, let alone consider changing their ways. They might even hold onto their views even more tightly, out of spite.

\textbf{What can we do instead?}

\section*{Appealing to their elephant}

Instead of angering, provoking, or shaming their elephant, we can appeal to their elephant. If we treat people with dignity and respect, we are much more likely to make progress toward our goal. The other person's elephant will likely let its guard down, which will make their rider much more receptive to your message.

Notice, this approach requires us to tame our own elephants. We have a powerful urge to shame and attack others, partially because our elephants have been enraged, and partially because shaming others feels good.

But if we can tame our own elephants and allow our riders to prevail (Taking the Reins!), we can be far more effective in winning others over and persuading them to change their ways.

Let's take a look at a real example to see this in action.

\textbf{Okay}

The organization Life After Hate is a Chicago-based nonprofit that has worked with dozens of former violent extremists to help them rebuild their lives and find inner peace.
Life After Hate's model is based on respecting everyone's human dignity, regardless of their history of violence. One of the group's leaders, Sammy Rangel, was previously a member of a street gang and spent years behind bars. Today, Rangel helps former extremists reform themselves.

Rangel explained this process as follows: “The negative things that we think to do to challenge the other side only helps us dig in. It's only through kindness, it's only through understanding, it's only through compassion and peace that people were able to get past all of our armor. It was never aggression, it was never shaming.”

It turns out Rangel's experience is backed up by science.

The science of nonjudgmental conversations

Researchers David Broockman and Josh Kalla conducted a series of experiments that have shown the value of nonjudgmental conversation in changing hearts and minds.

In one experiment, they trained canvassers (people who try to convince others to vote for or support a cause) in this method.

Broockman and Kalla instructed the canvassers to share a sympathetic narrative about a certain group of people. The canvassers then asked respondents to tell them a story about a time when "someone showed [them] compassion when [they] really needed it."

The aim was to get respondents to elicit their own experiences that relate to the experience of the group the canvassers were trying to build sympathy for.

What Broockman and Kalla found is that nonjudgmental conversations — that is, conversations where canvassers did not judge the people they met, but rather deeply listened to them and exchanged stories — were most effective in changing minds.

These conversations had powerful effects on individuals' attitudes, making them more sympathetic towards the groups of people the canvassers were advocating for.

To summarize, which approach has research demonstrated to be more effective in changing people's behavior for the better?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaking to people with respect and listening to them without passing judgment</th>
<th>Shaming, accusing, and pressuring people to change their beliefs and behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Checkmark]</td>
<td>![X]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That's correct! If we try to make people feel ashamed, they usually don't feel motivated to do things differently. People are often much more receptive to our message when we treat them with dignity and respect.</td>
<td>Not quite. When we try to make people feel ashamed for their current behavior, they usually don't feel motivated to do things differently. They might even resent us for being judgmental. But if we show that we respect them, and listen to them without passing judgment, people are often much more receptive to our message.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Does this technique sound familiar?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You might recall that you learned a similar technique in the last lesson, when we taught you to ask your conversation partner questions to uncover their life experiences.

In that context, we explained that digging beneath the surface and asking people to share their life experiences is a powerful tool to help us gain more understanding of others. It can help open us up to understanding.

Relatedly, by having these types of nonjudgmental conversations with others, you will also open the other person up to you! You'll be far more likely to get the other person to change their mind and their behavior, because you will have first appealed to their elephant.

Maybe you’re still feeling skeptical about all of this? Let’s take a look at an amazing real life example of how these practices changed hearts and minds.

**Great**
The blues musician and the KKK

This image is probably shocking to you, and for good reason. What is a Black man doing with a member of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), an infamous white supremacist organization?

The man is named Daryl Davis, a blues musician who played with greats like Jerry Lee Lewis and B.B. King. One day in 1983, Davis was playing in an otherwise all-white music venue in Frederick, Maryland when a white man walked up to him to compliment him on his musical talent.

"I really like y'all's music. This is the first time I ever hear a black man play like Jerry Lee Lewis," the man told Davis.

Davis informed him that Jerry Lee Lewis was inspired by Black musicians. The man told Davis that he had never had a drink with a Black man before. Davis wanted to know why, and that's when the man admitted he was a member of the KKK.

Whoa, what happened next?

This experience piqued Davis's curiosity. He began to wonder why anyone would hate him solely for the color of his skin. He went on to seek out members of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups, to introduce himself and build relationships so that he could understand why they felt the way they did.

These relationships turned into friendships that changed the hearts of hundreds of KKK members. Over 200 people left the organization as a direct result of their relationship with Davis. Through compassion and dialogue, Davis was able to convince these people to see him as an individual, rather than as a collection of negative group stereotypes.

Davis would later tell the media that he believes in talking as an alternative to conflict:

"It's when the talking ceases that the ground becomes fertile for violence. If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy...you will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you're forming a relationship as you build about that relationship, you're forming a friendship. That's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves."
Had Davis succumbed to the culture of contempt, he would never have been able to get through to the Klan members who he persuaded to leave the organization. Only by approaching these extremists with dignity and respect was he able to persuade them to change their hearts and their minds.

But can the average person do that?

We don't expect you to personally de-radicalize members of a hate group anymore than we would ask you to climb Mt. Everest! But these stories help inspire us to do better. They also remind us of the power of treating people with dignity and respect, especially if we disagree with them.

If Daryl Davis can break bread with members of the Ku Klux Klan, the rest of us should consider doing the same with people with whom we have less extreme differences.

As we mentioned in the last lesson, when it comes to bridging divides between people who disagree, there are short bridges and there are long bridges.

We don't have to start our journey to bridge differences by trying to cross the longest bridge first. Instead, we can begin by crossing the shorter bridges to build up our muscles so we can cross longer bridges in the future.

How can I start crossing these bridges?

Shifting our approach to disagreement

We can start off by shifting our approach to these conversations. Let's start with a simple question. Take a look at the following pictures:
Which of these pictures would you associate with the term "disagreement?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The top one</th>
<th>The bottom one</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That's great! You see that disagreement need not involve hostility.</td>
<td>Most think the same thing.</td>
<td>Exactly! Either one could involve a disagreement, although most people select the one on the right.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, we typically associate disagreement with negative emotions, such as the anger shown by the people on the right. But, disagreement itself isn't necessarily a bad thing.

In fact, disagreement can be an incredible opportunity! As we learned in Lesson 4, there are many benefits we stand to gain from engaging with diverse perspectives:

- Allows us to expand our knowledge
- Helps us make new discoveries and unlock creativity
- Empowers us to make wise decisions and avoid groupthink
- Improves our communication skills so we can be more persuasive
- Make it possible to build effective coalitions

Furthermore, as we learned in Lesson 3, if we approach disagreements with intellectual humility and curiosity, we can open ourselves up to growth and discovery.

As we discussed in the last lesson, one of the best ways to do this is to shift into an explorer mindset. That way, we can enter into disagreements with the goal of learning, rather than winning.

Got it

Of course, exploration comes with its own set of challenges. Anytime we're exploring uncharted territory — such as discussing a thorny issue for the first time — we're likely to make mistakes, no matter how much we try to prepare ahead of time.

To think through what it's like to face an unfamiliar landscape, let's think about taking a journey to a foreign country.

Think about a distant country that you'd love to travel to. For the purposes of this exercise, make this a country where you don't speak the language and you're unfamiliar with its local customs and culture.

What country are you thinking of?
Thanks for sharing!

Now, imagine that you decide that in two months, you'll set off on an adventure to [the country they named]. To prepare for your trip, you thought it would be fun to start learning [the language spoken in that country] so you can try to converse with the locals.

You start practicing speaking [the language spoken in that country] and you frequently make mistakes. That's no surprise — learning a new language is difficult and it takes a lot of time and practice to become fluent!

The day of your trip finally arrives, and as you disembark from the plane, you're thrilled to begin exploring! Your first day there you meet a couple of locals and you try to strike up a conversation. You know that your language skills still need a lot of work, but you're excited to begin practicing with others and demonstrating your intention of trying to learn about a new culture.

But it doesn't go as well as you expected. You're ridiculed and scolded for every mistake you make.

How would you feel in this situation?

Thanks for sharing. Most people say things like, "surprised," "ashamed," "embarrassed," or "hurt."

Just like when you travel to a new country and try to adapt to its unique culture and customs, jumping into conversations about sensitive topics can be very intimidating. That's because, just like learning a new language, it's inevitable that we'll make mistakes along the way.
Unfortunately, during difficult conversations, people tend not to let mistakes slide. Especially if someone is approaching the disagreement like a warrior, they may ridicule or attack others over minor errors, like using a poorly worded phrase. This is understandable, because when people are passionate about an issue and stakes are high, their elephants will often be running the show.

The problem is that many people are so intimidated by the prospect of making a clumsy comment that they choose not to engage in these conversations at all. When we feel like there's no room for mistakes, it's hard to feel comfortable opening up and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable.

But these types of honest and vulnerable dialogues are exactly what we need in order to understand one another and make progress on critical social issues!

**So what can I do about this?**

**Clumsy conversations**

We can follow the advice of the diversity expert Khalil Smith by welcoming **clumsy conversations** and being **forgiving of mistakes**.

Any time we're doing anything new, we're likely to be clumsy at it, whether it's learning a new language, playing a new instrument, or riding a bike. The same applies to having tough conversations: We ought to expect that we'll make mistakes, and forgive our imperfections as a natural part of the learning process.

In addition to forgiving our own mistakes, it's only fair to extend the same courtesy to our conversation partners.

If we create an expectation that everyone has to be perfect (for example, by calling out every little fault in people's wording or approach), our elephants may grow so defensive that we end up clamming up and refusing to engage altogether.

But if we treat people with dignity and respect (just like we'd like to be treated), we can keep a difficult conversation moving forward. That means both being willing to apologize if you offend someone, as well as being willing to accept an apology when someone else sincerely offers one.

**To summarize, which of the following actions would fit into a clumsy conversation?**

| Criticizing someone every time they use words that aren't exactly right to correct their errors | Calmly informing someone that some of their words feel hurtful to you, even though they probably didn't intend to hurt you |
Not quite! You might have good intentions in correcting them, because you want to help them learn from their mistakes. But if the other person is sincerely trying their best, it's often more productive not to focus on these mistakes.

Calling the other person out on every error might make them feel highly defensive and prevent you from having an open and productive conversation.

Great job! This response recognizes that the other person wasn't necessarily trying to hurt your feelings.

It informs them of how you're feeling while acknowledging that they may have simply made a mistake, as we all do from time to time.

Are you saying I shouldn't ever judge someone?

Withholding immediate judgment

In clumsy conversations, we recommend withholding immediate judgment. The key word being immediate. We're definitely not saying you can't judge someone's views eventually. But in order to have the sort of honest and vulnerable conversations that are necessary for productive dialogue, we need to give people space to make mistakes and to explain themselves.

When you hear something that offends you, begin by trying to understand the backstory of the person who said it and why they believe what they believe.

The Indian civil rights leader Mohandas Gandhi said it best: "If you wish to be understood, seek first to understand."

As a ground rule, when someone says something you strongly disagree with, it's best to ask them if they can tell you more about their experiences and beliefs first. That way, you get a better idea of where they're coming from and the best way to respond in a persuasive manner.

We recognize that it can be hard to hear someone out when they're saying something that offends or upsets us. But we can make it easier by reframing the way we think about listening to disagreement.
Listen with strength, even if you disagree

Remember what you learned in the last lesson about listening with strength?

Listening with strength means being able to listen closely to others and calmly process what you're hearing, even when what's being said is upsetting to you. It involves putting your rider in charge, so that even when someone says something you strongly disagree with, you'll take the time to carefully respond rather than letting your elephant react immediately.

Unfortunately, sometimes people do intentionally try to offend or insult others and you do have legitimate grounds for being upset or offended.

Does that mean that you should give them a taste of their own medicine and begin insulting them back?

That likely won't get you very far—it's a sure way to escalate things further and entice the other person to lash out at you again. You'll entrench yourselves in bitterness towards the other person, making resolution more difficult in the future. Worst of all, you will have sunk to their level.

Break rather than perpetuate the cycle of contempt

In fact, there is a more constructive way to respond. We can follow the guidance of the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor who was imprisoned in Auschwitz. In his famous book Man's Search for Meaning, he reflected on his experiences in the concentration camps, noting:

"[E]verything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Amazingly, even in the most inhumane circumstance imaginable, rather than allowing himself to be consumed by rage or despair, Frankl found the strength to maintain his dignity by continuing to find meaning in life despite his suffering.

Frankl teaches us we each have the power to choose how we will respond, regardless of the situation.

Even when others are malicious towards us, we can choose to break rather than perpetuate the cycle of contempt.
We can stand up for ourselves and calmly explain to the other person why we found their comments offensive.

By reacting in this way instead of lashing out at them, we will disarm their elephant and they'll be far more likely to treat us with dignity and respect. Through this approach, we can begin to cross a bridge instead of burning it.

**Navigating online conversations**

One place where it's especially challenging to listen with strength is on social media, where some of the most contentious conversations take place.

The internet is a double-edged sword when it comes to communication. It brings us together easily across long distances, and gives us so many new ways to interact and share our perspectives. But there are plenty of downsides to conversations that take place there.

There's a reason people say, "Don't read the comments!" about online media. The Internet can unleash some truly nasty behavior, which can be unpleasant to witness even if you're not involved.

| How many times have you witnessed people interacting with each other online in ways that would be extremely unusual in face-to-face conversations? [For example, have you seen people be extremely rude, hostile, or aggressive online to a degree that you would be surprised to see happen in person?] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Never | A few | Plenty | Too many to count |

That's pretty unusual! Count yourself lucky. Most people have seen some pretty nasty behavior online.

It turns out there's science to explain why online conversations tend to go less well, and why social media can feel so toxic.

When we're speaking face-to-face, we can make eye contact, read our conversation partner's facial expressions and body language, and detect the tone in their voice. In fact, human beings evolved to take all of these non-verbal cues into account, in order to better understand one another and empathize with each other.
But during most online conversations, we don't have access to those important cues. When the people we're interacting with aren't visible to us, we're more likely to misunderstand each other, by failing to detect the intention underlying their words. We're also less likely to recognize them as people who have feelings and the potential to be hurt.

Researchers say this leads to an empathy deficit in online interactions. It's harder for us to relate to each other's feelings when we aren't confronted with the signals we use to detect each others' emotions.

These various factors contribute to the willingness to express moral outrage online that we described earlier. When we don't actually see the recipients of our outrage face-to-face, it's easier for us to dehumanize them.

The reduced empathy we feel for one another during online interactions contributes to the online disinhibition effect: the phenomenon where people feel free to say and do things to each other online that they'd never dream of doing face-to-face.

Besides the empathy deficit, another major contributor to online disinhibition is the feeling of anonymity. On platforms where people go by usernames, handles, or avatars instead of being identified by their real name, people may behave more cruelly and aggressively because their actions online can't be traced back to them.

Another factor behind online disinhibition is asynchronous communication. In-person conversations are synchronous, meaning they take place in real time. In synchronous communication, if people react negatively to what we've said or done, we have to deal with the consequences right then and there.

But in asynchronous communication, where there are gaps in time within the back-and-forth of conversation, the consequences of saying or doing something harmful or cruel to another person are delayed, or sometimes can be avoided altogether.

One way to avoid these negative consequences of online conversations is to take them offline. Perhaps you have a family member who always argues with you on social media. Consider speaking to them over a video chat instead (or meeting in-person when social distancing eases up).

But even when we have conversations online, there are ways to keep them more productive. Public arguments on social media are like debating in front of a massive arena of people watching.
As we mentioned earlier, expressing outrage online tends to be rewarded with likes and shares. As a result, you may feel compelled to perform for an audience rather than treat the other person with respect.

If you're getting into a contentious conversation with someone online, you can suggest moving the conversation to a private forum, such as private messaging or email. By having the conversation one-on-one, you will both be more likely to actually listen and share, rather than perform.

This principle applies to in person conversations, too. Difficult conversations tend to go better if they're one-on-one, rather than in front of spectators. We have much less reason to try to perform for an audience if there's no audience to see our conversation.

For years, Meghan Phelps-Roper was part of a fringe religious group called the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC). The WBC would picket the funerals of fallen American soldiers, claiming that their deaths were a just punishment for America's acceptance of homosexuality.

Eventually, Meghan took to evangelizing for her views not just at street demonstrations but on social media, using Twitter to communicate to the world. Many people reacted harshly to Meghan's evangelizing online. But others asked her sincere questions about her religious beliefs and treated her with respect. This forced her to re-assess her views.

In 2012, Phelps-Roper decided to leave the WBC. The sincere and civil disagreements she had on Twitter had changed her mind about her religious beliefs. Through these conversations she even met her now-husband, who influenced her thinking by pushing her to consider the consequences of her behavior.

You can learn all the details of Phelps-Roper's story by checking out her TED Talk in the Perspectives Library.

We've covered a lot of ground! Let's take a moment to review.

**Review**

In this lesson, we talked about how our culture of contempt is harming us as individuals and as a society. As the science showed us, shaming people we disagree with is less persuasive, and has long-term consequences for our health and the health of others.
The good news is, we don't have to be addicted to contempt. We can break this negative cycle by choosing to treat people with dignity and respect, even when we strongly disagree with them.

By treating people with respect and nonjudgmentalism, we're more likely to open up people's hearts and minds, and make progress on the issues we care about.

In both in-person and online, we can choose to embrace clumsy conversations, where we're forgiving of mistakes and we allow people to express themselves before leaping to immediate judgment.

By listening with strength, we can promote a culture that values constructive dialogue rather than falling prey to our baser instincts.

Now, let's put this into practice with a final exercise. Ready?

**Practice time**

To begin, let's see where you stand on the following issue:
Some people think it would be best for society to impose a cap on the amount of money any single individual can earn. This is called a maximum income.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think that the government should set a maximum income?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No way</td>
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Now, imagine you're on social media and you post a status promoting your view on the maximum income. Your friend Hong leaves a comment saying the following:

**If they lean against a maximum income...**
You really think someone should be able to earn excessive amounts, even when so many people in the world are starving? I can't believe you're so selfish."

**If they lean in favor of a maximum income...**
"I can't believe you think the government should be allowed to set a maximum income! Are you a Communist?! No one is going to work hard in this country, if they can't keep what they have truly earned."
You start to notice other commenters chiming in on both sides of the issue, with some backing up Hong and others attacking her. You value your friendship with Hong and would like to respond to her.

**Based on what you learned in this lesson, what’s the best way to respond?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jump into the comments and publicly rebuke Hong for her statement</th>
<th>Send a private message to Hong inviting her to discuss the issue further over video chat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not quite! This might escalate the &quot;flame war&quot; already occurring, because both you and Hong may feel like you have to protect your egos in front of an audience. The best thing to do is to invite Hong into a private video chat because that will allow the two of you to speak privately and be vulnerable with each other. You won't have to worry about being judged in front of an audience.</td>
<td>Great! By taking the conversation into a private setting, you'll avoid turning this disagreement into a public brawl that could spiral out of control. This will also allow the two of you to speak privately and be vulnerable with each other, because you won't have to worry about being judged in front of an audience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now, imagine that Hong agrees to your request for a video chat.

**Which of these options seems like the best way to start your video chat conversation?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If they lean against a maximum income...</th>
<th>If they lean in favor of a maximum income...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I was a bit hurt that you would call me selfish for sharing my view, Hong. I don't think you meant to offend me, but I'd like to explain how your comment made me feel.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I can't believe you'd compare my view to Communism, Hong. You should really watch your language.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I can't believe you'd call me selfish for sharing my view, Hong. You should really watch your language.&quot;</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Great choice! You chose to break rather than perpetuate the cycle of contempt. Not quite. Even though Hong was rude and abrasive with her comments, you have the power to break this cycle of contempt, rather than perpetuate it. Great choice! You chose to break rather than perpetuate the cycle of contempt.
Instead of accusing and attacking Hong, which is likely to rile her elephant up even further, you can instead respond in a way that is more likely to get her to change her tune.

You might try something like:

"I was a bit hurt that you would call me selfish, Hong. I don't think you meant to offend me, but I'd like to explain how your comment made me feel."

"I was a bit hurt that you would compare my view to Communism, Hong. I don't think you meant to offend me, but I'd like to explain how your comment made me feel."

This type of approach can accomplish two things simultaneously. First, it allows you to stand up for yourself and explain why Hong's speech was hurtful. Second, by opening the conversation by expressing your own vulnerability, it's likely that Hong will reciprocate rather than continue into attack mode.

As the conversation continues, she says:

**If they lean against a maximum income...**

"I just think it's completely unfair to impose a ceiling on the rewards people can get for working hard for their families and for their country."

**If they lean in favor of a maximum income...**

"I'm frustrated that you don't support a maximum income. The income inequality in our country is totally unacceptable. Placing a cap on how much money individuals can earn is one of the few things we might be able to do to start leveling the economic playing field between the rich and the poor."

Given what we've learned in this lesson, what response would be most like approaching this disagreement as an explorer rather than as a warrior?

"I'm curious, Hong: What life experiences might have led you to develop this view? I'd like to learn more about your point of view so I can understand you better."

"I'm sorry, Hong, but you're obviously just ignorant. You don't understand this issue."
Good job! You might have been tempted to react immediately to what Hong shared, but instead you listened with strength, withheld immediate judgment, and processed what she had to say.

By asking Hong a question, you're applying your explorer tactic of digging deeper to understand where she's coming from. This response shows respect for Hong and treats her with dignity. She's more likely to respectfully engage with you if you go this route.

Not quite! Let's think back to what we gain when we listen with strength and withhold immediate judgment.

Calling Hong "ignorant" might provoke her elephant and make her feel angry or hurt. This response could escalate your disagreement with Hong into a real argument. But if we listen to her without reacting and judging her immediately, we can prepare a more thoughtful and tactful response that could keep the dialogue moving forward.

Let's try asking Hong a question. By doing so, you're applying your explorer tactic of digging deeper to understand where Hong is coming from.

Imagine that you respond:
"I'm curious, Hong: What life experiences might have led you to develop this view? I'd like to learn more about your point of view so I can understand you better."

In response to your question, Hong takes a moment to reflect, and then answers:

If they lean against a maximum income...
"Thanks for asking. Now that I think about it, I probably feel this way because of my family background. My parents sacrificed a lot to move from a Communist country to one that promises" 

If they lean in favor of a maximum income...
"Thanks for asking. Upon reflection, I think I feel so strongly about the need for a maximum income,"
that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough. They always tell me and my siblings that they made significant sacrifices so that we could have a better life.

When I think of the idea of imposing a maximum income, I feel the promise of a better future is taken away from people like my parents. It feels like a slippery slope towards the type of repressive society my parents worked so hard to get away from."

because I’ve seen so many people in my community struggle to pay for the things they need to meet their basic needs — like food, rent, and internet access.

I do care about people's economic freedom, but instead of focusing on the economic freedom of people who are already financially secure, I think we need to do what we can to increase opportunities for people who can barely get by."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you feel like you understand Hong’s view better, now that you’ve had this clumsy conversation with her?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great! It seems like there's only a short bridge between your view and Hong's, and you were able to make a lot of progress in one conversation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we've mentioned, there will be other occasions where the bridge between your view and someone else's is a lot longer.

You might not be able to cross those bridges in one conversation, but you may be very well to reach each other and find common ground if you keep trying.

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**Life Hacks**
Before we wrap up, here are a few life hacks so you can start putting these skills into practice!

1. **Break the cycle of contempt**
   The next time someone says something you disagree with or that you find offensive, challenge yourself to respond as calmly and respectfully as you can.

2. **Embrace clumsy conversations**
   Over the next week, before you start discussing a hot-button issue, share the idea of a clumsy conversation with your conversation partner(s). Ask them if you can all agree to forgive each other for any mistakes you'll inevitably make.

3. **Have conversations in private, not in public**
   Over the next week, if you find yourself having a contentious conversation with someone in a public social media forum, invite them to a private video chat, phone call, or message exchange instead.

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Which life hack would you like to practice?

- Break the cycle of contempt
- Embrace clumsy conversations
- Have conversations in private, not in public

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**Self-Reflection**

Great! We'll send you a reminder of the life hack you chose in your summary email. Before we wrap up, let's do some brief self-reflection.

What's the key takeaway you learned from this lesson?

Enter text...

In the upcoming week, how will you implement this key takeaway in your life?

Enter text...

That's it for Lesson 6!
We'll send you a summary of the material in this lesson in 24 hours.

We've come a long way in this program!
We began by analyzing the inner workings of our own minds and developing an understanding of our own moral worldview. We discovered that we can embrace our mistakes and develop intellectual humility and a growth mindset.

From there, we learned the many benefits of welcoming disagreements, and how to explore other people's worldviews. Finally, we've thought about how changing the way we think and behave as individuals can impact our culture as a whole.

Everything we've learned so far has prepared us to approach disagreements in a more productive way. But there's still more tools to add to your dialogue toolbox. In our next lesson, we'll begin training ourselves to manage our own emotions, even in the midst of truly difficult conversations.