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**Managing difficult conversations:  
Guidance for anaesthesia  
research co-ordinators**

**August 2025**

## Purpose of document:

This guide aims to equip anaesthesia research co-ordinators with practical, compassionate strategies for navigating difficult conversations in clinical and research settings. Drawing on evidence-based communication techniques and insights from A/Prof Liz Crowe’s CTN educational presentation, it provides a framework to foster clarity, empathy, and connection in high-stakes, emotionally charged situations.

## Acknowledgements:

The development of the Anaesthesia Research Coordinator Network (ARCN) and ANZCA CTN toolkit is being led by the CTN office team, in collaboration with the ARCN sub-committee and the CTN executive. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the ANZCA CTN members, CTN office, ARCN sub-committee, and CTN executive in the creation, preparation, development, and review of this document.

## Disclaimer:

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## DOI

10.60115/11055/1327

## Suggested citation for this document:

ANZCA Clinical Trials Network. *Managing difficult conversations: Guidance for anaesthesia research co-ordinators*. Melbourne: Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists; 2025. doi.10.60115/11055/1327.

## Document history:

Version	Contributors	Reviewed/Approved	Date Approved by ARCN Sub-Committee & CTN Executive	Changes
1.0	A/Prof Liz Crowe Karen Goulding Gillian Ormond	Louise de Prinse Samantha Bates A/Prof David Highton	1/8/2025	Creation

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## Managing difficult conversations: Guidance for anaesthesia research co-ordinators

### 1. Introduction

Difficult conversations are an inevitable part of clinical and research roles, particularly in high-stakes, emotionally charged, or unpredictable environments. Whether you're delivering bad news, addressing under performance, responding to unexpected disclosures from patients, or facing resistance from overburdened colleagues, your communication approach can deeply influence outcomes, perceptions, and relationships. This guide, based on an insightful presentation by A/Prof Liz Crowe, a leading clinical social worker and academic, during an Anaesthesia Research Coordinator Network (ARCN) educational session in October 2021, presents a comprehensive and compassionate framework to navigate these conversations effectively. It integrates evidence-based strategies, practical examples, and emotional intelligence techniques tailored to the healthcare and research context.

### 2. Communication is a practiced skill

- Communication is not innate, it is a skill developed over time through conscious effort, reflection, and practice.
- Professionals should continually invest in improving their communication through formal training, courses, reading, and podcasts.
- Like athletic training, the more you practice, the more fluent and confident you become. This includes role-playing scenarios and debriefing post-conversations.
- Be curious about new methods: explore appreciative inquiry, change communication strategies, and trauma-informed frameworks.

### 3. Ground yourself in intention

- Ask yourself: *"What is the purpose of this conversation?"*
- Intention should shape your tone, timing, setting, and choice of words.
- Returning to your intention can help re-centre a conversation when it becomes emotionally charged or derailed.
- Your intention may be to inform, to consent, to support, or to de-escalate, keep it in focus throughout.

### 4. Aim for connection, not perfection

- In emotionally heightened moments, people rarely retain the specific content of what you said; they remember how you made them feel.
- When words fail, empathy prevails. Express warmth, presence, and curiosity: *"That sounds really hard,"* or *"I'm here with you."*
- Scripts can sound robotic, speak human-to-human. Emotional authenticity fosters trust and engagement.

### 5. Listening is your superpower

- Listening deeply is different from simply waiting your turn to speak.
- Use active listening: mirror back what you've heard, validate emotion, and ask clarifying questions.
- Be aware of what's not being said, listen for silence, pauses, changes in tone, and hesitation.
- On phone calls, you lose non-verbal cues. Tune in with your full attention.
- Practise the 2:1 ratio: for every one thing you say, listen twice.

## 6. Mind the timing

- Even if an appointment is scheduled, check in: *“Is this still a good time for us to talk?”*
- Consider your own readiness. If you're rushed, anxious, or distracted, delay until you can be fully present.
- Give people time to transition into the conversation. Don't launch into your agenda too quickly.

## 7. First and last impressions matter

- The beginning and end of any conversation have the greatest emotional and cognitive impact.
- Begin difficult conversations with clarity and gravitas: *“Thanks for meeting with me. I'm afraid this is going to be a hard conversation.”*
- End with a clear, compassionate summary of next steps, responsibilities, and support options.

## 8. Be clear, be specific

- Avoid vague statements. Specificity helps people understand expectations and behavioural change.
- For example, instead of *“Your performance has been inconsistent,”* say, *“You've missed three deadlines in the last month, and your interactions with the team have been tense.”*
- Specific feedback is essential for fairness, accountability, and planning.

## 9. Acknowledge emotion: name it to tame it

- Recognise emotional cues and name them gently: *“You look anxious”* or *“You seem really upset.”*
- This helps validate the experience and opens the door to deeper understanding.
- Once emotion is acknowledged, you can guide the conversation back to facts and logistics.

## 10. Managing unexpected disclosures

- When someone discloses something distressing (e.g. domestic violence, cancer diagnosis), pause.
- Express empathy: *“I'm really sorry to hear that. That must be incredibly difficult.”*
- Clarify your role: *“I'm not a clinician in this area, but I can help you find the right support.”*
- Be present, not prescriptive. Offer next steps if appropriate, and respect boundaries.

## 11. Handling resistance, misinformation or aggression

- If someone says, *“I never agreed to this trial,”* calmly restate your identity and the consent timeline.
- If someone is hostile or talking over you, pause. Silence invites recalibration.
- Gently state boundaries: *“I'm finding it difficult to continue when I'm being interrupted. May I finish what I was saying?”*

## 12. Recognise cognitive and emotional limits

- Listening and emotional processing are finite resources.
- Schedule breaks, limit back-to-back difficult calls, and refresh your focus.
- When your capacity is low, communication quality and empathy suffer, take time to reset.
- Understand that sometimes an approach from/with a different person may be needed. Ask a colleague to assist and take cues from any learning.

## 13. Debriefing after a difficult conversation

- Start with emotional processing: *“That sounded really tough. How are you feeling about it?”*
- Then move to reflection: *“What went well?”* *“What might you do differently next time?”*
- Use open-ended questions and avoid judgment. Help colleagues build confidence and insight.
- Follow up days later, processing takes time.

#### 14. Addressing cultural and systemic resistance

- If admin or theatre staff are resistant to trials, invite them into the process.
- Ask: *“What would help make this easier for your team?”* This invites critical thinking that may invoke greater ownership and intellectual investment into the trial process.
- Acknowledge their workload and show them how their role contributes to bigger outcomes.
- Share results of trials and celebrate contributions. Recognition increases engagement.
- People respond to strategies that promote inclusivity and empowerment. Identify barriers and find what works for cultural motivation. Consider ways to make a trial more ‘fun’ and the research to be more engaging. Build it and maintain it.

#### 15. Use visual aids and simplified messaging

- Long protocols overwhelm. Use one-page infographics to introduce key ideas.
- Especially in mask-wearing environments, visual summaries help reinforce your message.
- Pair with a verbal hook: *“Here’s a quick overview of what we’re asking and why.”*

#### 16. Conclusion

The heart of any difficult conversation lies in human connection. Regardless of whether you’re dealing with grief, confusion, anger, or exhaustion, showing up with presence, intention, and compassion can transform tension into trust. This guide is not about perfect words or flawless scripts, it’s about equipping you to stay grounded, responsive, and kind. Your impact will be remembered not by your exact phrasing, but by the sense of dignity, understanding, and safety you provide.

#### 17. Quick reference: 10 essentials for difficult conversations

1. Pause. Breathe. Ground yourself.
2. State your intention. Be clear about your purpose.
3. Ask if it’s a good time. Respect readiness.
4. Lead with empathy. Don’t rush into facts.
5. Acknowledge emotion. Name it, then tame it.
6. Listen to understand. Silence is a valid tool.
7. Be specific. Detail what’s happened and what’s needed.
8. Don’t bluff. If you don’t know, say so, and offer to find out.
9. Debrief. Process emotional and practical dimensions.
10. Follow up. Build accountability and support.

*Above all, stay human, that is where your greatest strength lies.*