



TIPS FOR CONVERSATION GUIDES

Conversation Guides

If you're reading this document, you hopefully have interest in leading a small group through the Taking Charge of Your Life conversations. While the process could be led by a practiced facilitator, we have designed it in such a way that any person can use the tools to support someone to take charge of their life – family members, friends or support professionals.

The concept is straightforward. Work through each conversation one at a time. We have provided you with a context to setup each conversation. Watch the video and then use our sample questions to gather ideas and identify choices relevant to the person you are focusing on. Record these ideas in the Taking Charge of Your Life Journal.

As the Conversation Guide, you may want to reinforce that it's critical that the person you are supporting makes the choices. If they have difficulty communicating, those closest to them can help them communicate their choices. If you are hearing comments like, "I think you should do this or this...", you can remind the group that their role is to support the person to identify choices that appeal to them.





Who should be involved?

Obviously, the person who is the focus should always be present. Don't hold conversations about someone's life without them. The people that are closest to the person should participate including family, friends and supporters. A group of three to six people is manageable.

What do you need to prepare?

Our intention is to make this as easy as possible. If your group is small, you may be able to share the videos right off a laptop. If the group is a little larger, you may be able to cast the videos to a TV or use a projector or speakers if you have access to them.

It is helpful to ask a second person to record the ideas raised in the Taking Charge of Your Life Journal. The Journal is a fillable PDF so you could access a second computer for this or print off the document in advance and fill it out manually.

Comfortable chairs arranged in a semi-circle are effective and light refreshments are a nice touch.

You can also hold these conversations over Zoom or another virtual meeting platform if need be.

Clarifying your role as Conversation Guide

Your role as Conversation Guide is straightforward. You do not need to know everything about living with a disability and should simply facilitate and direct the conversation. Again, ensure that it is the person's voice that matters most and make sure everyone has a chance to participate and contribute.

TIPS FOR EACH CONVERSATION



1. INTRODUCTION (Length 15- 20 min)

It was only a few short years ago that we as a society felt that the best place for people with an intellectual disability was in a special program. This meant that people's choices were limited to the special programs that were available in their community. The most extreme example of this was with people who were admitted to institutions like David.

Whether you lived in an institution or not, many people feel that compared to everyone else in their community, their choices were very unfairly limited.

Thankfully, as a society, we now appreciate that every person belongs and contributes to their community and that each person is an individual with their own preferences and gifts with the right to choose and control every aspect of their lives just like everyone else.

The purpose of the introduction is to set a context for the conversations. Explore the idea of how choices define who we are and contrast that with how it must feel to have few choices or no choices as was the case with David being institutionalized.

Discussion Questions

1. Ask everyone participating in your group what they appreciate about making decisions in their life - why is having control in their own lives important to them?
2. Ask each person to share how they think they might feel if they lost control over critical decisions in their lives.

Imagine being told by others:

- Where you will live.
- Who you will live with.
- When and what you will eat each day.
- Where you will go and what you can do.

3. Loss of control over one's life is not limited to people who live in an institution. Do you have situations where you wanted to try something but weren't given the opportunity or you were told that you were not being realistic? Share that story and how it made you feel.

Journal Entries

In the first conversation, record those people who are participating in the conversation and their relationship to the person.



2. GETTING STARTED (Length 10-15 min)

Andrew and Dakota met in high school and have been good friends ever since. Both are young men and share many of the same goals for their lives. They're becoming more established in their jobs, are learning new skills and are working towards setting up their own homes.

In each of these areas, there are things they would like to continue doing and new things they're hoping to try or work towards. Take a few minutes to check in on what's going right in your life now.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the things in your life that are working for you now and that you'll want to hold on to and build on? You might want to think about friends you have, things you like to do, volunteer or work opportunities, or activities you enjoy that you're involved with today.
2. Change is a continuous and exciting process. How would you like to see your best life five years from now? As you discuss new ideas and begin trying new things, it will open up new opportunities and new priorities for you.

Journal Entries

Record the things you love about your life right now and some general ideas about how you would like to see your life in the future.



3. WHAT'S FUN FOR YOU? (Length 20-25 Min)

Even when it comes to fun, opportunities for people living with a disability have been limited to special programs and supports. Most people had very few opportunities.

Contrast that with the unlimited opportunities people in the general public have for fun and it's a big issue. There is no reason why every person in a community can't participate in most activities that are offered. Everyone has the same rights to participate in all their community has to offer.

To get started, think about your passions and interests first. Every person has their own interests and most activities will be more successful if you're interested in them.

But don't limit yourself to existing interests, think creatively to come up with a long list of new activities that might be a good fit and could be worth trying out.

Discussion Questions

1. Ask those you have gathered to share with you what they are involved in. Don't forget to list the things your friends, family and neighbours are also doing that seem interesting. You might want to think about whether any of those things sound interesting to you that you may want to try?
2. Consider the many roles that people hold in your community. Whether it's the role of an athlete, a sailor, an artist, a gardener or any other role, identify the role and then look at all the things a person does while in that role. What roles could you hold?

Considerations

- Consider new activities where the same people gather on a regular basis. This has the added benefit of creating opportunities to make new friendships.
- Don't forget to identify activities in every season. If you're having these conversations in the summer, are there things you might like to try in the winter for example.
- You should have a fairly long list now - Take a few minutes to share with others what on that list interests you. Inviting others in the group to participate in the activity with you can be a lot of fun.

Journal Entries

Keep a list of the fun activities you would like to try. Before moving on to the next conversation, identify the people who may help you try some of these activities.



4. LEARNING NEW THINGS (Length: 15-20 Min)

Many people who live full lives would consider themselves life-long learners. Most communities have many different learning opportunities available both formally and informally. High schools, colleges and universities are obvious but there are so many other opportunities. Community centres, libraries, non-profit groups or companies offer learning opportunities. You can also consider individual teachers or mentors to learn new skills. Opportunities are unlimited.

Discussion Questions

1. Ask those who have gathered what they are learning about now or new things they are trying?
2. As you begin to list the things you might want to consider always start with an interest or passion first and then look for learning opportunities in your community. What's offered by your town or city, or parks and recreation center or even your library?
3. Are there programs or courses in a local college or university that may have interest?
4. Are there groups or meet-ups in your community that focus on a developing a skill or passion?
5. It doesn't have to be a scheduled course. Are there things you might be interested in learning where you can ask someone to share their experiences or expertise with you?

Journal Entries

Keep a list of the things you would like to learn and where you might find a place to learn them.



5. MAKING NEW FRIENDS (Length: 20-25 Min)

Studies have found one in four young people report they have no close friends at all. Zero.

And 75 % of young people wish they had more friends.

If you feel lonely or would like more friends, you are not alone. So many of us feel that we would like more friends. It seems like such a simple and natural need yet we mistakenly believe friendships should just happen automatically.

The reality is that it takes an intentional effort to build new friendships and it takes time. If it's important to you, think about how you might be more strategic. Discuss the ideas below and come up with some things you can do to start meeting new people and creating opportunities to make new friends.

Discussion Questions

1. Getting involved in regular community activities with people who share an interest or passion is the best way to develop new relationships. Have your group share with you a story of where and how they met the last person they became good friends with?
2. Whenever possible, get involved in activities where the same people gather on a regular basis. While there is never a guarantee, being involved with a group of people over time creates the conditions where new relationships are possible.

For example, if someone is interested in theatre, a season subscription would be fun but will offer little opportunity to meet someone. Volunteering with a theatre group either on-stage or behind the scenes where the entire group is together for planning, rehearsals and performances over the course of months, has much more potential. What are some activities you might be interested in where people gather together on a regular basis?
3. Hospitality is also a great way to develop new friendships. Are there people you might invite for a coffee or lunch? Can you host a dinner? Could you bake something or share something from your garden with neighbours? As you meet people you like, extending invitations or finding ways to be helpful are a great next step.
4. Create a list of all the activities you are involved with and list those people who you like and could extend an invitation to. Making new friends is very much a numbers game. The more people you are exposed to, the greater the chance of making a new friend.

Consideration

It can take time and effort to meet new friends. Very few people meet someone once or twice and develop a friendship. Be patient and committed.

Journal Entries

Keep track of all the places you could go to meet more people and list all of the people you know now whom you would like to get to know better.



6. WHERE WOULD YOU LOVE TO LIVE? (Length: 20-25 Min)

Over the years, choice around where a person with a disability may live was extremely limited. In fact, where someone lived was often determined by whether or not a spot opened up with an agency. The choice was simply to take the placement or not.

As times have changed and we now appreciate everyone's right to direct their lives, people living with a disability have the same opportunities to create a home of their own – a home that is truly a place they would love to live.

Where would you love to live?

Discussion Questions

1. Ask the people in the group to share with you what they love most about their own home.
2. Discuss with the group some of the factors and preferences that were critical in their decision to choose where they live? Why did they choose their home?
3. Explore some of the things that are important to you in choosing your ideal home.

Would you prefer:

- A house or an apartment?
- To rent or own your home?
- To live with family, a friend or a roommate?
- Would you prefer living in a city or in the country?
- A location close to family or friends, or to your job?

Take time to consider many of the variables that will help you create a home of their own.

Considerations

- Use this as an opportunity to dream. Don't get caught up in logistics like who will provide supports or manage finances. These can be addressed at a later time. Start with the dream.
- The goal is to identify those aspects of home that truly matter to you.

Journal Entries

List all of the things you would like in a home you would love and create a list of the people who can help you explore them.



7. GIVING BACK TO YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD (Length: 15-20 Min)

Volunteering or giving back to your neighbourhood can be a great way to become engaged with your community, share your gifts and talents, build confidence, learn new skills and meet new people.

There are formal volunteer positions you might consider but also informal things you can do to support your family and neighbours.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the types of volunteer positions that would be best for you. Would you prefer to volunteer at big community events or something quieter where you can get to know people? Do you have an interest that could guide you (i.e. the environment, the arts, sports, caring for others)?
2. List the organizations that need volunteers in your community.
3. List the creative ways in which you might support your neighbours. Could you bring in recycling containers, help shovel snow or cut grass for an elderly neighbour or bake something for someone who may enjoy it?

Journal Entries

List all the volunteer opportunities or places that need volunteers in your community. Don't forget to include things you can do for neighbours, family or friends.



8. IT'S TIME TO WORK. WHERE WILL IT BE? (Length: 20-25 Min)

Did you know that employers who have hired people with disabilities report that they are some of their most reliable staff?

Employers have recognized that people with disabilities provide a reliable and valuable source of labour. For them, it's all about being profitable and employees who have a disability have demonstrated they can make businesses better.

Paid work can make a real difference in a person's life. It creates a sense of purpose, generates income, provides social connections and most importantly provides opportunities for people to contribute and share their gifts and talents.

It's time for work. Where will it be?

Discussion Questions

1. As always, passions and interests are the best place to start. Identify those interests and then look for the opportunities. For example, if someone is interested in boats, they may find a position working maintenance in a marina, cleaning boats, working in a marine supplies store or food services at a marina, etc. Explore the idea of identifying an interest and then brainstorm creative work opportunities.
2. Becoming a valued employee often starts at home. List the responsibilities you can take on at home to develop new skills and a sense of responsibility.
3. Often the greatest indicator of employment as an adult is having a part-time job as a teenager. If you're still in school, list part-time positions that you may be interested in.

Considerations:

We would discourage people to take volunteer positions that others are paid for. There needs to be a clear separation of work that should be paid versus volunteer opportunities. If it helps to think of it this way – “don't do any work for free that others are being paid for”.

There are many steps involved in finding work. Use these conversations as a first step to discuss potential job opportunities that could be a good fit. If you need help moving forward there are many agencies that may be able to provide support, training and connections to employers. But if there is not – then remember most people find their first job through someone they know.

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Journal Entries

Track all potential jobs, work places and new responsibilities you could take on and list the people who may help you explore these options.



9. TAKING ACTION (Length: 20-25 Min)

Change rarely happens without intention. With a journal full of ideas, it's time to take action.

Review the ideas listed in your journal and identify your priorities. What is feasible to start with in the next few months?

With each priority, list:

- The steps you need to take to start?
- Who will support you with each step?
- Ask other people to help you if needed?
- Be specific. List who will do what and by when?

Share your journal and dreams with others in your life - teachers, support workers and other family and friends.

It is beneficial to schedule a follow-up call or another get-together to update the group on progress made. If these conversations were of value, consider getting together and working through the conversations again.

As you have new experiences, your confidence will grow and you'll be open to more and more new experiences.

There are no limits to what is possible when a person with the support of family and friends, is given a chance to take charge of their life.

Journal Entries

The focus here is to identify a short list of opportunities you will want to act on. Be specific and note the people that may support you in taking action on some of your priorities. Don't forget to identify the people you would like to share your Journal with. Set a date for the group to come together to hear how you are doing and to discuss next steps.