



# **We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter**

*Celeste Headlee*

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## **We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter** Celeste Headlee

"We need to talk"-perhaps the most dreaded four words in the English language. But in this timely, insightful, and wonderfully practical book, Celeste Headlee-who earns a living by talking on NPR-makes the case that they are urgently needed. Today most of us communicate from behind electronic screens, and studies show that Americans feel less connected and more divided than ever before. The blame for some of this disconnect can be attributed to our political landscape, but the erosion of our conversational skills as a society lies with us as individuals. And the only way forward, says Headlee, is to start talking to each other. In *We Need to Talk*, she outlines strategies, like the following, that have made her a better conversationalist- and offers simple tools that can improve anyone's communication: *Be There or Go Elsewhere*. Human beings are incapable of multitasking, and this is especially true of tasks that involve language. Think you can type up a few emails while on a business call, or hold a conversation with your child while texting your spouse? Think again. *Check Your Bias*. The belief that your intelligence protects you from erroneous assumptions can end up making you more vulnerable to them. We all have blind spots that affect the way we view others. *Check your bias* before you judge someone else. *Hide Your Phone*. Don't just put down your phone; put it away. New research suggests that the mere presence of a cell phone can negatively impact the quality of a conversation. Whether you're struggling to communicate with your kid's teacher at school, an employee at work, or the people you love the most-Headlee offers smart strategies that can help us all have conversations that matter

## **We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter Details**

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# From Reader Review We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter for online ebook

## Sheri says

Lots of nuggets of wisdom regarding good communication skills, and in particular conversation skills, in this book. After all, "Good conversation doesn't happen naturally, though most of us assume the opposite." (p. 35) Honest and to the point, Headlee's strategies will help you improve your conversation skills, as well as know and understand others better.

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## Allison says

"I believe with all my heart that we have a window of opportunity right now to make things better in our world and it starts with an act as simple as saying hello to your neighbor. So put away your smartphone for just a moment and go talk to someone. Better yet, go listen to someone. People will surprise you. They will delight you, enlighten you and sometimes anger you. But if you can get past the superficial chit-chat most of us mistake as conversation, people will never bore you."

This book was not quite what I expected after reading the title (I expected more of a play-by-play of how to have a difficult conversation) but it wasn't an unpleasant turn of content. This book actually reminded me quite a bit--and referenced quite a lot of the same sources--as the other book I just finished, *Bored and Brilliant: How Spacing Out Can Unlock Your Most Productive and Creative Self*.

However, the application here is turned outward instead of inward. I had to swallow my pride a time or two when she describes the key of being a good conversationalist as being a good listener. I consider myself a good listener...but, when comfortable, I like to talk, too. I think I will take a tip from this highly successful journalist and broadcaster and keep my mouth shut a little more often, and ask the right questions a little more often, too. Hopefully, I'll also be able to say like she does, "I'm so sorry, but I really just don't have the mental capacity to listen to you right now. I would love to be more attentive to what you are saying, so let's have this conversation in 5 minutes when I'm not bathing the cat."

Okay, the cat line was mine, but it definitely applies.

I think her message is an important one because so many people in our society are moving away from empathy, moving toward an "if you voted this way, I have nothing to say to or learn from you" mentality.

She writes, "Listening to someone doesn't mean agreeing with them. The purpose of listening is to understand, not endorse. Often we decide very quickly whether or not we will agree with someone. We listen for certain words that might be clues to their politics, or faith, and we use them to categorize people into groups. Into one group, we gather all of the people who think like we do, and into the other group, go all of those who think differently. The problem is, these kinds of groupings are not very accurate."

I think we need more patience in our listening, less categorizing and more thought before we eagerly share our own experiences and promote our own interpretations of those. It's something I need to work on, and after reading this book, I feel excited to get to it.

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## Stacy says

Headlee had me at her dedication, “For Grant: I wanted to be a better person so I could be a better mom.” I think this speaks to so many parents out there.

This book is so timely in our current politicized environment and she touches on having discussions with people who differ on politics as well as having productive discussions with your boss or employees.

Did you know humans now have the attention span of a goldfish? Technology over the last few years has made up skim and look for sound bites instead of taking the time to read or really listen. I love to blog, but to post and read other blogs it takes more time that I sometimes have. Throwing an update on Facebook takes less than a minute. This affects our conversations too. How many times have you found your mind wandering when someone is talking? Or just waiting for a break so that you could add your own story or comment? Most of us are guilty.

This book was easy to read and had great information, even for people who think they don’t need help. I like that she added lots of studies to back up her recommendations. I found so many things to work on in my own conversations.

Here are a few tips for you. Put away your phone! Even having your phone on the table inhibits conversation. Be present (meditation can help with this). Be respectful and end on a good note. It’s not about you. Keep it short and don’t repeat (especially the negative stuff). Ask open-ended questions and don’t unload your daily accomplishments on an unsuspecting acquaintance.

I really liked this one and can’t wait to try out some of the tips.

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## Robert Cox says

Overall a quick easy read with some insightful points about conversation that can have application in real life. Some are things we might know already but need reminded of:

-We cannot multitask. I do this all the time, try to hold a conversation and write or read an email. Just doesn’t work.

-Going into a conversation with the intent of changing someone’s mind is more often than not a suicide mission. However listening to viewpoints that you disagree with and allowing the person to explain themselves can create a real conversation where opinions can be embraced if not accepted.

-You’ve got 40 seconds of someone’s attention. On a good day. Get to the point.

-Ask open ended question, as much as possible.

-Listening is the embodiment of empathy

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## Aliya Janjua says

Must read for how to communicate.

Don't be shifter, be a supporter.

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### **Tamara says**

Helpful in this post-Trump era.

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### **Liza Fireman says**

This book can be summarized in a few short sentences, maybe one for the most part. We need to listen, and actually talk less. This is an important lesson, since we tend to talk and not listen much, and we tend to talk about ourselves.

As recited in the book: *Sociologist Charles Derber describes this tendency to insert oneself into a conversation as "conversational narcissism." It's the desire to take over a conversation, to do most of the talking, and to turn the focus of the exchange to yourself. It is often subtle and unconscious.*

But it's quite amusing, that in a book that talks about "conversational narcissism" the author writes 90% of the book about... themselves. "I" is mentioned there about 70 million times, and what the author said, thought, heard or bought in a store. Like many of us in conversations, I wasn't super happy or interested in that.

Here is some of that:

*\* After that meeting, I started to take notice of how often I repeated negative feedback. I did it a lot, and it was affecting staff morale. The thing is, it would have never occurred to me that repetition alone could be heard as criticism had this producer not spoken up.*

*\* But more important, the truth is that most of the time we aren't really listening at all. I was at the grocery store recently and told the cashier, "My reusable bags are buried in my cart. Give me a minute to get them out." She looked directly at me and said, "Okay, sure. I hear you," while she was bagging my groceries in plastic bags. I had to repeat myself twice more before she really heard me.*

*\* I had relegated the melodies to the background of my mind, not even paying close attention on those occasions when I was seated in a concert hall with the lights down. I simply allowed the music to play while I thought about other things. When I finally listened, really listened, the music moved me in a powerful way. It was almost a spiritual experience, and that's not far from the experience I have sometimes when I truly listen to other people.*

A much better book that touches this area is Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well by Douglas Stone. There are some awesome insights that I took with me from there.

And I want to add The Power of Vulnerability: Teachings of Authenticity, Connections and Courage by Brené Brown. This one highlights empathy, listening and sharing, topics that are dealt also in We Need to Talk: A Practical Guide to the Lost Art of Conversation.

We need to listen, sometimes especially to advice that we give to others. 2 stars.

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### **BOOKLOVER10 says**

Journalist and radio host Celeste Headlee, in her well-organized and nicely researched work of non-fiction,

"We Need to Talk," suggests that too many of us do not listen attentively or communicate effectively. In an age of instant messaging, surfing the Web, Facebook, and email, how often do we have more than a cursory chat with our relatives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues? Although superficial exchanges are the stuff of everyday life, there are instances when hearing what someone else has to say and conveying what you think and feel can be significant. The words you speak and how you express yourself matter when, for example, you meet with your employer about an important work-related issue, discuss a health problem with your medical practitioner, or try to comfort someone who is bereaved. In her introduction, the author relates the tragic story of a plane that crashed, partly because a first officer was too timid to convince his captain that they should delay takeoff because of dangerous icing conditions. Seventy-eight people perished.

Furthermore, Headlee believes that "our world has become so fractured by politics and distracted by technology that having a meaningful conversation can become a challenge." Too often we become irritated when others express contrary opinions. Civility, respect, and tact may go out the window when people get on their soapboxes. In "We Need to Talk," the author offers excellent strategies for improving the quality of our verbal interactions. She touches on such techniques as avoiding distractions; empathizing; acknowledging that we all have biases; disagreeing without becoming disagreeable; getting to the point rather than going off on long-winded tangents; staying in the moment; postponing a conversation gracefully when you are exhausted or out of sorts; admitting that you are wrong and that you don't know all the answers; and listening with an open mind.

This book, based on a well-received TED talk, is breezy, intimate, honest (the author admits her mistakes and tells us what she learned from them), and includes relevant and lively anecdotes that nicely illustrate Headlee's points. Alas, nothing will bring back the lost art of letter-writing--and what a shame that is--but perhaps this well-written and entertaining book will help restore civil dialogue which, these days, appears to be on the brink of extinction. Let's put away our electronic devices and, as Headlee advises, "go talk to someone. Better yet, go listen to someone. People will surprise you."

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## **Basma says**

One of those books that you may already heard of it's content multiple times before but you still need to read it to refresh your mind and to give a bit more effort to understand and think about what the author is saying to fully grasp the meaning behind it all and it's implications.

I really enjoyed reading about this and it has made me think about many of the conversations I had, the ones I try to avoid, the ones I listen to half-heartedly, the ones where I can't wait for the person to shut up and leave me alone and the ones where I have hoped I have seen the person's face expression before talking and vice versa.

This book shows you that even if you don't think of yourself as a narcissist, it's still something that's in you that will come up every now and then especially in conversations. It shows how much we enjoy the bubble we create and the opinions that we wrap ourselves in without wanting to have a look outside and how that makes us prone to continuously claim we are right and everyone else is wrong without giving them a chance or the benefit of the doubt. I am without a doubt guilty of that as well in most cases. It's not an easy thing to step outside especially when it was quite a journey getting yourself to where you are now whether it's in beliefs or comfort/confidence or the types of conversations you have.

This book doesn't only teach us about where we can go wrong in conversations, but the importance to listen

to ourselves as well and knowing when to have a conversation and when not to. When it's important to put yourself first and have a break or how to decline someone's conversation in a polite way instead of listening half-heartedly and having the other person get annoyed. The importance of actively listening to someone instead of thinking of a quick reply immediately after they finish their sentence.

The author isn't one of those people that blames everything on technology and social media. She acknowledges its impact on us not being able to actively listen and have better conversations and the overall repercussions of that (such as empathy and compassion) but she also acknowledges its importance in our lives nowadays and I guess it's one of those things that we need to work around it instead of eliminating it because it's not something a lot of people -myself included- will be into.

There's so much to unpack from this book and I really hope that my subconscious retains most of the information.

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### **Michael says**

If asked, "Are you a good driver?" What would you say? How about a good listener? "Of course," I'd reply, without looking up from my smartphone.

Our perceptions often don't match how we are perceived. And common sense isn't that common after all.

Celeste Headlee provides a reality check while teaching her readers the most valuable skill; how to listen.

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### **Deanna says**

"The attempt to change somebody's mind is the death of good conversation."

The ability to hold good conversations has become important to me; the skill for both listening and speaking is one that I would like to sharpen.

I came across *We Need To Talk* via a podcast where I heard the author speak of her work. She made a positive impression. I became curious about her book. The book did not disappoint.

Within the pages I found many good and practical pointers to improve conversation for both speaking and listening. The author's writing style appealed, and her voice throughout made the information presented very accessible. I came away from the book with many quotes and ideas to apply to my daily life. This does not mean my conversation skills improved overnight as that's a constant work in progress. Rather, I now have a clearer idea on what to keep in mind, where I can improve, and which steps to take over time. This is a book to return to periodically. There is a lot of good stuff to take in.

A few quotes:

"Through my experience and research, I've identified five key strategies that help facilitate a productive

dialogue. They are: be curious, check your bias, show respect, stay the course, and end well.” p63

“The most basic of all human needs,” said Dr. Ralph Nichols, who pioneered the study of listening, “is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.” I can say without exaggeration that listening is the most important skill I’ve acquired in my life.” p221

“To experience empathy, we must establish a connection between our idea of ourselves and of another person. We have to ask questions like, “Would I like it if that happened to me?” “How would I feel if someone ran over my mailbox?” p23

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## **Leigh Kramer says**

Celeste Headlee believes conversation can change the world and after reading her book *We Need To Talk*, I agree.

Good conversations increase our empathy and they help us consider other points of view, whether it's a political issue or how to handle a tricky situation at work or even a helpful tip related to a household chore. We walk away understanding ourselves and the other person better than we did before.

This, of course, takes work. More importantly, it takes self-awareness. Most of us believe we're better conversationalists than we actually are.

And there's the rub. When I started reading, I thought I had a pretty good handle on my conversation skills. There are, of course, areas I can work on but overall, I thought I was in pretty good shape. I'm a great listener and naturally empathetic. I used to be a social worker, for pete's sake. It was tempting to think about how much other people really needed to read this book.

But Headlee called me out. Well, she called us all out. We've all made mistakes when it comes to conversation. We've said things we wish we hadn't, we've spaced out, our words have hurt the people we love and strangers alike. At a time when we're growing more divided and disconnected, we can't afford not to think about how to converse better.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section focuses on the philosophy of conversation. How do we define a good or bad conversation? What can conversation teach us? What does the research say? I found chapter 3 about the hallmarks of good and bad conversation to be especially pertinent. Chapters 4 and 5 made me think a lot about my expectations of conversation and how I can fine tune my approach for difficult conversations. I may or may not have needed this reminder while discussing a hot political topic the other night.

The second half of the book offers practical suggestions, such as how to ask questions, the benefits of silence, and why repetition doesn't actually help us communicate. It also discusses when we shouldn't converse- because there are times when this is the correct response. I was underlining and asterisking so many parts. It's made me view conversation in a whole different light and I'm already trying to put her suggestions into practice.

*We Need To Talk* offers practical, insightful advice on how to improve our conversations. It's well-written and easy to read. In fact, it mimics Headlee's advice on how to have better conversations. It's focused and to



the point. It's engaging. It asks good questions. It invites us to learn about ourselves and the world around us.

The truth is we all need to heed Headlee's wisdom. I have a feeling I'll be referring back to this book for years to come. It's not enough for me to read it; I need to apply its truths to my life. Hold me to it.

Disclosure: I received an ARC from TLC Book Tours in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Jill Dovale says**

I initially thought the title "We Need to Talk" was a bit dramatic, but Headlee is passionate and convincing about the merits of meaningful conversation and the risks of our deteriorating ability to listen and communicate to ourselves and society; there were many times while reading this book that I found myself nodding along enthusiastically. Headlee frames these benefits and risks at the personal AND global scale, showing the stakes, especially in these divisive times, of being unable or unwilling to communicate with those--an uncle or a congressperson--who might hold wildly different viewpoints.

This is a fast read, and it doesn't introduce anything mind blowing (though it does have lots of great quotes!), but it is a good reminder of how much can be gained by slowing down, truly listening, and making an effort to speak with intention. As it happens, all of that is very hard to do. I'm a committed meditation practitioner and mindful speech is pretty much the most challenging frontier. It's difficult for the average human to listen with presence while actively trying not to pre-meditate a response, all while actively avoiding shifting the conversation to a more preferred subject...like the self.

After reading this book I am more aware of my own "conversational narcissism" and notice it more in others, too. I agree with Headlee: it would be valuable if we all practiced listening and speaking mindfully. We should learn this skill at home and in school, and it should be practiced and reinforced with intention. I'm not sure if reading this book will change my behaviors, but noticing is the first step to changing a habit, and I am happy to be reminded that I don't, in fact, want to be a conversational narcissist! Even if I'm only able to be mindful of my listening/speech habits for 2 mins a day, it's a start.

Headlee has a clear and crisp voice, and she uses herself as an example for conversation pitfalls in a way that's humanizing and relatable, which is definitely a good thing because she can get a little prescriptive at times ("don't do this...do do this"). This book covers a lot of ground without a ton of depth, highlighting bad habits and offering some advice (loving-kindness meditation and all kinds of other tips), but it's a worthwhile read if only to highlight the opportunity we all have to slow down and bring greater care to how we talk to each other.

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### **Andrea says**

Headlee is a news show host on NPR whose primary business is interviewing people and learning from what they tell her. In this book, she uses her own observations backed up with current research to present several ways we can improve the quality of our conversations. Headlee argues that with Americans more divided than at any time in recent history, we are losing the ability to have civil, engaged conversations. The strategies she presents are not necessarily new or groundbreaking, but help us to recover the lost skill of difficult and involved conversation. She covers the idea of active listening, overcoming our bias in

conversations, and mindfulness.

I found this a useful discussion. The only disappointments for me were Headlee's apparent disregard for small talk or banter and her insistence that timing is crucial to good conversation, even to the point that she recommends simply walking away from conversations when we may be too tired or distracted to fully engage. While I understand that she is trying to present culturally specific advice for Americans, I think there are many times when important conversations must happen on someone else's timetable, not our own. I also think that preserve our verbal interactions for "quality" conversations disregards the social cohesion that small talk builds. Growing up in a large family and marrying into a culture that highly values both small talk and deep conversation, I think social interaction is a learned skill but I also think quantity can have a value even when the "quality" of the interaction is limited.

Overall, I would recommend this book. I plan to use excerpts for discussions with my college students about conversation styles and also active listening and audience awareness.

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## **Kevin Lin says**

I picked up this book after listening to an interview with Celeste in a podcast. She mentioned a few interesting pointers about conversations and piqued my curiosity enough that I got her book.

"We Need to Talk" makes the case for in the importance of conversation in society and some practical advice in having good conversations. It's a short read that could have been a quarter of its size and still gotten the same points across.

The book is divided into two halves. The first half tries to establish the importance of good conversations. A lot of studies are cited that all go along the lines of concluding that conversations are important. Most are loosely referenced and described in one or two sentences. They are peppered in between chapters and feel like they could be dislodged with an untimely sneeze. While I welcome the reference to research and figures in books covering soft skills that traditionally have revolved more around personal experience and anecdote, one gets the feeling that the research is only present to lend a shallow "scientific validity" to the arguments in the book (instead of bringing further depth onto the subject).

The second half of the book addresses actual advice on having good conversation. Once again, you have the peppering of research but it is accompanied by practical conversation advice. The advice switches back and forth between talking and listening and the majority centers on when to not speak which I think is sound (pun intended) and spot on.

In short, "We Need to Talk" is a good primer on conversations with actionable steps on having good ones. It's not deep and light on in depth justifications but there's enough there to make you think differently if you've never thought much about conversations before.

pros:

- short read
- some genuinely practical useful tips
- interesting citations

cons:

- could have been much shorter
  - not much depth
-