



How to Confront Others About Their Poor Hygiene

Expert
Reviewed

Three Parts: [Preparing for the Conversation](#) [Setting up the Conversation](#) [Having the Conversation](#)

Sometimes, we have friends, roommates, or colleagues who struggle to keep up with personal hygiene. They may not realize the effect their poor hygiene has on their relationships or working environment, so it may be necessary for a friend or manager to confront them about it. Here's how to navigate this difficult conversation by keeping the focus on your relationship and your friend or colleague's well being.

Part
1

Preparing for the Conversation

1 Set a goal for the conversation. Making sure that you have a particular result in mind will help you plan for the difficult conversation. Know the specific changes that you want to see in your friend or colleague's behavior and be clear about why those changes are important.^[1]

- Avoid examining his or her personality; keep your goals focused on behaviors.
- Write your goal down so that you can keep it as a reference as you plan the conversation.

2 Consider the other person's perspective. If you're in a workplace, then take a look at your company's dress code, in case your colleague simply doesn't know the standards. If you're dealing with a friend or family member, think of ways that you can present the situation that will reflect his or her personal values or beliefs.^[2]

- Know your company's dress code, if you're speaking with a colleague or employee.
- It's possible that the person simply doesn't know that they have a problem, as they may have a decreased ability to smell or are unaware of how to care for his or her hygiene.^[3]
- Some people may view hygiene as a community obligation, rather than a simply personal one, so be aware of potential cultural values that you can point to as support for improving the situation.^[4]

3 Learn about possible health problems that may cause hygiene issues. Some health conditions or mental illnesses can contribute to difficulties in managing personal hygiene, so it's important to be aware that discussing this topic may bring up other issues.

- Depression can cause anxiety, a sense of helplessness, and deep sadness that may interfere with a sufferer's ability or desire to maintain good hygiene.^[5]
- Certain illnesses of and damage to the brain or nervous system may affect a sufferer's physical ability to care for him or herself, and so add to a lack of good hygiene.^[6]
- Drug or alcohol abuse can cause confusion, fatigue, memory loss, and lack of attention, which may all contribute to less attention to personal hygiene.^[7]

4 Examine and deal with your own concerns about confrontation. You may be concerned about the other person's feelings, or you may have difficulty bringing up challenging issues with others. If you mentally prepare yourself by focusing on the goal and eliminating any extra emotions, you'll feel more confident in the conversation.^[8]

- Make a list of all outside issues and emotions that are causing you anxiety and plan to leave them out of the conversation.
- Remember that this discussion will be painful, but it will definitely help your friend or colleague in the long run. Focus on the long-term benefits for his or her relationships, professional success, and self-confidence.

5 Practice the conversation with a trusted support person. Although you don't want to "gossip" about the situation, it's important to be sure that you're focused on the goals of the conversation and that you can feel more confident about your approach.^[9]

- Ask your supervisor, friend, or mentor (preferably someone who does not know the person or is not affected by the situation) to give you feedback on your tone of voice, the evidence you're including, and potential challenges you might face during the conversation.

6 Be prepared for an emotional response. The person may not realize that there's a problem, and he or she may be humiliated and defensive. The conversation, even if you're gentle and have the best intentions, may alienate your friend or colleague. He or she may even begin shouting or involve you in a physical altercation.^[10]

- Include a mentor or another friend as a support system to help you prepare and to be present during the difficult conversation.
- Be aware that this kind of conversation, if it's with a colleague, may be construed as bias or harassment, and may put you at risk of legal action.^[11]

7 Focus on a positive outcome. Have the mindset that you will both be able to speak and listen well, and that you'll come to an understanding that is satisfactory for both of you.^[12]

- Consider meditation for calming your fears and helping increase your mindfulness, and thus your confidence.^[13]
- Imagine a positive and encouraging conversation, and see yourself as calm, compassionate, and honest in your mind's eye. Imagining your "best possible self" may both help your confidence, and also may improve your optimism for a successful meeting.^[14]
- Make a list of the results of a successful conversation, both in your relationship and in that person's life. Write down the positive meanings for negative consequences, too, so that you can maintain an optimistic outlook throughout the process.^[15]

Part 2

Setting up the Conversation

1 Request permission for a private conversation. Rather than making a public demand or writing a letter, call or speak with your friend or colleague in person.^[16]

- A conversation is not an argument, so use direct, but warm, tones and general language when you ask for a meeting, such as, "If you have a minute, I'd like to set up a time to speak with you this week."
- Sending an email message is acceptable, although it may cause some anxiety because it's less personal and may seem cold or unfeeling.

2 Schedule a time that's convenient for both of you. Although the person may push you for details right away, it's best to make sure that you both have sufficient time for a full conversation. Rushing through between appointments or when you have other plans may lead to confusion and hurt feelings.^[17]

- Meeting at the end of the workday is the best option for a co-worker or employee, so that he or she doesn't feel self-conscious all day long.^[18]
- Plan to set your cell phone to the "Do Not Disturb" setting during the time you choose so that you can avoid distractions and interruptions.

3 Plan a face-to-face meeting. Body language and facial expressions make up a significant part of our communication, so meeting in person is important if you want to protect your relationship, whether professional or personal.^[19]

- Video conferencing, such as Skype or Google Hangouts, is an option, though it can feel impersonal and distant, and you risk technological problems and misunderstandings.
- A phone meeting might be acceptable, but it may lead to more awkwardness, since you can't see each other's expressions or body language.
- Email isn't really useful, as the conversation is delayed and broken up, and you can't see one another's body language or hear tones of voice. Additionally email poses privacy concerns.^[20]

4 Make arrangements for a comfortable place to meet. Choose a safe, neutral space, like a conference room, outdoor park, or a study area, so neither party has too much dominance in the conversation. If one person feels less powerful in the room, he or she may feel even more nervous or defensive about the situation.^[21]

- Avoid crowded public places, like coffee shops or restaurants, that might lead to greater embarrassment and a more emotional response.
- Your office may feel like the principal's office to your colleague, and there may be more interruptions. These interruptions will hurt your chances of having a calm and thoughtful conversation.^[22]

5 Ask your support person to be available during the meeting. Although it's kinder, and more effective, to meet one-on-one, try to request that another friend, mentor, or supervisor be available at the time you're meeting. He or she can help you to deal with difficult emotional responses or challenging questions. ^[23]

- If you feel uncomfortable being alone with your co-worker or friend in this situation, then have your support person present during the conversation itself.
- If your coworker is of the opposite gender, be aware of cultural values that may interfere with or complicate the conversation.^[24]

Part 3 Having the Conversation

1 Affirm your commitment to your relationship. The most important outcome is a relationship that survives the conversation. Keep this mindset throughout the conversation to help with awkwardness and to keep you on track.^[25]

- A friend needs to know that your relationship is important to you and that you're having this conversation because you care about his or her well being. "Your friendship means a lot to me, and I wanted to meet with you because I'm concerned about you."
- A co-worker or employee needs to hear that his or her work is valued and that his or her job isn't at risk. "I'm glad to have you on our team, and I want our working relationship to continue to be successful."^[26]

2 Be direct, but warm. Be specific about the problem, as being vague in order to spare the person's feelings might lead to misunderstandings. Use as much respect, kindness, and compassion as you can, but present the issue clearly.^{[27][28]}

- **Keep your body language open** to encourage your friend or colleague to trust that you want to help them.
- Avoid statements with generalizations like "You never" or "You always." These phrases will put the person on the defensive, which will distract from the issue at hand and cause even more discomfort for both of you. ^[29]
- Use only "I" statements to explain your feelings rather than blaming your friend or co-worker. Focus on the reasons that good personal hygiene is important for your relationship, whether personal or professional.^{[30][31]}
- Don't use anyone else's comments about the person's hygiene as evidence of the problem, as this will just make the person feel more humiliated and isolated.

3 Start with a discussion of clothing. It's easier to discuss clothing, as most workplaces have a dress code, even if it's business casual. These standards will help you explain your position. Friends may also be more receptive if you begin with more surface concerns.^[32]

- You may need to explain the term "business casual," or, in a more informal workplace, explain the difference between "casual" and "inappropriate" or "messy."
- If finances are an issue and the person brings it up here, you can later offer some suggestions for shopping on a limited budget. "I understand financial struggles; I've been there, and I have learned a lot about how to find good deals on quality clothing."

4 Discuss the problem of odor or general uncleanliness. This portion of the conversation will be the most uncomfortable for both of you, but you should bring it up as directly, yet warmly, as you can. Don't make any assumptions about the cause of the odor, instead, suggest that the person may need to wash clothes more often or shower more regularly, or that it may be a health issue.^[33]

- "I also want to talk with you about something that's difficult to bring up, and we'll probably both feel pretty awkward. I am concerned about your hygiene habits. I've noticed some odors that seem to follow you from place to place."
- Leave the cause open-ended so that the person can explain if they feel comfortable doing so. Hygiene is a personal issue, so he or she may not want to offer details about their habits or problems. "You don't need to explain your situation to me, although I'll be willing to listen if you want to."
- Try to explain that body odor issues may be a "violation of employee dress code. At our business, we need to maintain a particular level of professionalism, and that includes everything from appropriate attire to overall hygiene."^[34]

5 Listen actively. It's important to let the person have a chance to respond to the situation, especially since learning that other people are bothered by one's poor personal hygiene can be distressing.^[35]

- Let the person express the emotions they need to, even if that means they are visibly upset and this is uncomfortable for you.
- Don't interrupt unless he or she asks you a question. While interrupting is sometimes a useful strategy, in this case, you don't need to assert control over this part of the conversation.^[36]
- Pay attention to both what the person says and how he or says it. Note verbal and non-verbal cues, and be ready to summarize and reflect on his or her response before you continue.^[37]

6 Keep the conversation on topic and moving towards your goal. In an awkward conversation, it's easy to be distracted by side issues, emotions, or a desire to be overly kind. Stay focused on explaining the issue and the changes in behavior you'd like to see.^[38]

- Let him or know you understand his or her feelings, but you need to keep on track: "Thank you for being honest with me about your feelings. Let's talk about how we can solve this problem together."
- If the person becomes defensive, remember to reaffirm the relationship and his or her value as a friend or employee, but be clear that personal hygiene is an important aspect of his or her success, both personally and professionally.
- Be ready to redirect the conversation back to personal hygiene and the ways you can help, especially if the person now seems to think that he or she is worthless as a friend or employee.
- If an employee shares that his or her poor hygiene is related to depression, then show genuine compassion and urge him or her to seek counseling. You should still express that employees should practice good hygiene when coming to work.^[39]

7 End the conversation with a mutually acceptable plan. Explain your expectations for the person's hygiene, and then offer your help with any aspects of good habits that seem difficult for him or her. Revisit the strengths of your relationship and the positive outcomes of the conversation: "I'm so glad you took the time to talk with me. Our relationship/your work is important, so let's talk about how we can move forward."^[40]

- Young college students, for instance, may not know [how to do their own laundry](#), so offer him or her suggestions for detergents and methods for washing clothes.
- If the person insists that he or she bathes frequently, suggest new soaps or [deodorants](#) to help to combat odors, and be willing to explain how to apply deodorant.
- Discuss alternative options for solving the problem, paying attention to the person's needs as well as your own; ask "What can I do to help you?"

Can you answer these readers' questions?

[Refresh](#)

On **How to Remove Icons from the Android Home Screen**, a reader asks:

How do I remove a picture locked over my home screen on a Samsung sm-g360v android version 5.1.1 phone?

[Reply](#)

On **How to Create a New Playlist on YouTube**, a reader asks:

Why are there some songs that can't be added to a playlist? I click the "Add" button and it doesn't present the list of playlists from which to choose.

[Reply](#)

On **How to Adopt a Family Member**, a reader asks:

My grandchild has been living with me for years. What are the procedures for adopting her without involving a lawyer?

[Reply](#)

Warnings

- Don't try to lighten the mood with jokes; making light of someone's difficulty will only add to the awkwardness of the situation.
- If you're a manager or supervisor, avoid making assumptions about an employee's potential health conditions or mental disability, as you may expose your employer to liability under the Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA.^[41]
- Sometimes, calling attention to someone's personal hygiene could lead to legal action, if the person feels harassed, so take care to be honest and fair in your interaction.^[42]
- Be sensitive to cultural differences in hygiene habits and acceptable smells. Avoid a perception of intolerance by clearly establishing the typical standards for hygiene in US workplaces.

Sources and Citations

1. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/whe.10412/full>
2. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/whe.10412/full>
3. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/11/business/yourmoney/11advi.html?_r=0

[Show more...](#) (39)