



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

S3E4: ACROSS THE POLITICAL DIVIDE WITH DR. TANIA ISRAEL

Tania Israel: One of the things I would encourage people to do is just to be interested in what is the meaning that it has for somebody else, and not to assume that because somebody voted a certain way or behaves a certain way or believes a certain thing, then that means the opposite of what it means to you.

Sam Fuqua: That's Tania Israel, and this is, Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, we talk with Dr. Tania Israel about how to have a meaningful conversation with someone whose politics are very different from our own.

I'm Sam Fuqua, cohost of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi, Sam.

Sam Fuqua: Tania Israel, welcome to the program.

Tania Israel: Thank you so much. I'm delighted to be here.

Sam Fuqua: Let me start by asking you how you define dialogue. And is dialogue different from conversation or argument? What does that mean to you?

Tania Israel: Such a great question. Uh, dialogue, the way I talk about it is a conversation that promote connection and understanding. And that's not always what we're doing when we're having a conversation with somebody. And it's not always what our images of what we should be doing when we're, uh, engaging about politics. So much more often, we have this idea in our minds that's been shaped by what we see in the media where people are debating with each other or just venting, uh, at each other or just stating their own views. But what's really needed in order to accomplish any of the goals that we might have for dialogue is a conversation that promotes connection and understanding.

Sam Fuqua: We know that there are major political divisions in our country, but how large is that divide really? Is the reality of political polarization the same as our perception of the divide and, and how do we know that?

Tania Israel: So, it turns out that we are more polarized than we have been in recent history. And at the same time, we are definitely not as polarized as we think we are, that we have a misperception about that, where we think that people, on what we consider to be the other side, are more extreme than they actually are. We think that they're farther away from our own views than they actually are. And those misperceptions are really creating in our minds a much larger gap and much larger polarization than actually exists in our views.

Sam Fuqua: So is that a function of, of many of us just watching particular viewpoints in the media and social media?

Tania Israel: So it's a, several things that are contributing to that. One of those is media, because media tends to focus on people more at the extremes. It turns out that that's more interesting to viewers than if they are interviewing people who say, "I don't know, I can kind of see both sides of things." Like that apparently doesn't make for great TV. So some of it's what's represented in the media is we're seeing the

extremes. There's another thing that's going on, which is that in social media, the people who post about politics in social media are people who are more at the extremes and who are representing views that are more extreme than, than the typical person. And so, we're also seeing in media this sort of misrepresentation that's making us think that people are mostly at the extremities. The third thing that's contributing to this is our own minds, because as human beings, we have what I think of as some flaws in our operating system that cause us to misperceive. We talk about cognitive distortions sometimes, and these cognitive distortions do, uh, tend to make us see people as being more extreme, more, more different from ourselves in our, in their views than they actually are.

Sam Fuqua: One of the things I appreciate about your work is the, the practical nature of it, and you talk about the science behind this. What research did you draw on to develop your approach to constructive conversation?

Tania Israel: I, I love how much research there is that supports connection and warmth and understanding. So, I'm a counseling psychologist. My work for the last several decades has been primarily about how to support LGBTQ people and communities. And that work certainly put me in situations where, where I was engaging with people who didn't necessarily see things the same way that I did. And, so what I have drawn on across all of that is research that we have in the field of psychology. Some of that research is just what I'm talking about now, about cognitive distortions, realizing that we don't see people accurately. So it's about how do we correct our perceptions? And a lot of that is about these very practical things about how to do that. So I mentioned earlier, that what we need is understanding and connection if we wanna reach any of the goals that we have for dialogue. So always ask people like, what are the goals that you have? What is it that draws you to wanting to connect with people across the political divide?

And reliably these are the things that people tell me. People say, "There's someone in my life who I wanna connect with or I wanna maintain a relationship with, and we're having problems doing that because of our different views." Some people say, "I wanna convince or persuade other people." Some people say, "I'd like to find common ground or heal the divide." And then some people say, "I simply cannot understand how people can think or act or vote as they do." So I went to the literature to see what is the research on persuasion, what is the research on maintaining connection with people, and it all points to the same things. So one of those things is about listening. And listening in a certain way that your goal is to understand somebody else rather than to, uh, you know, conflict with their view. So when you listen to somebody instead of sort of coming up in your mind with the thing you'll say back, that's, that's going to be different from what they're saying. Instead, you come back at them with a summary of what they've just said. We call it active listening or listening to understand, reflective listening.

And it turns out that that's really useful for a number of reasons. One is, it does help somebody else to feel understood and to feel more connected to you and to feel more trusting. It also is gonna help you to make sure that you really do understand them, uh, because you're gonna be focused on what they're saying if you know you're gonna have to summarize it. And also because if you don't quite get it right, then they can correct you. So all of the research shows that helps to build relationships. Some of what I talk about also is what happens if you are hearing stuff that pushes your buttons? 'Cause if you really are listening, then you might hear things that, uh, don't sit well with you. We have a huge body of literature on how to manage our emotions in those situations. How can we breathe? How can we keep ourselves physically grounded so that we can stay present? And that's gonna help us then to achieve the goals that we have for dialogue. There's also research on perspective taking about how do you really understand things from somebody else's point of view. And then there's research on this thing called intellectual humility, which is really about how can we keep our own views and values, even if they're deeply held, or extreme views, but be

respectful of and genuinely curious about where somebody else is coming from. Because it turns out that's a very good stance for going into these conversations.

Alexis Miles: So one thing I'm deeply curious about is how people can monitor and regulate those big reactions that come up when we are talking with some, with people about things we disagree about or we think we're gonna disagree about. So it seems that the nervous system, the body can just get supercharged so that we can't even listen and hear. What are some ways we can control that?

Tania Israel: That's such a great observation about the way our bodies are reacting to those situations because it turns out that our bodies react to any threat as if it is a, uh, life threatening situation because that's the way our bodies were built. Uh, you know, back when there were saber tooth tigers and then any threat really was a life threatening, uh, kind of situation. And so we would go into this fight, flight or freeze mode, and that's the best thing to do to survive as a species. But it's not what we need in situations where the threat is, uh, more emotional than physical because that can get triggered by all kinds of things. By, you know, hearing the, the media, by even imagining having a conversation with someone and having our bodies in that kind of worked up mode all the time just isn't even healthy for us, and it's certainly not a good, uh, place to be when you're trying to go into a conversation that promotes connection and understanding. So, I always recommend, uh, something for people that's, we're doing it all the time, which is breathing. And we're not always breathing in, in the way that's gonna help to keep us calm. But we are always breathing.

So, what I suggest is that we breathe really, like we're blowing bubbles because apparently, I am obsessed with bubbles. And so, uh, breathing like we're blowing bubbles, you know, you imagine having one of those little plastic wands, you breathe in deeply and then you breathe out with a slow and even breath. And if we do that, that's gonna help to calm us. So noticing when your muscles are getting tight, when your breathing's getting shallow, when you're feeling flushed, and then trying to do some slow bubble breathing can be really helpful. Even, um, you know, grounding ourselves physically by noticing the feeling of the chair underneath you or touching your own hand can just help to short circuit that fight, flight or freeze mode. And the thing I always try to do, it's just in my thoughts to remember that probably the worst thing that's gonna happen in this situation is that someone's gonna disagree with me in a loud voice, and to remind myself that I can handle that. And so just keeping in mind what's the magnitude of this threat and trying to stay in it.

I'm gonna add one more thing about that, which is that, you know, people say, but these things are not always just, um, disagreement. Like sometimes what people are saying is really threatening somebody's identity, um, their, their very existence. And it's true, you know, that these things can feel very personal. So I think everybody's, can make choices there. You know, you can make a choice, do I wanna stay in this conversation? Um, is, is this worth it to me? Let me remember what my goals are for this. And, and is that my priority right now? If you need to get out of the conversation, then that's something that you can do also, and if you know that what you need at that point is to get support or to have your views validated, then try to have people in mind who you can go to and get what you need from those people. So it's always a matter of making those choices about like what's the most important priority right now, and what are the skills that are gonna help you to achieve that.

Sam Fuqua: You've actually prepared a flow chart, which is really helpful and I've never seen it broken down like this, but it is a flow chart for how to engage in conversation. Can you kind of walk us through the steps?

Tania Israel: Absolutely. So before I wrote the book, the very first thing that I did after the 2016 election, and when I realized that people were having a lot of challenges connecting with people across the divide, and I thought, wow, what can I do to help? Uh, can I create some resources? So the first thing that I did is I made this thing that I call, *The Flow Chart That Will Resolve All Political Conflict in our Country*. Um, because I'm optimistic like that. I think it's a very powerful flow chart.

Sam Fuqua: That's a modest claim.

Tania Israel: I know. I showed this to one of my friends who said, "Yeah, way to over promise." Um, but what I wanted to do was to help people to be more intentional about whether or not they were gonna engage in these conversations, and if so, how to do it in such a way that they could be most successful at achieving their goals. So the very first question is, do you even wanna have this conversation? And if you don't, then that's okay. Like move along. People always ask me, you know, wow, just 'cause I can do this, does it mean I have to? Like do I have to have these conversations every time there's an opportunity? And of course you don't. But I see too many people turning away from the conversations because either they're misperceiving who they're gonna have the conversation with, so it's that distorted perception, or because they don't know how to do it in a way that's going to be successful and they don't know how to set, um, appropriate expectations for what they can do.

So, so yeah. Do you even wanna have this conversation? And if you do wanna have this conversation, like, what do you wanna do? Do you, do you just wanna, want to vent and, uh, you know, express yourself, or do you really wanna try to understand where somebody else is coming from? And you know, there if, if what you most wanna do is just to vent, or even if you just wanna have your own views validated, then maybe this isn't the best situation for that, you know? So there are a couple of off ramps, um, in this flow chart where maybe, maybe this isn't even what you wanna be doing. But if this is what you wanna do, then, you know, how do you wanna go about doing that? Yeah, you wanna do these listening skills. What about if you want to, um, find common ground with someone, or persuade somebody? What are the best ways to do that? So really trying to think about all of these different things and then across any of those, how is it that you can keep your cool? How is it that you can manage your own emotions so that you can best be present and effective in doing this?

Sam Fuqua: Yeah, a series of yes or no questions, and then the, uh, the follow up action based on how you answer that. Really, uh, really broken down nicely, and we'll, uh, we'll post that and link to it on our website. Uh, we're talking with Dr. Tania Israel. Her book is called, *Beyond Your Bubble: How to Connect Across the Political Divide, Skills and Strategies for Conversations That Work*. Your book also, again, very practical book, it, it includes some exercises. Can you give us an example of an exercise that can help us be better about having constructive conversations?

Tania Israel: Sure. One of the very first exercises that I included in there is just around preparation for entering one of these conversations. I find so often that people, even in anticipation of talking to somebody who disagrees with them politically, get, people get very anxious, and, uh, you know, people are telling me about how they're listening to the radio or they're watching TV, and they're just even trying to imagine having a conversation with this person and their, their head starts to explode, you know? And so, how do we take those feelings that we're having and get ourselves to a place where we can be present with somebody and actually want to engage and actually want to understand. So, I looked again to the literature on, you know, what do we do with emotions, uh, to, to help, to prepare ourselves in various ways. And so, there's a lot of really great work on, on writing as an exercise for being able to process difficult emotions. So I included that in there so that people can sort of do a journaling activity to try to work through those

emotions that might be coming up for them, and then be able to kind of set them aside in a way so that you can approach people with a, a fresher and more grounded kind of stance.

Sam Fuqua: Now, once you move to listening to understand and having a dialogue where you can have an understanding of the person with an opposite view, there's another step that maybe you wanna take, which is to try to find some common ground, right? Um, what, what is key to that? So let's say I'm, I've had a, what I think is a reasonable dialogue with person on the opposite end of the political spectrum so that I'm gaining an understanding of where they're coming from, and maybe they gained an understanding of where I'm coming from, but, but it, that doesn't feel quite the same as finding a common ground. How do we get to that?

Tania Israel: You know, that's part of it is what do we think we're going to get to in terms of common ground, and how big do we think that is? I'll tell you that some of the way I started this work was back in the nineties I started a group to bring together pro-choice and pro-life people to have dialogue with each other. And, when I first entered that, I thought, well, you know, maybe we won't agree on abortion, but maybe we'll agree on contraception, and how we should be doing sex education in the schools. And you know, it turns out that not so much, like it, like we didn't necessarily agree on those things either. But I'll tell you what was amazing about it is that even though it didn't change anyone's mind, I think, about abortion, it changed so much my views about people who disagreed with me on it. And it helped to humanize people who were on the other side and helped me to really understand more where they're coming from. And, 'cause I had really not understood a lot of that. So, some of it is recognizing what the achievable goals are. So sometimes we might not be able to find common ground on, you know, uh, on, on the big matters, but we might be able to find common ground on our own humanity. Or I might even be able to find common ground on, on, um, smaller kinds of things or, or things that aren't so polarized for us. So, in Congress there's the Problem Solvers Caucus, and this is a bipartisan group where they're working on things that they can agree on. So sometimes we need to focus on the things where we do agree, uh, rather than trying to sort of figure out if there's a way to compromise on the areas where we don't.

Alexis Miles: So you, you talk a lot about connections, like the, the importance and power of connections and of connecting with people rather than connecting with a position. Can you say more about the importance of that and, and how we ensure that we're doing it?

Tania Israel: Absolutely. Connection is a human need, and there are ways that we can create stronger connections with people. Uh, and then there are ways that we can rupture those relationships. And there's so much that we, um, have been doing in terms of just the way we think about other people that is causing these ruptures to happen. So, there are some strategies that you can use also. For example, if you hear something that the other person says that you can agree with, then let them know that. We are so stingy sometimes about agreeing with somebody who we see as being our, our opposite or our enemy. And if we can acknowledge, oh yeah, you know, if, if I, um, thought that I could, uh, you know, keep my community safe by doing that, then I would do that too. Um, even if you don't agree on what the thing is that they would do. Anything that we can do to acknowledge agreement really does help then the other person to acknowledge agreement too, and then really find areas where you can agree.

I think that there's something also, which is about not just talking about opinions, um, about policy and things, but to really understand more people's stories behind how they got there and what their values are and, and what their experiences have been related to that. I think all of that really gives us a fuller and more complex and nuanced and human picture of where someone's coming from that can help us to find those points of agreement and connection. I talked about the, um, misperceptions that we have of other

people because of media and social media, and even the cognitive biases in our own minds that are pushing people farther away from us. If we want to bring people closer, we need to be open to shifting our view and recognizing that we might have had either a wrong view or a too limited view of another person. So, so we've gotta somehow be a little bit humble about our perspective on somebody and be open to really understanding more complexly, maybe in a more nuanced way, who they are. So, that's part of that connection is not seeing people just as these narrow stereotypes, but really trying to see people in their full humanity and then using these skills that we've talked about, listening, managing emotions, perspective taking, to um, to try to reconnect with people with that warmth and understanding.

Curiosity is, is a really powerful tool. Truly wanting to know who people are, uh, is, is so powerful in terms of forming that connection. And part of the reason that that connection's important isn't just so that we can have conversations about politics, but it's because we are connected with other people as partners, as parents, as community members, and all of those kinds of ways that we interact with people constantly. If we can have warmth and connection in that, rather than that friction, it's going to help our own mental health, and it's gonna help to create stronger communities. And I mean, ultimately, I think a stronger country, a stronger democracy, um, if, if we can maintain those connections.

Sam Fuqua: We're recording this during the December holiday period and many of us have just gathered or will gather with families. And families, of course, can have people on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Would you add any counsel or strategy to what you've just offered for folks who are trying to do this within a family where there's, of course, shared experiences, there may be baggage, there may be really great memories that have been shared? Uh, how does that make it different?

Tania Israel: I hear so much pain that people are experiencing right now around this, around, uh, conflict within families, separation, uh, from families, or worrying about, uh, connecting, making, you know, a lot of families are making rules about, well, we can't talk about these things when we're all together. I think one thing that's helpful, and this is not always easy to do when we're in a family gathering situation, but I always recommend trying to have these conversations one-on-one rather than in a group situation, because it turns out that it's harder for people to change their minds about things when they feel like there's, you know, kind of public observation of, of them. And so it can be easier sometimes to do this when it's just a one-on-one relationship kind of thing, and somebody doesn't feel like they're needing to justify their view to a group of people sitting around the table. And that might involve some preparation for going into it. Like rather than waiting till you're all together, maybe calling up, um, you know, a family member ahead of time and saying, you know, I know that this is something that comes up sometimes when, when we're together, or I know that this is something we've been avoiding, but I would love to have a different kind of conversation with you about this. I'd really like to understand more about where you're coming from, and I really value our relationship and, and our connection, and I'd like to strengthen that. So, trying to do some things ahead of time can really help to make sure that when the family gathering happens, then you've already laid that groundwork so that it's not coming up in a situation where it's gonna be difficult to have that conversation.

Sam Fuqua: Is there something we haven't touched on that you think would be important to include in the conversation?

Tania Israel: So one thing I'm noticing people are doing these days to push other people away is assuming the meaning that somebody, that something has for another person based on the meaning that it has for you. So for example, let's talk about vaccines for a moment because that's so much on people's minds. Somebody might say, "Well, I got a vaccine because I really care about my, uh, my elderly family members

and, and I care about my community. And if you didn't get a vaccine, then you must not care about people." And somebody else might say, "Well, I don't believe in vaccine mandates because I feel like people should make their own decisions about their bodies, and because I don't think that the government should be dictating these things. And if you believe in vaccine mandates, if you're supporting vaccine mandates, then you don't trust me and you don't trust people to make their own decisions about their bodies. And you want government interference in our lives." So, what people are doing here is flipping the meaning and say, here's the meaning it has for me, and if you disagree with me, then the meaning must be opposite for you. And that is very seldom the case. So what, one of the things I would encourage people to do is, just to be interested in what is the meaning that it has for somebody else, and not to assume that because somebody voted a certain way or behaves a certain way or believes a certain thing, then that means the opposite of what it means to you.

Sam Fuqua: Dr. Tania Israel, it's really been a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you for your time and, and for your work.

Tania Israel: Thank you so much for the work that you're doing about conflict and conflict resolution. I think it's so valuable.

Sam Fuqua: Tania Israel is a psychologist, a professor at the University of California Santa Barbara, and author of the book, *Beyond Your Bubble: Dialogue Across Political Lines*.

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