



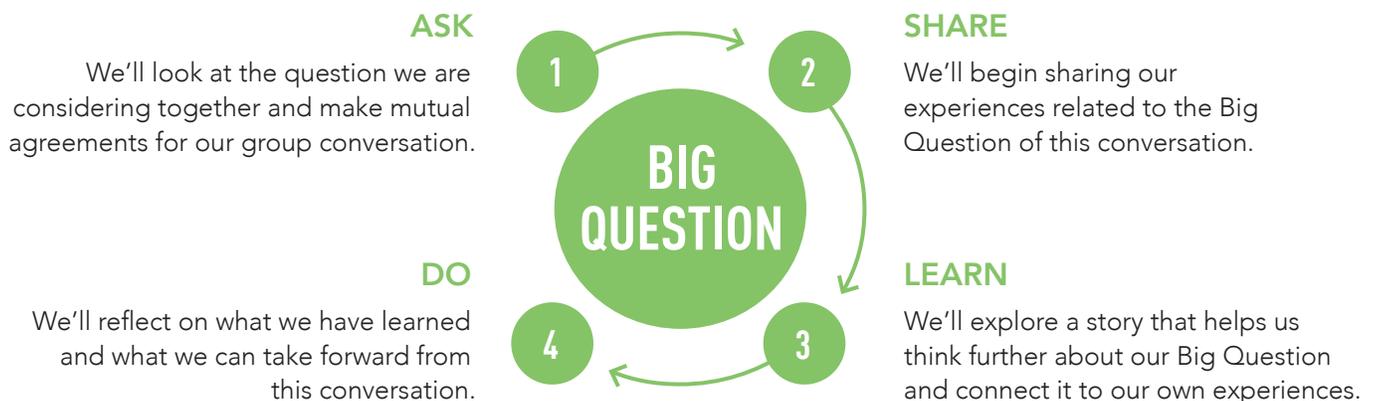
FOR WHOM ARE WE RESPONSIBLE?

A GUIDED CONVERSATION

WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATION IS THIS?

A Big Question conversation is one that helps us connect by discussing questions that matter to everyone, and everyone can answer. The questions we will talk about don't require expertise to answer. For our time together, we will share stories and explore questions instead of making arguments and debating issues. We'll focus on listening and reflecting together to understand and learn, instead of to convince or persuade others.

CONVERSATION FLOW:



Our conversation today will follow these stages, and should last between 60 and 90 minutes. We'll use this written guide as a centering point, to help us have a shared discussion that stays focused and allows everyone to participate. Some parts of the conversation will include reading aloud by members of the group and at times we might break into pairs or small groups.

*Conversation Leaders can find suggestions and support in our "Resources for Conversation Leaders" guide, available online.

ASK

Before we ask each other to share our stories, we need to agree to some parameters to guide us. To create a more trustworthy space where we feel able to contribute openly, we will begin by asking each of us to agree that we have mutual responsibilities to each other and the group. We'll spend around 10 minutes in this section.

We will read our Agreement of Mutual Responsibility together, with volunteers taking turns reading items out loud. As we read, you can use the space provided before the items to mark them using the symbols shown below. You can put more than one symbol by an item if more than one applies.



Put a question mark by any items for which you need clarification



Put a check mark by items which feel easy or natural to you



Put an arrow pointing to items which will be challenging for you, where you will need to pay special attention



Put a star by items which are most important for you to receive from others in order to participate fully

After we read the Agreement items together, we'll review any that need clarification. Then, as we go through the conversation:

- be aware of those items you marked as challenging for yourself, and try to adjust when you find yourself not following an agreement;
- if you feel others are not observing agreements, especially those that you starred as most important to you, you can ask the conversation leader or the group as a whole to review an item and discuss what can help the group make adjustments;
- notice whether your assumptions about what would come easily or naturally to you were accurate, and whether in the future you might need to be more mindful about your tendencies in those areas than you anticipated.

OUR AGREEMENT OF MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY



need clarification



feels easy or natural



will be challenging



need from others in order to participate fully

WE AGREE TO:

- _____ **1. Share the Air:** We will strive to share this time, space, and learning process equitably, so that all can participate and share in the benefit. We will not expect other individuals or groups to bear the responsibility of educating us.
- _____ **2. Uphold Confidentiality:** We will not share others' stories or identities outside this conversation, although we may share what we have learned from this experience.
- _____ **3. Maintain Respect:** We will treat others with respect. We will not shame, blame, demean, or attack others.
- _____ **4. Allow for Silence:** We won't rush to fill silences, recognizing that we may need time to gather our thoughts or find our courage to speak.
- _____ **5. Listen to Understand:** We will acknowledge the limits of our own knowledge and open ourselves to what we can learn from the experiences and circumstances of others. We will listen to understand and to learn, not to debate.
- _____ **6. Speak Only for Ourselves:** We will each speak from our own experience, not for others, not for entire groups. We will not expect others to speak for entire groups.
- _____ **7. Consider the Bigger Picture:** We will strive to recognize how our own and others' experiences and perspectives are influenced by heritage, cultural environments, social groups, our diverse identities, and social systems.
- _____ **8. Explore Disagreement:** We will strive to be open and curious about our disagreements, and to engage with disagreement even when it feels uncomfortable.
- _____ **9. Lean in to Discomfort:** We will be willing to grapple with challenging ideas and feelings, and examine our own reactions.
- _____ **10. Practice Generosity:** We will recognize that we are all people in process and are more than we express in any one moment. We will give ourselves and each other permission to not know. We will respect each other's right to be fully human, including experiencing strong emotions, not knowing, and making mistakes.

Please sign here as a symbol of your commitment to upholding our Agreement.

SHARE

We want to enter into conversation by introducing ourselves and inviting everyone to reflect on our own experience, connecting our Big Question to our individual lives. We'll have up to 20 minutes for this activity.

Think about this question:

WHAT COMES TO MIND?

- What or who comes to mind when you hear the word "responsible?"

Take a moment to organize your thoughts; you can use this space to make some notes to yourself. Then we'll each introduce ourselves and share a brief answer.

LEARN

This is the heart of our conversation; we'll spend up to 30 minutes in this portion. We are going to read a poem together, to help us think about our Big Question from a shared reference point.

SETTING THE CONTEXT:

Our Big Question for today is "For whom are we responsible?" Within this question are other questions: Who are 'we'? What does it mean to be responsible? Who is responsible for us? How do we fulfill our responsibilities?

The dictionary defines "responsible" as "having control or authority," or "being accountable for one's actions and decisions." A legal dictionary broadens the definition of 'responsible' to include, "characterized by trustworthiness, integrity."

In the poem below, the main character deals with all these questions and meanings. We'll read it together, and then have a chance to discuss it.

OKAY

There's a man in the road, waving.
We're driving home from Hot Springs,
my wife and I, and our three kids.
He's holding something bundled
in his arms. Don't stop, my wife
telegraphs to me with a sideways glance.
I'm okay with that.

It's a dog! the kids shout, He's
carrying a dog! So, okay, I stop,
roll down the window.

Please help, the man says, tears
leaking down his stubbled chin.
The dog is bleeding. He's rolled up
in an old rug, eyes open, miserable.
I just run over my dog, the man
blubbers, He's drunk. And stinks.

Okay, I'm thinking, I'm stuck
with this. The kids squeeze together;
the man and dog huff and groan,
sniffle and slide themselves into
our lives. My kids' faces in the rearview
are pinched, afraid to breathe –
wet dog, blood, booze, rotting socks.

The man whimpers, cradles his dog,
I'm f-ing sorry, man. So f-ing, f-ing
sorry. This is less than okay.
We spit gravel behind us and speed
back to Hot Springs to find a Vet.

It's a Sunday, my wife whispers,
everything's locked up.
I'm thinking, Okay, what now?
At the one payphone on Main, I pull over
to let the man and dog out. You better call
someone, I say. My voice sounds afraid.
The man's eyes are shut, not asleep,
but almost. The dog's eyes are shut, too.
You better call someone, I say louder,
Okay? Okay?

The man stands at the payphone, his dog
bundled on the sidewalk.
He just stands there.
My kids cry silently. My wife trusts me
To be the man she hopes I am. I don't
know what's okay and what's not.
The man is fumbling in his empty pockets
for change. I feel a lot like that.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

We won't necessarily discuss every question here, but we will discuss at least 1 or 2 from each section. As we discuss, you can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

Clarifying: What's happening in the poem?

- Is there anything in the poem that isn't clear to you?

WHAT COMES TO MIND?

Interpreting: How do people in the story feel and respond?

With these questions, we want to stay as close as possible to the actual content/action of the story, examining what is there and what we think it means.

- Why did the man driving the car stop? Why do you think he first didn't stop, and then later did?
- Who, if anyone, do you think is taking responsibility for something or someone in this story? Who, if anyone, is neglecting responsibility in this story?
- What do you think of the family leaving the man and his dog at the pay phone? Did they have a responsibility to do anything more? Why or why not?
- What do you think the man means at the end of the poem when he says, "My wife trusts me to be the man she hopes I am"? What kind of man do you think she trusts him to be?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Reflecting: How does this story resonate with us?

- Would you have stopped the car if you were driving? Why or why not?
- Did you create a visual picture in your mind of the people in the poem? What do they look like? What if their identities were different than you imagined—would that influence whether you would stop or not?
- What things do you consider when deciding if you feel like you have a duty or responsibility to someone?
- Who do you think has a responsibility for/to you?
- Think of a group or community that you identify with. What, if anything, do you consider to be your responsibility to others in that group with you? And is there any responsibility you think the group you belong to has toward others who are not a part of that group?

WHAT COMES TO MIND?

DO

To conclude our time together, we'll think and talk about some of the things that really struck us during the course of our conversation and what we can take forward from this experience.**

**Conversation Leaders can find suggested variations of the "Do" section in our "Resources for Conversation Leaders" guide, available online



WHAT DID WE LEARN?

First take a moment to reflect and respond briefly, in a phrase or sentence, to at least one of these questions:

- What insights did you have about our Big Question?
- What insights did you have about yourself, your own values, or how you view the world?
- What insights did you have about others -- whether other participants, someone whose story we discussed in the Learn section, or people in general?

You can use the space to make some notes to yourself. After you've had a moment, we'll share some of our thoughts.

WHAT COMES TO MIND?

WHAT WILL WE DO?

Now take a moment to reflect and respond to the questions below and choose one response you would like to share with the group. We'll finish with a final round of sharing.

1. Think again about our Agreement of Mutual Responsibility. What are some things you noticed in this conversation that you and others did – or didn't do – that created the space for a meaningful, respectful conversation? What is one thing you want to work on maintaining in other conversations you have?
2. We all know maintaining commitments can be hard. In anticipation of the times when maintaining your goal is a struggle, what is a strategy that you can use to help yourself in those moments?

WHAT COMES TO MIND?

CLOSING

Thank you for participating in this conversation. Educator John Westerhoff has said that "We are at our best when we make our lives and our search for meaning available as a resource for another's learning."

SHARE YOUR FEEDBACK:

We'd like to hear about your conversation experience! Take our brief survey at bit.ly/AskBigQs.

SHARE YOUR STORY:

Join the Ask Big Questions community online – connect with us and share your conversation story. Tag @AskBigQs (Twitter) and @AskBigQuestions (Facebook and Instagram)



ABOUT ASK BIG QUESTIONS

Ask Big Questions is a project that seeks to deepen understanding and strengthen community through reflective conversations about questions that matter to everyone. No matter our background or perspective, we need opportunities to see and hear each other more deeply – not as labels but as human beings. Conversations that help us connect are essential building blocks for strong and inclusive communities. Big Question conversations support and strengthen civic habits of listening, civility, and engaging diverse perspectives, which are important steps toward better problem solving. Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel International.

JOIN THE BIG QUESTIONS COMMUNITY!

Join our movement to build connection, trust, and community through better conversation! A good conversation changes us, and as those effects ripple outward, it can change the world. Visit askbigquestions.org to find more Big Question conversation guides and resources to help you use our guides for better civic dialogue.

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