

***Crucial Conversations With Adult Learners: Addressing Academic Remediation,  
Mental Health Concerns, and Lapses in Professionalism***

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**Abstract**

In the intricate landscape of modern education, effective communication is paramount, particularly when engaging in crucial conversations with adult learners. This conceptual framework delves into the significance of these conversations, exploring their role in addressing academic remediation, mental health concerns, and lapses in professionalism. By examining the impact of such discussions on adult learners' educational experiences, this study provides valuable insights into fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Drawing upon a comprehensive review of the literature, the authors present evidence-based strategies for engaging in successful crucial conversations. These strategies are designed to empower educators and facilitators to navigate challenging topics with adult learners, facilitating meaningful dialogue and promoting positive outcomes. To that end, they are showcased through three case studies that highlight the use of Crucial Conversations with adult learners. By promoting crucial conversations through open dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaborative problem-solving, educators can create a learning environment that values diversity, encourages growth, and supports the holistic development of adult learners (Grenny, 2022). This research underscores the need for ongoing professional development in communication and conflict resolution skills, empowering educators to navigate challenging conversations and contribute to the overall success of adult learners.

Keywords: Adult Learners, Crucial Conversations, Remediation, Mental Health, Professionalism

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## **Introduction**

Adult learners occupy diverse backgrounds, experiences, and motivations, thereby bringing unique needs and facing distinct challenges within educational settings (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020). Recognizing the significance of fostering growth and success among this population, crucial conversations have emerged as a vital tool for supporting adult learners. These conversations, characterized by their focus on high-stakes and emotionally charged issues, serve as transformative opportunities for addressing critical aspects of adult learners' educational journey (Grenny et al., 2022). This conceptual framework delves into the significance of crucial conversations in three specific areas that significantly impact adult learners: academic remediation, mental health concerns, and lapses in professionalism. Through an examination of existing research and insightful case studies derived from workplace scenarios, this article seeks to shed light on effective strategies for engaging in these conversations and fostering a supportive learning environment that facilitates adult learners' growth and development. By understanding the role of crucial conversations in these key areas, educators and practitioners can equip themselves with the necessary tools to create inclusive and effective learning environments for adult learners.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Academic Remediation and Crucial Conversations***

Academic remediation refers to the process of providing additional support and resources to adult learners who require assistance in meeting educational standards. Crucial conversations centered around academic remediation involve discussing areas of improvement, goal setting, and providing constructive feedback (Cheong et al., 2022). According to a study by Grenny (2009), crucial conversations in academic remediation can enhance self-awareness, clarify expectations, and promote personalized learning plans. Engaging in these conversations requires active listening, empathy, and establishing clear objectives for adult learners.

According to Dweck (2006), cultivating a growth mindset, where learners believe in their capacity to improve through effort and learning, can positively influence academic outcomes. In addition, educators should employ strengths-based approaches when engaging in crucial conversations about academic remediation (Bourgeois-Law et al., 2018). Recognizing and building upon a learner's strengths can provide a solid foundation for their learning journey. By acknowledging their existing skills and abilities, educators can create a supportive environment that encourages students to apply their strengths to areas that require improvement (Dornan et al., 2019). This approach not only boosts confidence but also instills a sense of empowerment in learners, motivating them to tackle academic challenges with enthusiasm.

Moreover, developing effective learning strategies is crucial when addressing academic remediation. Students who struggle academically often benefit from tailored approaches that cater to their individual learning styles and needs (Hamman, 2018; Housel, 2020). Educators should take the time to understand each student's preferred learning methods and provide them with the necessary tools and techniques to enhance their learning experience. This may involve simulated and experiential learning, mentorship and coaching, peer collaboration, or integrating technology into their learning.

Chou et al. (2019) highlights the importance of creating an open and non-judgmental space during crucial conversations about academic remediation. Establishing an atmosphere of trust and respect enables students to comfortably share their challenges and seek assistance. Encouraging open dialogue allows educators to gain valuable insights into the specific hurdles students face, enabling tailored interventions and support. This collaborative partnership between educators and students fosters academic growth and success.

### ***Mental Health Concerns and Crucial Conversations***

Mental health concerns significantly impact adult learners' educational experiences (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018). Crucial conversations focused on mental health aim to address stress, anxiety, depression, and other emotional challenges that can hinder learning. Studies by Alsubaie et al. (2019) and Kumagai, Jackson, & Razack (2017) highlight the importance of creating an emotionally safe and inclusive environment that encourages the disclosure of mental health concerns among adult learners. They found that crucial conversations that prioritize active listening, empathy, and the provision of appropriate resources can help reduce the stigma associated with mental health and promote well-being.

Incorporating mental health support services and awareness within educational settings is crucial. Yusuf et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis positive impact of integrating well-being initiatives into adult education programs. Wellness integration enhances learners' academic success and overall well-being by providing them with the necessary support to address their mental health concerns. Yusuf et al. (2019) found that while many approaches can be helpful, it is essential to tailor the approach to the particular person or group of persons. To that end, these supportive interventions can be navigated by engaging in crucial conversations that focus on the mental health of the adult learner. Crucial conversations should be conducted with sensitivity and respect, ensuring that learners feel heard, understood, and supported.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that mental health concerns among adult learners are diverse and multifaceted (Wolgast et al., 2020). These concerns can stem from various factors such as personal experiences, societal pressures, financial stress, and life transitions. These factors can significantly impact their mental well-being and hinder their educational experiences. Therefore, it is important for educational settings to acknowledge the complexity of mental health issues among adult learners and provide tailored support that addresses their unique circumstances. By fostering a supportive and empathetic learning environment, educational institutions can empower adult learners to seek help without stigma and promote overall well-being alongside their academic growth.

### ***Lapses in Professionalism and Crucial Conversations***

Lapses in professionalism, such as disruptive behavior or ethical violations, can negatively impact the learning environment and the experiences of adult learners. These instances can create a sense of unease, hinder effective communication, and impede the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Guerrasio et al., 2019). In Grenny's (2009) article, he argues that in crucial conversations, emotions run strong, and outcomes have significant consequences, holding the key to transforming disruptive behavior. Engaging in crucial conversations about professionalism involves setting expectations, addressing concerns, and promoting accountability. The author emphasizes that rather than ignoring or avoiding such

conversations, educators must engage in them skillfully to address the root causes of disruptive behavior and create a culture of respect and collaboration.

Similarly, Kaslow et al. (2018) researched the evolution of remediation at their institution and highlighted the use of crucial conversations in the context of physician-resident remedial teaching. The study explores the evolution of teaching strategies for physician residents who require additional support to meet competency standards. The authors emphasize that crucial conversations, including a written learning plan and individual support, have played an important role in providing effective feedback and addressing professionalism, along with other related issues, in a constructive and supportive manner. They argue that engaging in these conversations allows educators to identify areas of improvement, set goals, create a safe environment for growth, and develop personalized remediation plans for physician-residents. Fostering a culture of professionalism contributes to a positive learning environment where adult learners can embrace constructive feedback and enhance the overall educational experience for adult learners.

### **Considerations for Educators**

In the realm of adult education, educators face a multitude of challenges when engaging with their learners. From addressing academic remediation to navigating mental health concerns and handling lapses in professionalism, adult educators must possess a diverse skill set to effectively facilitate learning and foster a supportive environment. By examining these considerations, educators can gain valuable insights and strategies to better support their adult learners on their educational journey. This section focuses on crucial conversations with adult learners, highlighting the importance of open and respectful dialogues to tackle these complex issues. Through proactive communication and understanding, adult educators can create an inclusive and empowering learning environment that promotes growth, resilience, and success for all learners.

### ***Strategies for Conducting Successful Crucial Conversations***

To ensure the effectiveness of crucial conversations with adult learners, it is essential to employ specific strategies. Grenny et al. (2022) discussed the "CRIBS" framework as part of training for crucial conversations, which encompasses four key elements for effective collaboration. This structure serves as a guide to fostering successful collaboration by promoting purpose-driven communication and innovative strategizing. The framework emphasizes the importance of committing to seek mutual purpose, recognizing the underlying purpose behind the strategy, inventing a shared purpose, and engaging in creative brainstorming to devise innovative strategies (Grenny et al., 2022). This framework provides a guide for educators to navigate crucial conversations successfully. Additionally, active listening, empathy, and respect for cultural differences are critical elements in establishing trust and rapport during these conversations. By tailoring the delivery of information to meet the unique needs of adult learners, educators can create a more engaging and impactful learning experience. Ongoing feedback and reflection play a vital role in the continuous improvement of crucial conversations. Educators should encourage learners to provide feedback, share their insights, and collaborate on finding solutions.

Often, crucial conversations regarding lapses in professionalism can be challenging and evidence-based models can be helpful if navigating this critical dialogue. Kaslow et al. (2018) emphasize the significance of using evidence-based techniques, such as the DESC

(Describe, Express, Specify, Consequences) model, to navigate these conversations effectively. This model provides a structured approach allowing educators to express concerns objectively and collaboratively find solutions. DESC emphasizes the importance of accurately describing the specific instances or behaviors that are of concern. This helps in providing clear and specific feedback to the trainee. Delisle et al. (2016) suggest that using specific examples of lapses in professionalism increases the probability that an educator's feedback can be clear and avoid being unambiguous. The model encourages expressing the impact and emotions associated with the observed behavior, highlighting the importance of open and honest communication. This includes specifying the desired changes and expectations, outlining the professional standards that need to be met. Lastly, the model addresses the consequences or potential outcomes of not addressing the professionalism issues, such as implications for patient care and professional reputation. By using the DESC model, professionals can structure their crucial conversations effectively, ensuring that trainees understand the concerns, receive clear guidance, and have a clear understanding of the consequences of their behavior. Ultimately, these evidence-based techniques support the growth and development of adult learners, ensuring they have the best possible educational experiences (Vaughn, Allen, Kologi, & McGowan, 2015).

### ***Fostering a Supportive and Inclusive Learning Environment***

Crucial conversations should be embedded within a broader framework that supports a positive and inclusive learning environment for adult learners. This includes cultivating a culture of collaboration, providing resources for mental health education, and promoting professional development opportunities for educators. Research Chemosit, & Rugutt, (2020) emphasizes the importance of collaborative partnerships between educators, support staff, and administrators to address the needs of adult learners holistically. Collaboration fosters a sense of shared responsibility and allows diverse perspectives to be heard and valued. By working together, these stakeholders can identify common goals and develop strategies to address challenges and promote growth.

Collaboration enables the gathering of knowledge, skills, and experiences among educators, support staff, and administrators, ultimately leading to more effective solutions for adult learners. Through collaborative efforts, individuals can leverage their unique strengths and expertise to create a comprehensive support system for adult learners, ensuring their holistic development. Moreover, collaboration fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, as each stakeholder actively participates in the decision-making process and takes responsibility for the outcomes, further enhancing the effectiveness of the learning environment.

Ongoing professional development plays a vital role in equipping educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to engage in effective crucial conversations (Boeren,2017; Merriam, 2018). Training programs can provide educators with tools and techniques to navigate difficult conversations, manage conflicts, and promote constructive dialogue. By investing in continuous learning opportunities, educational institutions demonstrate their commitment to creating a supportive environment for both educators and learners (Boeren, 2017). In addition to equipping educators with skills for engaging in crucial conversations, ongoing professional development enables them to stay updated with the latest research and to access new strategies that can enhance their instructional methods and improve student outcomes (Housel, 2020). Professional development opportunities not only empower educators to navigate difficult conversations and manage conflicts effectively but also foster a culture of collaboration and growth within educational institutions (Boeren, 2017). By

engaging in continuous learning, educators can share their knowledge and experiences, exchange ideas, and collectively work towards improving teaching and learning practices.

In addition to fostering a culture of collaboration and professional development, it is essential to provide resources for mental health support. Engaging in crucial conversations can be emotionally challenging, and individuals may experience stress or anxiety as a result. Offering access to counseling services, mental health professionals, or employee assistance programs can help educators navigate these conversations while prioritizing their well-being. Implementing regular mental health check-ins and workshops specifically tailored for educators can further enhance their well-being and equip them with coping strategies for managing stress and anxiety. Also, establishing peer support networks or mentorship programs within educational institutions can create a sense of community and enable educators to share their experiences and seek guidance from one another. Providing comprehensive training on self-care and resilience can empower educators to prioritize their mental health and effectively manage the emotional demands of their profession. A supportive environment that recognizes and addresses the emotional impact of crucial conversations can contribute to more effective and empathetic communication.

Collaborative partnerships, professional development, and mental health support are integral components of a broader framework that promotes a positive and inclusive learning environment for adult learners. By prioritizing these aspects, educational institutions can empower educators to engage in crucial conversations effectively, foster growth and understanding, and ultimately enhance the overall learning experience for adult learners.

## **Case Studies**

Following the completion of medical school, medical students embark on specialty training known as physician residency, which constitutes a part of Graduate Medical Education (GME). Eastern Virginia Medical School (EVMS) engages in a variety of efforts to assist residents who are in academic remediation, experience mental health concerns, or experience professionalism concerns. Often, these efforts will include crucial conversations which can help to navigate personal, family, and work-related stressors along with increasing their overall well-being and personal growth. The following three scenarios demonstrate specific instances of using crucial conversations to promote wellness. These scenarios involve a physician resident who is on academic remediation, a resident who is experiencing mental health concerns, and a resident who is struggling with professionalism. It is important to note that the names, demographics, and situations presented are amalgamations of resident experiences and do not correspond to specific individuals. While these scenarios are related to counselor education and medical education, this framework can be transferred to any educational profession.

Shannon, a dedicated first-year family medicine resident, faced significant challenges in passing one of her assessments, leading to her enrollment in an academic remediation program. Recognizing the importance of effective communication and dialogue in addressing academic difficulties, the faculty engaged in the crucial conversations (Grenny, 2022) Framework as a solution. These conversations involved open and honest discussions between Shannon, her mentors, and faculty members to explore the underlying reasons for her struggles and develop strategies for improvement. Through crucial conversations, Shannon was able to express her concerns, receive constructive feedback, and collaborate on identifying areas for growth. This was initially challenging because she had more time to

study in medical school. Shannon found that making adjustments to her study style and when she studies helped her to retain the learning material. The use of crucial conversations proved instrumental in fostering effective communication, trust, and mutual understanding, enabling Shannon to improve her approach to studying and to pass her assessment which helped her to advance the next year of residency.

Thomas, a second-year Obstetrics and Gynecology (OBGYN) resident, finds himself grappling with mental health concerns that manifest as anxiety before engaging in specific medical procedures. In order to address this issue, his faculty mentor implemented a crucial conversations approach, employing the CRIBS framework (Grenny et al., 2022) as a solution. During the critical conversation, Thomas was encouraged to share his anxieties related to specific OBGYN procedures. The first step was to create psychological safety, ensuring that Thomas felt heard, understood, and supported. Next, the conversation focused on identifying the gap between Thomas's current state and his desired state of managing anxiety effectively. Through open dialogue, the root causes of his anxiety were explored, such as lack of experience or fear of making mistakes. After understanding the underlying issues, the conversation shifted towards brainstorming solutions. Various strategies were discussed, including mentorship from senior OBGYN residents during procedures, stress management techniques, and counseling support. The goal was to equip Thomas with tools and resources to cope with his anxiety and build confidence in performing procedures. Finally, actionable steps were set to implement the agreed-upon solutions. This approach not only provided him with the necessary support but also fostered a culture of open communication and well-being within the OBGYN residency program, ultimately benefiting both Thomas and his patients.

Mark, a third-year psychiatry resident, is facing concerns regarding his professionalism. He has been consistently late for rotations and has been submitting patient notes past the deadline. These issues have raised concerns among his colleagues and supervisors regarding his reliability and commitment to his duties as a resident. To address this sensitive matter constructively, Mark's faculty advisor employed the DESC model (Kaslow et al., 2018). During the conversation, the faculty member described Mark's performance issues and provided specific instances of his lack of punctuality and failure to complete patient notes on time. This description served to highlight the significance of professionalism within the field of psychiatry. By expressing these concerns and including specific details, the faculty advisor aimed to help Mark gain a better understanding of the impact his actions were having on his professional reputation and how it aligned with his aspiration of progressing in his residency. The faculty advisor approached the discussion with a supportive and non-judgmental tone, offering practical suggestions to address the identified issues. These recommendations included implementing time management techniques, refining prioritization skills, and seeking assistance whenever necessary. The faculty advisor also helped Mark to process the potential consequences of not making improvements in his professionalism. Additionally, they explored personal and professional challenges that may have been impacting Mark's performance, and the faculty advisor offered appropriate resources, such as mentorship or counseling, to address those issues. As a result, Mark was able to follow through with the professionalism improvement strategy and make the needed improvements.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of crucial conversations in supporting the growth and success of adult learners in educational settings. These case studies demonstrate the application of crucial conversations in academic remediation, mental health concerns, and

professionalism, highlighting the benefits of open communication, trust, and mutual understanding. Academic remediation crucial conversations focus on improvement, goal setting, and constructive feedback, promoting self-awareness and personalized learning plans. Mental health crucial conversations create a safe environment to address emotional challenges, reduce stigma, and provide appropriate resources (Maxfield, 2009). Dialogue regarding professionalism aims to establish expectations, address concerns, and promote accountability, using evidence-based techniques for effective communication. Educators must consider individual needs, cultural differences, and diverse perspectives to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Ultimately, crucial conversations facilitate meaningful connections, personalized support, and transformative learning opportunities for adult learners in diverse educational contexts.

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