

Guide on How to Facilitate Conversations

Talking to your family members about their experiences as Vietnamese refugees can be deeply meaningful for both sides, but it requires sensitivity, respect, and care.

Choose the Right Time and Setting

Consider bringing it up during a moment of connection, such as a family meal or a walk, and give advance notice so they're not caught off guard.

Find a comfortable, private space where your family member feels safe and relaxed.

Minimize stressors, such as loud noises or interruptions, and be mindful of body language by maintaining a calm, open posture.

Approach with Empathy and Respect

Express admiration for their resilience: *"I've been thinking about our family's history and how much you've been through. I'd love to understand more about your journey if you're comfortable sharing."*

Emphasize that your goal is to learn and honor their story, not to pry or reopen painful memories.

Use trauma-informed approaches: avoid sudden questions, allow space for reflection, and focus on strengths by framing questions in a way that acknowledges their courage: *"How did you stay strong during such challenging times?"*

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Start with broad, non-intrusive questions, and let them decide how much to share. For example: *"What was life like for you in Vietnam before you decided to leave?"*

Consider using meaningful objects such as old photographs or sentimental items to help trigger their memories.

Be patient and allow pauses; some memories may take time to surface.

Be Prepared for Emotional Responses

Understand that their experiences may carry trauma, and they might respond with sadness, anger, or reluctance to discuss certain details.

Offer reassurance during emotional moments: *"Thank you for sharing this with me. I know it's not easy to talk about, and I appreciate your vulnerability."*

Avoid trying to "fix" their emotions; sometimes, listening is the most supportive action.

Validate Their Feelings and Experience

Acknowledge their bravery and sacrifices: *“It’s incredible what you’ve been through and what you’ve done for our family.”*

Avoid judgment or pressing for more details if they seem hesitant. Focus instead on broader themes, such as their feelings or general experiences.

If they share a painful memory, validate their feelings: *“I feel for you. That experience sounds painful, and it makes sense you’d feel that way.”*

Respect Their Boundaries

If they’re not ready to talk, let them know that it’s okay: *“I understand this might be hard to talk about. If you ever feel ready, I’m here to listen.”*

Pay attention to signs of distress, such as changes in tone, hesitation, or physical discomfort. If they seem overwhelmed, shift the conversation or take a break.

Be patient if this takes more than one conversation. Building trust around this topic might take time. Respect their pace and revisit the topic only if they seem open to it.

Show Gratitude

Express how much you value their story and the impact it has on your life: *“Hearing about your journey helps me understand so much about who we are and where we come from. I’m really grateful you’re sharing this with me.”*

Offer to Record or Document Their Story

Suggest documenting their history as a way to preserve it for future generations: *“Would you be interested in recording this so our family always has it? It’s such an important part of our history.”*

Additional Resource for Context and Support

To deepen understanding and provide language for these conversations, consider reading this [Los Angeles Times article](#) on Vietnamese mental health. It offers insights into cultural perspectives on trauma, healing, and intergenerational dialogue, which may help facilitate discussions not just about the refugee experience, but also about mental health and family dynamics over time.

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions allow your family members to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words and open the way for more detailed responses. Use these examples as a starting point, try to tailor your questions to your family member's unique experience, and ask follow up questions whenever appropriate. **Note:** Please adjust the pronoun *ông/bà* based on who the storyteller is.

General Background and Life in Vietnam

What was your childhood like in Vietnam? Tuổi thơ của ông/bà ở Việt Nam như thế nào?

What did a normal day look like for you before everything changed? Ngày xưa, một ngày bình thường của ông/bà giống như thế nào trước khi mọi thứ thay đổi?

What were some positive memories from growing up in Vietnam? Những kỷ niệm vui của ông/bà khi còn trẻ ở Việt Nam là gì?

Who were the people who influenced you the most when you were growing up? Ai là những người có ảnh hưởng đến ông/bà nhiều nhất khi còn trẻ?

What's one thing about Vietnam that you miss or wish you could experience again? Một điều về Việt Nam mà ông/bà nhớ hoặc mong muốn có thể trải nghiệm một lần nữa là gì?

Motivation and Decision to Leave

When did you first realize you might have to leave Vietnam? Lần đầu tiên ông/bà nhận ra mình có thể phải rời khỏi Việt Nam là khi nào?

What was the hardest part about deciding to leave? Điều khó khăn nhất đối với ông/bà khi quyết định ra đi là gì?

Were there specific events or experiences that pushed you to make the decision? Điều gì hoặc sự việc nào đã thúc đẩy ông/bà đưa ra quyết định này?

How did you prepare for the journey? Ông/bà đã chuẩn bị cho cuộc hành trình này như thế nào?

The Journey Itself

What do you remember most vividly about the journey? Ông/bà nhớ điều gì rõ ràng nhất về cuộc hành trình?

Were there moments during the journey that gave you hope? Có những khoảnh khắc nào trong cuộc hành trình đã giúp ông/bà có được sự hy vọng không?

Did you meet anyone along the way who made a lasting impression on you? Ông/bà có gặp ai trong suốt cuộc hành trình đã để lại kỷ niệm hoặc gây ấn tượng lâu dài với ông/bà không?

What gave you the strength to continue the journey to the U.S.? Điều gì đã cho ông/bà sức mạnh hoặc niềm tin để tiếp tục hành trình đến Hoa Kỳ (nước Mỹ)?

Arrival and Adjustment

What were your first impressions of the new country? Ấn tượng đầu tiên của ông/bà về đất nước mới là gì?

What were the biggest challenges you faced when starting over? Những thách thức lớn nhất mà ông/bà phải đối mặt khi bắt đầu lại từ đầu là gì?

What helped you get through those early days in a new place? Điều gì đã giúp ông/bà vượt qua những ngày đầu ở một nơi mới?

Were there any cultural differences that were particularly hard to adjust to? Có những sự khác biệt văn hóa nào lớn mà ông/bà thấy khó thích nghi khi đến Mỹ không?

What parts of your Vietnamese culture have you worked to preserve the most? Những điều gì trong văn hóa Việt Nam mà ông/bà muốn gìn giữ cho thế hệ của con cháu?

Reflections on the Experience

Looking back, how do you feel about your decision to leave Vietnam? Khi nhìn lại, ông/bà cảm thấy thế nào về quyết định rời khỏi Việt Nam?

What helped you heal from the difficult parts of your experience? Điều gì đã giúp ông/bà chữa lành (vượt qua) những giai đoạn khó khăn trong quá khứ của mình?

How did your experiences shape the way you raised me or view family? Theo ông/bà, những điều trong quá khứ đã ảnh hưởng đến cách ông/bà nuôi dạy chúng con hoặc mối quan hệ gia đình như thế nào?

What motivates you today as you face current obstacles of the present? Điều gì thúc đẩy (giúp) ông/bà vượt qua những khó khăn của hiện tại?

Are there lessons from that time in your life that you think are important for me to know? Ông/bà có những bài học (kinh nghiệm) nào trong cuộc sống mà ông/bà nghĩ là cần thiết để truyền lại cho chúng con biết không?

Additional Resources for Questions

[Vietnamese Boat People Conversation Cards](#)

[Parents Are Human Conversation Cards](#)

Viet Stories Online & In Media

Learning about similar experiences through online digital archives and various forms of media can provide insight into what your relatives might have gone through and help frame your understanding. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list but a starting point to exploring the stories of others.

Oral Histories, Digital Archives, and Museums

[Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project](#)

An oral history collection housed in the Southeast Asian Archive with the purpose of assembling, preserving, and disseminating the diverse life stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California

[Southeast Asian Archive at UC Irvine](#)

A community-centered archive founded in 1987 in Orange County, CA

[Vietnamese Heritage Museum](#)

A non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and exhibition of our Vietnamese refugees' heritage, which features an online oral history archive and artifacts collection

[Vietnamese in the Diaspora Digital Archive](#)

A collection of open-access primary source materials relating to the Vietnamese diaspora

[The Việt Museum, also known as The Museum of the Boat People and the Republic of Vietnam](#)

A museum in San Jose, CA dedicated to Vietnamese refugees with a collection of artifacts and documents

Films and Documentaries

[Journey from the Fall \(2006\)](#)

A powerful depiction of a family's escape from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon and their struggles in America

[When the Tenth Month Comes \(1984\)](#)

A classic Vietnamese film about a widow grappling with her husband's death in the war, reflecting on the emotional aftermath for those left behind

[Finding the Virgo \(2019\)](#)

A documentary that follows a Vietnamese refugee's journey to reconnect with the captain of the boat that rescued her family during their perilous escape from Vietnam

[Last Days in Vietnam \(2014\)](#)

A documentary about the chaotic final days of the Vietnam War and the evacuation of South Vietnamese allies

[Heaven and Earth \(1993\)](#)

Directed by Oliver Stone, this film is based on Le Ly Hayslip's memoirs, offering a Vietnamese woman's perspective on the war and its consequences

Books

[*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen](#)

A Pulitzer Prize-winning novel that delves into the complexities of identity, loyalty, and the refugee experience through the eyes of a Vietnamese double agent

[*The Refugees* by Viet Thanh Nguyen](#)

A collection of short stories about Vietnamese immigrants navigating life in America, focusing on themes of displacement, memory, and family

[*Monkey Bridge* by Lan Cao](#)

A novel exploring the intergenerational struggles between a Vietnamese immigrant mother and her daughter in America, woven with memories of war and loss

[*The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui](#)

A graphic memoir recounting the author's family's journey from Vietnam to America and the emotional toll of displacement and intergenerational trauma

[*Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora* by Andrew Lam](#)

A collection of essays reflecting on the Vietnamese immigrant experience, cultural identity, and reconciliation with the past

[*Family Style* by Thien Pham](#)

A graphic memoir that uses food to tell the author's family's journey from Vietnam to America, exploring themes of identity, resilience, and belonging

Podcasts

[*Vietnamese Boat People Podcast*](#)

Features personal stories of Vietnamese refugees and their descendants, exploring themes of survival, identity, and resilience

[*Second Wave Podcast*](#)

Focuses on the experiences of Vietnamese Americans as they navigate cultural identity and the legacy of war

Credits & Acknowledgements: This guide was created and edited by [Linh My Truong](#), Don Hua, Selena Tran, and Henry Duong. Please share and edit this guide freely. Thank you for the courage to have these conversations with your family!