Hi, my name is Moni. I am here because I am an iREFs, which is Institute-wide Resources for Easing Friction and Stress. We are graduate students that are trained formally in conflict management in order to support all of you. And so, please please please use us if you ever feel like you would need support in anything. Via very formal negotiation, or you’re just trying to resolve some sort of family life discourse, we’re trained and would love to help you. We’re free, we’ll take you out to coffee on MIT’s dime, very nice! And if you’re interested in gaining these skills, if this peaks your interest and you’re like “actually I want to be on the serving side of this” then please email us and we will interview you, you’re welcomed to join. And we have a training happening at the end of January that’s only four days that’s like really short, it’s excellent – we’d love to have you on board!

The scenario that we’ve decided to do is this, May-sun and I are roommates and we share an apartment and I’ve asked May-sun to come talk to me because we are having a slight issue. She’s having friends over which is great, we never said this couldn’t happen and in fact we said it was great for people to come over to our apartment. However, they’re coming on the weekdays at night pretty late and they’re being loud. And I have an issue with this. I haven’t really said much to May-sun but there were a lot of parties last week, so this has collimated me asking her to come and have a conversation about it.

You can ask a really big open-ended question. What is important about these gatherings to you, tell me sort of like the big things for why you want to have gatherings? And let them talk for like ten minutes – like you can just listen. And in real life, that’s what I do. I talk as minimally as possible. I’m like “tell me about X” and I shut up. But in a real scenario, you can do that, ask a big enough question, sit back, relax, pay attention, let them do the talking, and then just confirm, “I heard all of these things – did I hear your correctly?” They’re like, “yeah, that’s it.” Anything else that’s like dear to your heart about this. In two questions, you could probably gather all the information so you don’t have to do as much like if that feels interrogating to you, you can hold back from asking big questions and let them talk.

Figure out what your core interests are. My interests, it would be positional to say “I don’t want parties.” I think, in one sense that if we agreed and that was the solution like – you’re right, no more parties, my core interest, if I was like “Why don’t you want parties?” and I said, “Because I need my sleep.” Because I need my sleep, does not necessarily mean no parties, I mean that’s one way. But, if you’re going to have any amount of minimal cooperativity and fairness as adults in a conversation. Chances are you can say “Well, you know...” you ask – you start by asking the other person because I could’ve started and said “I really need my sleep, it’s really important to me. I haven’t being getting enough.” And what usually happens there, the other person gets really defensive. It’s very triggering to like start off. And if you know this technique, you’re in a better position and say, “Hey, I want to just talk about this, real neutral, like we haven’t established something or I don’t think it’s quiet working for me, do you mind?” They’re like “okay” not to threatening. And then you draw it out of them, like “Why are you having parties?” Because if you tell them, “Don’t have parties” what they hear is “Don’t have fun, don’t
have friends, don’t get to destress. Party pooper.” And that’s probably not the best way to get someone to work with you, right? Even if you feel that way, you can feel that way. That might be genuine to you but it’s not affective. And I think it’s much easier to speak from a position of interest and say, “I really want you to hang out with your friends. If I could sleep through this, I wish to god I could. But I can’t! You want to have your party and I want my sleep. What can we do creatively?”

You get to generate a bunch of options by really addressing what matters to you. Conversationally you know, if they say something that’s funny I try to like have emotional offer like “oh that’s awesome” I try not to be super mechanical. My body language is always positioned towards the person and I try as much as I can to do that summarizing or the reframing that’s in the active listening triangle to really say like, you know I don’t catch everything but I just go, “I’m just trying to understand why this is important to you, is it because of these things. Is that, right?” And if they’re like “yeah that’s totally it.” That’s sort of like what I’m thinking as I’m undergoing this process.

Blame is really ineffective. It causes the person shame, it causes bad feelings. It might release some of your stress but it’s not going to get you the outcome you desire. And so, if you feel like blaming someone you can write it on paper and burn it into ashes. The recommended approach is, know what you feel and you can express really complicated feelings say you know “This really stressed me out.” But you can share it in a way where the other person is going to actually receive it. What you really want, like you want them to acknowledge but you really want them to change their behavior. And I don’t think you’re going to do that when you’re just like, “BAD! Bad person, change! Terrible.” Because a lot of the times they probably, I would hope didn’t mean to and some cases they’re oblivious and aren’t aware of the impact and you want to give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they’re bad people, that’s real. But you want to give them the benefit of the doubt and not start from a place of blame. But first start with, let me understand you. I’m being a respectable adult by trying to like seek your opinion, figure out where you’re coming from and trying to make a case for me. And if that doesn’t work there are many ways to escalate all the way down to like illegal mediation and if you really needed to. Why not take care of yourself? And in general, being neutral it’s hard for many of us, it’s very, very useful to be able to harness that attitude. It’s more affective. Think about it from the affective perspective – way more affective if you can keep your cool and not like “blahh” and then get an outcome that benefits you and the other person. It’s kind of hard, do you want to us to scream at each other and do we want to actually get the outcomes that benefit the both of us? People usually don’t want to scream at each other.

If it does go south, or if you watch and you see a person starting to look defensive, you can just stop. You know what, I’m noticing this, just observe. Be like, “It sounds like this is a bad time or I’ve said something to offend you and if I have, I’m sorry. And if this is like a bad time or like I’m pushing it the wrong way, you know I’m not trying to strong arm you into this conversation – I’d like to have it in a way where you’re comfortable. You can be a friend and say “Do we need to pause, is that a bad time? Because I’m picking up vibes.” And if they’re still not doing it be like, “You know what, I think maybe I’m just like not in the right place in mind either or don’t even
make the assumption just say, “Can we talk at a different time actually? That would just work out better for me.” Yourself. And walk away. If they can’t recover from whatever it is that you said.