

PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS

Active listening, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue are learned skills: Everyone can acquire them, and no one can perfect them without practice. Philosophical Chairs is designed to help us develop these skills while also learning about opera.

You might find these statements challenging—and you might find it challenging to talk with someone whose views differ from your own. That’s the point! Take your time with each statement, embrace uncertainty, and know that changing your mind as you learn new information is a sign of strength. Before you begin your discussion, take some time to review the rules of engagement:

Be sure you understand the statement. If something is unclear, ask!

Face each other. Body language helps show that you’re listening.

Only one speaker at a time. Everyone will get their turn to speak.

Think before you speak. Be sure that what you’re going to say is what you really mean, and remember that we can disagree while still being kind.

Summarize the previous person’s comments before adding your own. This will show that you have heard their thoughts and are responding thoughtfully to what they said. It will also help avoid misunderstandings and faulty assumptions.

Address ideas, not the person. Challenging ideas or statements is great—but only if we respect the individuality and inherent value of the person who expressed them.

Three before me. After you’ve spoken, you may not make another comment until three others have shared their thoughts.

THE STATEMENTS

- You should always try to be who society wants you to be.
- Since you can’t change the past, regrets are pointless.
- Regret helps us learn from past mistakes.
- Suffering is always a transformational experience.
- Everyone has demons.
- Everyone, at some point in their lives, will find themselves in psychological distress.
- Mental illness is a clinical condition (and not a personal weakness).
- It is normal to feel sad.
- It is important to prioritize your mental health.
- Being honest about who you are will make you happy.
- Everyone you meet in life, you meet for a reason.
- Coincidences are random and meaningless.
- Social norms will never change.