



SIMPLE STEPS TO MASTER SMALL TALK

by Jane Travis

I like people, and I like talking. So why does the thought of small talk make me break out in a cold sweat and want to hide in the cupboard?

It's the inane chitter chatter, the pleasantries, the polite prattle that I hate. It's the conversational equivalent of Twitter, where there's little chance to talk seriously about anything important or interesting.

That, and the fact I am rubbish at small talk.

My mind goes blank, I say something wildly inappropriate, I stutter and laugh loudly, snorting for good measure. Afterwards, I die inside as I wait for the floor to swallow me up, which it never does, proving that floors are evil.

But I've learned that small talk doesn't have to be a nightmare. All it needs is some reframing.

WHY PUT YOURSELF THROUGH THE LIVING HELL THAT IS SMALL TALK?

Remember the old saying "There's no such things as strangers, just friends we haven't met yet"?

We're human, and have a need to connect with others. This is only achievable by meeting people. Sorry.

Every friend you have was once a stranger, and you only found out that they were interesting, funny, and great to have around by talking with them and finding common interests. It all started with tentative conversations weighing each other up.

Let's not miss that opportunity. Let's make each small talk-filled conversation be the best it can be, and see if it leads to friendship.



HERE ARE 11 SIMPLE STEPS FOR ROCKING SMALL TALK:

1

Prepare

Feel nervous before the event? Ring a friend, have a chat and allow them to remind you that you are fabulous and that everyone will love you.

Upbeat music is not necessary, but recommended.

2

Go steady with the Pinot

Alcohol gives you Dutch courage, but also reduces inhibitions. Day after flashbacks are a nightmare you don't need.

3

Put your phone away

Checking your phone might be a handy distraction, but it makes you look unfriendly, unapproachable, and rude. Unless you get an urgent call, save checking your phone for bathroom visits.

4

Focus on your potential new BFF

If you're shy, your internal commentary will be: "OMG, I don't know what to say, I'm going to look such a fool, I just pronounced that word wrong I'm sure, I bet people are laughing at me, oh this top's too small, the buttons are gaping and people can see my bra, I'm so embarrassed," etc., etc.

Did you notice that this dialogue is all about yourself?

The easiest way to get over your shyness is to focus on other people. Concentrating on them stops you from fixating on yourself, and reduces stress.

I once did an amazing training exercise: I had to sit facing someone and look into their eyes while the trainer talked to us.

We were asked to imagine the other person's life—the circumstances of their birth, celebrations of milestones, first word, first steps, birthdays, starting school, pets, boyfriends, celebrations, and losses. It was a very intense experience, encouraging me to really see the other person as an individual with a history, hopes, dreams, fears.

Be aware that whoever you're talking to is a unique individual, and allow yourself to become curious about them and their life. Let your interest show.

5

Be approachable

Make eye contact and smile. Yes, you're nervous but guess what? So are other people!

Firstly, it's important to remember that most people also hate small talk. When at an event, remind yourself that you are in a room full of terrified people, and make it your mission to help others through their ordeal.

Make their wellbeing and comfort your focus, and take the spotlight away from yourself.

6

Pay a compliment

A good icebreaker is to pay a compliment. Make sure your compliment is genuine; fake compliments are easy to spot.

7

FORE: Default topics for all occasions

Can't think of a thing to say? Here are four topics you can't go wrong with:

FAMILY

- Where is your family from?
- Are you from a big/small family?
- Do you have any brothers/sisters?
- Do your family live locally?

Occupation

- What do you do?
- How do you fill your days?
- What attracted you to your profession?
- What do you enjoy most about it?

Recreation

- How do you spend most of your leisure time?
- Do you have any hobbies?
- Do you enjoy sports?
- How do you like to relax?

Education

- Did you go to school around here?
- What was your favorite subject?
- Where did you go to university?
- What would you study just for fun?

We all have experience with these topics and they are great icebreakers.

8

Listen

Shy folk are often so focused on ourselves, we kinda forget to listen to what's being said. So if your mind becomes full of "OMG what will I say next?", take a deep breath and listen. Then you can participate in the conversation effectively.

9

Share

Asking other people questions is a great way to get the conversation started, but if you only ask questions, people will feel interrogated. Conversations are a two-way street.

Others will want to learn about you, so be prepared to share with them.

10

Keep things light

This is NOT the time to share your political or religious views. Steer clear of any sensitive topics.

11

Excuse yourself

After you've spoken for a while you'll want to end the conversation and move on. Let the person know that you have enjoyed the conversation (making them feel important).

Pick on something you found interesting and reference that: "I really enjoyed hearing how your cat loves watermelon; I hope we can chat again soon."

With a little reframing and preparation, small talk changes from mundane to memorable, and becomes a chance to meet new friends. You'll connect with more people, make valuable connections and have more fun.



Jane Travis blogs at www.janetravis.com and writes about self care for people pleasers. She's been a practising counsellor/psychotherapist since 2005, and helped hundreds of people find balance in their lives. She has just launched an online course '[How to say no without feeling guilty or changing your mind](#)', and has valuable free resources on her website.