

SMALL TALK

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **1X/DAY** | Duration: **10 MINS**

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

You might think that making small talk with a stranger won't be pleasant. If you do, you're not alone—most people believe it would be difficult to start a conversation with a stranger and likely that the stranger wouldn't want to talk to them. On top of that, social norms often encourage us to stay quiet.

In reality, though, we're wrong. Studies have shown that people are more interested in connecting—and these kinds of conversations are more pleasant—than we expect them to be. In fact, talking to a stranger can be just as enjoyable as talking with a friend (and the strangers enjoy it, too).

Even if you're an introvert, getting a brief boost of social connection can be a positive experience—despite what your intuitions are telling you. The more we practice chatting with strangers, **the more confident we become** in our ability to converse. Moreover, repeatedly talking to strangers can gradually reduce our fears about approaching unfamiliar people.

We tend to be happier when we interact across the wide variety of relationships we build. While we can benefit from connecting with friends, family, acquaintances, and colleagues, making space to converse with strangers is also important for our happiness.

TIME REQUIRED

You can try this practice whenever you have a few minutes to spare and you're in the company of strangers. Research has found benefits from conversations that last 10-20 minutes.

HOW TO DO IT

In our everyday lives, we routinely spend time around strangers but don't always strike up conversations with them. This exercise invites you to make a connection rather than remaining in solitude.

Whether during your commute, in a waiting room or elevator, or in line for coffee, have a conversation with a new person today. Try to make a connection. Find out something interesting about them and share something about you. The longer the conversation, the better. Your goal is to try to get to know the person.

Although people are probably more willing to talk than you expect, it's important to be sensitive if you sense that the person doesn't want to engage. If they do seem interested, here are some tips for a good conversation:

- Ask questions related to your immediate context. At a grocery store, you might ask, "What are you going to make with that?" During the holidays, you might ask, "Do you have any plans with family or friends?"
- Stick to open-ended questions. Questions about who, what, when, where, or why can help sustain your conversation, while questions that can be answered with a "yes" or "no" can cut the conversation short.
- Have some go-to questions, like "What do you do for fun?" or "Where are you from?"
- Use your knowledge of news or current events. You might ask, "Did you hear about the couple who won the lottery? What would you do if you won?"
- Explore their interests, particularly if you seem to have something in common. For example, "Are you on your

way to yoga? What's your favorite type of class?"

- Ask follow-up questions. Rather than flitting from topic to topic, go deeper into the conversation, which may make you more likable.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Epley, N., & Schroeder, J. (2014). [Mistakenly seeking solitude](#). *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(5), 1980–1999.

In a series of experiments in Chicago, people on public transit, in taxis, and in a waiting room were assigned to either make conversation with a stranger or stay silent. Those who made conversation reported having more positive and no less productive interactions, and they had positive impressions of their conversational partners. No demographic information was included in this study.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Social connection is crucial to our happiness, and yet we spend many moments of the day in polite solitude—sharing silent elevator rides, standing in line feeling impatient, or crammed on public transit without making eye contact with anyone.

This practice transforms moments that might otherwise feel slightly negative—particularly commuting, [ranked](#) as one of the least enjoyable daily activities—into an opportunity to smile, share something about yourself, and brighten someone's day. Indeed, socializing is ranked as one of the *most* enjoyable daily activities, and the “[micro-moments](#)” of connection that we experience with others can uplift us and bring us a sense of common humanity.

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

