

SMALL TALK

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **VARIABLE** | 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.

TIME REQUIRED

You can try this practice whenever you have a few minutes to spare and you're in the company of strangers. Research participants benefitted from conversations that lasted 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 your conversation partner 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, "How is your shopping going?"
- Have some go-to questions, like "What do you do for fun?" or "Where are you from?"
- Leverage 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—to go deeper into the conversation and **be better liked** by your partner.

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, people on public transit, in taxis, and in a waiting room were assigned to either make conversation with a stranger or stay silent. Participants who made conversation reported having more positive and no less productive interactions, and they had positive impressions of their interlocutors.

WHY IT WORKS

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](#).

