

Small Talk

Small talk is light conversation between people who don't know each other well. For people with social anxiety, making small talk can provoke so much anxiety that they rarely get a chance to learn the basics. Mastering these basic steps will help reduce that fear.

Before beginning a conversation, pause to take in the other person's body language. Are they leaning away, busy, or relaxed? That might give you clues to how willing they are to have a conversation.

1. Introduction

Introduce yourself by name and ask them their name, e.g. "Hi I'm John [extend hand for handshake], what's your name?"

Start out with an ice-breaker, such as a comment on a neutral subject that most people have in common. The weather is a good standby: "It looks like it's going to rain out there." You can also comment on the situation at hand, such as the room you're in.

If appropriate to the setting, ask them to sit down, or ask if you can join their table. Offer to get them something like a drink.

2. Middle

Ask a little about them and tell a little about yourself. Say something positive you noticed about them, or the situation you are in together.

Look for signs of interest in them. What topics do they light up about? Which ones do they seem to enjoy talking about? If they only offer a few words and seem uninterested, don't take this personally. Just because the topic doesn't interest them doesn't mean they aren't interested in talking with you.

Ask them for information or for their opinion.

Let the conversation flow back and forth like that, and keep up your end. Answer their

questions with specific details. Sometimes people with anxiety give very short or vague answers out of fear of boring the other person. The truth is quite the opposite – nothing is more boring than short and vague answers! Share your personal feelings, opinions, and stories.

This back-and-forth can go on as long as you want it to. You might practice ahead of time, preparing a few topics about yourself that you can feel comfortable talking about to others (see back). However, over time you'll want to depart from practiced topics into a more spontaneous conversation.

3. Ending

It's rare that conversations end by both parties suddenly coming to a close. One of you will need to signal that it's time to move on, and don't feel bad if you are on the giving or receiving end of that – it's part of the normal flow.

If you need to move on, shift your body language. Stand up if sitting, or point yourself a little more towards the exit. Look at the time, or mention the time, and look towards the door or exit. Then say – in a friendly voice – something like: "It's really good talking with you, but I've got to head off to class now..."

You can also summarize the conversation, as that will let the other person know that it's coming to a close. "Well, it was good to run into you – I'm so glad to hear about your new job."

If you notice the other person doing any of the above, you can help ease the ending by shifting into summary mode as well.

These principles can be applied to most simple conversations. Practice it regularly, and don't aim to do it right or do it well; just aim to do it. Small talk is an art, and there's no right way to do it, just some principles to guide you through.

—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 1/3/2017

Ten Topics to Start a Conversation

1. Weather

Although talking about the weather may seem mundane, it is a good neutral topic that everyone can discuss.

2. Arts and Entertainment

Arts and entertainment topics include such things as the latest movies and television shows, popular restaurants, popular music, and books. To prepare for these topics, brush up on what is popular and make a point of having a book on the go at all times.

3. Sports

Sports topics can include such topics as favorite teams and local teams. Even if you don't like sports, you can talk about why you don't like them.

4. News

A great way to prepare for small talk is to read the news every day. Be aware of what is going on in the world and in your city.

5. Family

People are likely to ask you about your family. Do you have any brothers or sisters? How long have you been married? Do you have any children? Be prepared for these types of questions and reciprocate by asking others about their families.

6. Work

Another popular small talk topic is work. You may be asked what you do and whether you like your job. If you do something unusual that is hard to explain, consider keeping business cards in your wallet. This works particularly well if your company or job has a website that people can visit.

7. Travel

People like to hear about vacations. If you travel, be ready to answer questions and give your opinions about the places you have visited.

Put together albums that you can show people who visit your home.

8. Celebrity Gossip

It isn't necessary to follow celebrity gossip to make small talk. However, it is a good idea to know a little bit about some of the most popular celebrities in case the topic comes up.

9. Hobbies

People like to talk about their hobbies and are likely to be interested in yours. If you don't have any hobbies, consider trying something new. Not only will you have something to talk about, but having a hobby will give you a chance to meet others with like interests.

10. Hometown

You might be asked about your hometown. How is it different from where you live now? Why did you leave? Ask others about their hometowns as well. You never know who might be from the same place as you.

Read more

The Fine Art of Small Talk, Debra Fine

How to Talk to Anyone: 92 Little Tricks for Big

Success in Relationships, Leil Lowndes

How To Talk To Anybody About Anything:

Breaking the Ice With Everyone from

Accountants to Zen Buddhists, Leil Lowndes.

Note: this last one is a reference book that gives great questions to ask people based on their occupation or interests. It's useful to read ahead of time; e.g., if you're going to dinner with an accountant you could read that section beforehand.