

THE ART OF SMALL TALK

Do you fear the awkward silence that often arises when you make small talk? Kathy O'Brien shares some tips to help make starting a conversation a breeze

Hate it or not, small talk is an essential skill to have. We often do it not just at parties and networking sessions, but also in daily situations, be it with colleagues at the water cooler or standing in line for coffee at your favourite café.

But if you have ever been a guest at a wedding reception or networking event, you'll know



the difficulty and awkwardness in trying to engage an acquaintance in light conversation. Some find that the difficulty begins with initiating the chat, as they have no idea what to talk about. In a culture where people get easily offended, picking a topic has become harder than the conversation itself. Others get self-conscious and worry about how their acquaintance might perceive them, making it difficult for them to begin talking.

However, Debra Fine, author of *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, believes small talk doesn't have to be painful. Done right, it acts as "the appetiser for any relationship", as it whets the appetite for deeper conversation by helping to establish common ground between two parties.

Here are some tips on how to go beyond conversations on the weather and brush up on your small talk skills.

1 Take note of your body language. Show the other person that you're interested by establishing eye contact, smiling when appropriate and standing or sitting with an open posture.

2 Ask open questions. Starting a question with "How did you..." encourages more sharing than "Did you..." Crafting your question around something the person said previously also helps, as it shows that you were paying attention to the conversation.

3 Find safe topics. *The current situation* is the safest topic that you can discuss with anyone. Say you're waiting for a business dinner to begin and find yourself standing awkwardly

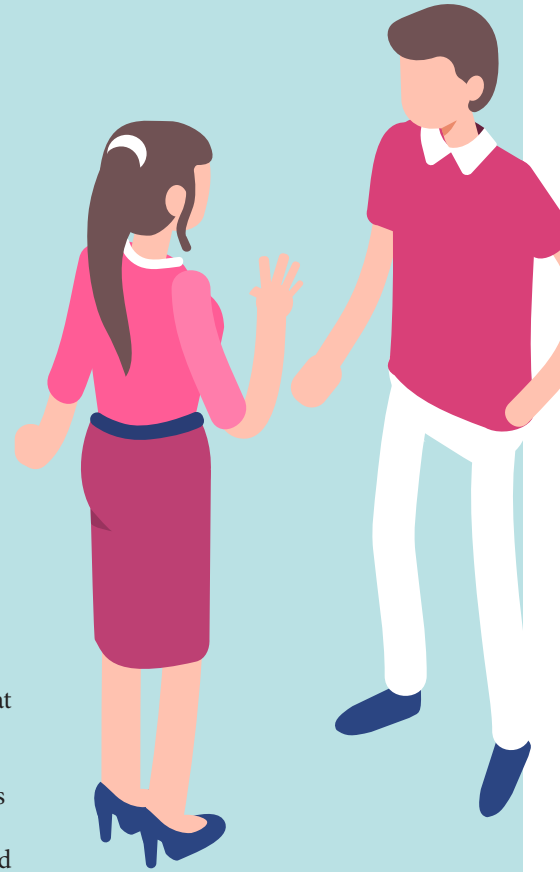
with one other early bird. Make observations about the venue or comment on the buffet spread. These are topics the two of you definitely have in common because you're standing in the same place.

Today's agenda. If you're making small talk with someone at a seminar, for instance, try discussing the workshop that will take place in the afternoon or your lunchtime plans. After chatting about the day's programme, you can move on to discuss other related topics. A good next question might be, "Have you attended any workshops in the past?" or "What types of food do you enjoy?"

News and current events. These are good topics to progress to once you've built rapport with the other person. We recommend sticking to non-controversial topics, such as the upcoming Formula One or a newly opened shopping mall, and avoiding potentially polarising issues like politics or religion.

Personal life, family and hobbies. Keep it open-ended. If you have ever asked someone about his family life and felt an awkward pause, you know this can be a tricky area. Not everyone is comfortable sharing their personal life with a new acquaintance, thus tact is crucial to navigating this area. "What do you enjoy doing on weekends?" is a good question to start with, as it is open enough to avoid awkwardness if someone is unwilling to share too much with you.

Remember, moving on through topics requires sensitivity towards the other person's comfort level. If the other person maintains eye contact, an open posture and keeps



the conversation going, all is well. But if he or she seems avoidant or gives one-word answers, move to easier topics like the surroundings or today's agenda to make him or her feel comfortable. Stay on these safe topics for a few minutes and wait for the other person to become more open to you.

In short, the key to small talk is being a good listener — you have to show the person you're conversing with that you're interested in what they're saying. Keeping this in mind will help you breeze through the inevitable small talk you have to make in all kinds of situations. ■

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