

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

5 SECRETS TO EFFORTLESS SMALL TALK

A Bridge Between Us

How To Keep Small Talk Going Naturally And Foster A Delicate Dance Of Dialogue That Sustains Engagement With Every Word — Chapter One. About a 13-minute read.

You're stepping into an elevator.

After a quick nod to the rider already inside, you turn to face the front, push the button for your desired floor, and watch the doors slide closed. As the easy-listening jazz melody radiates from the speakers overhead, your pulse rises. For the next 30 seconds you're gripped with anxiety.

You search for words—a comment about the weather or a playful quip asking if it's really only Tuesday—but nothing worthwhile comes to mind. You feel uncomfortable, overwhelmed, frozen. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, a loud "ding!" breaks the spell. The doors swing open.

It's only an elevator ride, but it's one of the endless everyday scenarios in which your capacity—or in this case, incapacity—to make conversation with a stranger has an outsized bearing on your life. One awkward elevator ride may seem trivial, but your ability to make and sustain small talk isn't. It is directly correlated with your personal and professional success. Initiating stimulating, relevant conversations can open professional doors, pave the way for meaningful personal connections, and establish the foundation for lifelong relationships. That rider could have been a future friend, colleague, or mentor—if only the right words had been spoken.

Yet despite its numerous advantages, small talk is something many of us struggle with. If you lack small talk skills, connecting with others can be an uphill battle. You may recognize

some of the ways your weaknesses in this area are playing out in different aspects of your life: struggling to break the ice in new conversations, constantly worrying that you're talking too much or too little, panicking when an awkward silence falls on a conversation, or stumbling your way through networking events, to name a few. These challenges can make it difficult to make introductions, communicate clearly, and build rapport with colleagues and customers. Perhaps you've been labeled "socially awkward" or have given that label to yourself. Why is it that small talk can feel like such a Herculean task, while for others it seems to come so naturally?

What you may not realize is that small talk is not some innate ability that we're either born with or doomed to live without. It's a skill, and, like any skill, it can be practiced and improved upon. Until now, you may not have had a solid framework for strengthening your small talk capabilities. That ends today. In this book, you'll discover five secrets that will help you recognize your small talk shortcomings, pinpoint specific strategies to address those challenges, and put your newfound strategies for strengthening small talk into action. Whether you're looking to improve your relationships, collaborate more successfully with your colleagues, strengthen your networking skills, or overcome social anxiety, the content within will arm you with the tools you need to achieve your goal.

How do I know these strategies will work? you may be wondering. My own professional journey is a perfect case study. The tactics contained in this book are the same ones I have used to build a satisfying and lucrative career that revolves around successfully relating to other people. As a journalist in far-flung locales around the United States, my job depended on my ability to quickly and effectively establish trust with strangers, many of whom came from very different walks of life than my own. Later, as a public relations manager, my success hinged on being able to communicate messages clearly and in a positive way. Now, as a freelance writer, my rapport-building capabilities have allowed me to establish a portfolio of outstanding clients who pay me to do engaging and creative work. Small talk helped make it all possible.

I'm not sure I'm ready. Maybe you're hesitant to take the plunge into changing this not-so-minor aspect of your personality. To be sure, perfecting the art of sustaining small talk and

using it to forge meaningful connections requires commitment. At times, it will cause some discomfort. But your bigger hesitation, as far as I'm concerned, should be with whether you can continue to stick with the status quo, stumbling through interpersonal interactions and struggling to gain traction in your social and professional relationships. Which path will cause more discomfort in the long run?

I'm already making changes on my own, you might be thinking. I applaud you for taking steps to better yourself, since enhancing your small talk skills and realizing your full potential ultimately falls on you. But consider this: Without strategic guidelines or a step-by-step roadmap to follow, you may end up putting in a lot more effort just to get started or figure out where to focus your attention. You may fail to consider certain nuances like the norms of small talk specific to the workplace, considerations for navigating conversations in a virtual setting, or dealing with awkward silences, which could add unnecessary obstacles to your journey. This book and the structure it provides make that journey easier, simplifying the process of achieving your desired changes.

Through consistent application of the tactics we'll cover in this text, you can achieve the improved self-esteem, increased confidence, and reduced anxiety that come from feeling more adept in your small talk skills. As a result, you'll enjoy better relationships, expanded professional opportunities, rewarding personal growth, and ultimately, a more successful and fulfilling life. These are tips anyone can follow regardless of prior knowledge, background, or career experience, and they're offered in easily actioned, small steps that will add up to measurable differences. I'm excited to dive in, so let's get started.

— Tami Dzenitis

Chapter 1: A Bridge Between Us

The year is 50,000 B.C.

You're wandering through the forest with a bow and arrow slung over your shoulder and nothing more than a loincloth standing between you and the vast, unknown, and often

dangerous world. Game has been scarce lately, and your tribe members are counting on you to bring home something tasty—or at the very least, something edible.

The leaves crunch underfoot. Your stomach grumbles.

But wait. What was that? Another sound, something moving up ahead. You're certain of it.

Before you even have a chance to crouch behind the nearest palm frond, out from behind the foliage appears something you haven't seen in months, maybe even years: an unfamiliar face.

Your heart leaps into your throat. Your grip tightens around your bow. You wonder if you're flexible enough to reach behind you and clandestinely sneak an arrow from your quiver without the stranger noticing. You wish you would have done those yoga stretches for upper body mobility that your partner is always nagging you about, but that's beside the point.

As your instinct wavers between fight or flight, the stranger raises a hand and points a finger toward the heavens.

"Looks like rain," he says, and your muscles instantly relax.

Innocuous chatter about the weather is an icebreaker as old as time, and it immediately lets you know that this unknown creature is not, in fact, a threat to your survival but a well-meaning comrade. In fact, he might even be able to point you in the direction of a patch of juicy berries or a nut tree—that is, if you can keep the friendly conversation going.

Small talk. It's the relationship-building tool that's been around nearly as long as humans themselves, and it's a crucial component in sparking deeper conversations that lead to meaningful connections.

The 6 Es Of Small Talk

For centuries (and probably millennia), humans have been using small talk as a launchpad for establishing relationships and generating positive outcomes. We see direct references to this conversational technique dating back to the 18th century.

In a 1751 letter, the 4th Earl of Chesterfield encourages his son to engage in “a sort of middling conversation, neither silly nor edifying; but, however, very necessary... to become master of.” The Earl goes on to explain how this sort of meandering chitchat, which covers everything from current events and social life to the style of clothing worn by various armies, will go further than “superior knowledge and shining parts” to advance his son’s prospects in the world*.

The Earl was on to something. Even hundreds of years later, small talk offers numerous benefits ranging from personal to professional. It can help us with what I like to call the 6 E’s of small talk:

Establishing Connections

Small talk often happens at the first point of contact between two people, acting as a path toward more profound interactions.

Easing Tension

Talking to new people can be awkward. Small talk makes initial conversations more comfortable by facilitating the discussion of non-controversial topics that allow people to find common ground.

Encouraging Trust

In order for strangers to establish relationships, trust is essential*. Small talk creates a sense of familiarity, which is a key component in fostering trust.

Eliciting Information

Small talk enables us to learn more about a person, which can be instrumental in understanding their motivations, intentions, and behaviors.

Espousing Social Norms

In many cultures, small talk between two unfamiliar parties is an expected societal custom, the keeping of which is important for social and vocational advancement.

Engineering Opportunities

Small talk can be a door opener for networking, collaborations, business propositions, and other opportunities to advance one's prospects.

Though the benefits above are diverse, they all share a common characteristic: small talk's function as a bridge toward deeper conversations that can produce an array of desirable results.

As a news reporter in the Deep South, getting people to open up wasn't always easy. With my nondescript accent and compact Mazda, I stuck out like a sore thumb among the thick southern drawls and ubiquitous Ford pickup trucks. If there's one thing people in small-town southern communities are wary of, it's outsiders—especially if one of those outsiders is knocking on their door asking for an interview.

When approaching a new source, before I ever whipped out my microphone, easing into the conversation with a few minutes of small talk was crucial to disarm the person (sometimes literally) and put their suspicions about a nosy news-seeker to rest. This tactic is what allowed me to land exclusive interviews with grieving families, witnesses to crimes, city hall whistleblowers, and even convicts.

As a young journalist, I often found myself handling the newsroom phones while the more seasoned reporters were out on assignments. Almost daily, an older woman—we'll call her Miriam—would call asking for the stock market numbers, and then inevitably, linger on the

phone wanting to chat. She, I figured, was elderly and lonely. I was bored and waiting around for news to break. So, I humored her with a few minutes of idle chatter each day.

One afternoon, months into this daily call-and-chat routine, Miriam got quiet (which almost never happened).

"Could I tell you something?" she asked in a hushed voice.

What came out of Miriam's mouth next would turn into the first big story of my budding career.

Miriam's doctor, she said, wrote narcotics prescriptions by the dozen to anyone who so much as complained of a headache. Essentially, he was running a pill mill out of his two clinics, and lots of older folks she knew were getting hooked on painkillers. This was long before the opioid epidemic became well-known, so at the time, it was a pretty shocking claim.

After all those months of superficial chatting, Miriam felt comfortable enough with me to tell me her story. And, after a little more talking, she agreed to tell it on camera.

My news director was thrilled. The story Miriam trusted me with received tens of thousands of views. And eventually, after several years of investigations and court dates, the doctor was given jail time and his partner was placed on house arrest. Were it not for those seemingly insignificant daily conversations, Miriam's story might never have come to light.

Building The Bridge

By now it's clear that small talk plays a critical role in building bridges between individuals, but what's less clear is how to build that bridge. It may be called small talk, but striking up a conversation with a total stranger is no small feat. It's a task that can spur nervousness and even anxiety, feelings that are rooted in the fear of social rejection*.

Despite the unpleasant feelings that can accompany small talk (which, by the way, are incredibly common), there are a few core principles of small talk that can not only help you

build the proverbial bridge of connection but do so with much less discomfort.

Principle #1: Picking The Right Topic

The first step of successful small talk is to build rapport with the other person. Merriam-Webster defines rapport as “a relationship characterized by agreement, mutual understanding, or empathy that makes communication possible or easy.” To make communication easy, pick an easy topic.

We’ll talk in depth about what makes a good topic in Chapter 3, but as we noted earlier, the weather is a safe option. The owner of my local wine store is an absolute master at turning any meteorological condition—rain, sun, snow, fog—into a conversation starter. The last time I was in his shop, it was a picture-perfect late summer day.

“Great weather for flying a kite,” he commented while ringing me up. “You ever tried it?”

How could I not respond to that inquiry? This brings us to our next technique...

Principle #2: Evoking A Response

People love to talk about themselves. It’s science; when you self-disclose (a fancy term for talking about yourself), your neural pathways light up*. Take advantage of this biological fact by asking questions and bringing up topics that promote self-disclosure. Open-ended questions are ideal, as are comments that invite discussion.

Back when I used to work in public relations (PR), my job required me to attend a lot of networking events. One of the best tricks I learned for striking up conversations played on this principle. As soon as I arrived at an event, I would scan the crowded room to see what people were wearing. No, I wasn’t prioritizing potential connections based on their fashion choices; rather, I was looking for opportunities to prompt people to self-disclose.

“That jacket is so unique. Where did you get it?”

Whether it’s a funny necktie, an eye-catching piece of jewelry, or a fabulous pair of heels, commenting on a person’s choice of apparel (in a positive way, of course) invites that

person to share, serving as the perfect point of entry into a conversation.

Principle #3: Speaking And Listening

When engaging in small talk, one of the most common mistakes people make is spending the whole time thinking about what they're going to say next. Not only does this promote greater self-consciousness, but it also makes it impossible to learn anything about the other person because you're not actively listening to them.

Effective small talk is equal parts talking and listening, which we can accomplish by turning our attention outward. This not only takes the focus off how anxious we might feel, but it also helps us respond more appropriately, ask more productive follow-up questions, and find common ground with our conversation partners.

Principle #4: Practice

While it's true that some people are naturally good at engaging in small talk, make no mistake that it is a skill. This is good news, because it means you can get better at it with practice, like any other skill.

If you're not accustomed to regular exercise, getting yourself up off the couch for those first few workouts takes a lot of effort. Likewise, when you're perfecting your small talk skills, you shouldn't expect to wake up one morning with the burning desire to go out and start chatting with the mail carrier. You'll need to make it a practice you engage in regularly, whether or not you're feeling motivated to do it.

When you consistently hone your skills of choosing simple topics, inviting self-disclosure, and actively listening, you'll get progressively better at building the rapport and trust required to transition from surface-level conversations to deeper interaction.

Small Talk, Big Impact

It was the spring of 2008 and Jessica was 7½ months pregnant with her first baby. Like many moms-to-be, she was excited but also apprehensive about the new and uncertain

world of parenting that lay ahead of her.

One thing that was making Jessica particularly anxious was laundry. She knew there would be a lot of it in her baby's early days, and the "special detergent" she had been given to use on her little one's tiny outfits was making her sneeze uncontrollably. Why?

When she turned to Google for answers, she was horrified at what she discovered: The detergent she'd been using, along with hundreds of other so-called baby-safe products, contained synthetic fragrances and other chemicals with known side effects like skin rashes and allergic reactions.

Cut to a few weeks later, when Jessica was attending a launch event for a book about strategies for creating a cleaner, safer home. Jessica struck up a conversation with the book's author by asking for his opinion (evoking a response!) on what products she should be buying and what companies she should be shopping with. To her surprise, he didn't have a great answer. There were options, he said, but they were expensive and could be hard to find, not ideal for busy and tired new parents.

That conversation took place between blockbuster actress and Golden Globe nominee Jessica Alba (of *Fantastic Four* and *Sin City* fame) and author Christopher Gavigan, and it continued throughout the evening. Over the months that followed, the two kept in touch, connected by their deep mutual interest in safer children's products.

Three years later, the duo officially launched The Honest Company selling a handful of baby products free from potentially harmful chemicals. By 2014, the brand was being stocked on mega-retailer Target's shelves. By the 2021 IPO (initial public offering), the company, which originated from a casual bit of small talk at a social event, was valued at \$1.44 billion*.

The serendipitous story of The Honest Company's inception illustrates that ordinary as it may seem in the moment, small talk has the potential to have a profound impact, forging connections and sparking ideas that can hold untold potential.

Action Steps

1. Think about the last time you engaged in small talk. In your mind, consider what went right and what could've gone better. What do you want to practice for next time?
2. On a piece of paper or your phone, write down three topics and/or opening lines you could use today to initiate small talk. Keep in mind the four principles we explored in this chapter: picking the right topic, evoking responses, speaking AND listening, and practicing.

While the days of foraging for food deep in the forest may be behind us, the role of small talk in building impactful human connections persists. In the next chapter, we'll explore some of the factors that can influence small talk, for better or worse, and how to adapt to them.

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