

Conversations

Introduction

There is an art to conversation: some people are naturally good at it. But it is also a skill which you can learn and improve upon through practice.

Some people have never learned how to have a conversation, and restrict themselves to small talk. They are often afraid that anything more interesting will inevitably descend into argument and insult, but this can be easily avoided.

There are some general principles to bear in mind.

- Listen more than you talk.
- Allow the other person to direct the conversation.
- Ask relevant questions, to show you are listening and interested.
- Ask for stories, not facts.
- Build on what they tell you.
- Surprise them.
- Don't tell them they are wrong, but feel free to ask them why they think they are right.
- Be sensitive to when they are reluctant to talk or want to end the conversation.

The aim of the conversation is to provide the other person with a pleasant experience of human contact; anything else is an added bonus. But, in providing this, the experience should work for you as well. Please let us know if you find it frustrating or difficult in any way.

Listen More

Listening is hard work. Particularly if you like conversation, the temptation is to talk: the challenge is to draw the other person in, to help them feel not only that they are being given the opportunity to talk but, more importantly, that they are being listened to.

Come with ideas to get the conversation started, but allow the other person to direct where the conversation goes – within reason, of course. Encouraging someone to continue repeating complaints and old grievances doesn't help anyone. You are not attempting to be a therapist, but there is no harm in helping them focus on happier and more constructive topics.

Asking questions is important. The general advice is to ask open questions – questions that don't have a one-word or yes/no answer. But those questions often come with built-in assumptions, so it can be a good idea to ask a closed question to check the assumption first: *Do you have a partner?* and then *How did you and your partner meet?*

Ask for Stories

People love stories, and most people love to tell them – you just have to give them an excuse. Ask questions that invite them to tell you a story.

The following list of suggestions is based on a TED Ideas article, *How to Turn Small Talk Into Smart Conversation* by Chris Colin and Rob Baedeker. They are thinking mainly about talking with people in the context of a social gathering or dinner party, but it's a good starting point.

Instead of ...

How are you?

How was your day?

Where are you from?

What do you do?

What line of work are you in?

What's your name?

How was your weekend?

What's up?

How long have you been living here?

Where did you go on holiday?

Try ...

How are you today?

How is your week going?

What did you do today?

Have you always lived here?

Where did you grow up?

What was the best thing about growing up there?

What's your story?

What did you do today?

What do you enjoy doing?

Do you have any hobbies?

What is a typical day like for you?

How did you end up in your line of work?

What's the most interesting thing that happened at work today?

What does your name mean?

What would you like it to mean?

What was the best part of your weekend?

What are you looking forward to this week?

What made you decide to live here?

If you could go anywhere in the world, where would it be, and what would you do there?

And here are a couple of other possibilities:

- What is on your bucket list?
- Who in the world would you really like to meet (dead or alive) and what would you say to them?

Explore What They Tell You

Pick up some of the details in the stories they tell you, and explore further. “That sounds like an interesting job / hobby / experience. What was the most challenging aspect? How did you overcome that difficulty?”

Almost everybody will have knowledge, skills and experience that you lack, so use the opportunity to learn. Most people love to pass on their wisdom and experience, so give them the chance. And you might actually learn something of value yourself.

Surprise Them

It’s important to find the right balance here: if too little is unexpected, the conversation is likely to be boring; if too much is unexpected, it is likely to be confusing. But if you find yourself about to say something expected and possibly trite, think first about whether you can offer something different, to move off the familiar track and start to explore new ground.

Ask Why

The main purpose of a conversation is human contact: it gives you a connection with another human being, and this is important, whatever else the conversation gives you through being listened to and valued.

But there is a tension in many conversations: on the one hand, you want an experience that makes you feel good; but on the other hand, you want to use your time well and productively. Different people will balance these things differently, and each person will change as their energy and motivations change, so sensitivity is always needed.

One way to explore more meaningful areas is to pick up on references they provide – it doesn’t matter very much what the area is – and then ask them why they think, feel, believe or prefer whatever they were saying.

Where they say things you disagree with, try not to promote your views, unless they ask you to. If you think they are factually wrong, you can ask where they get their information from, and ask: if they discovered the situation was not as they describe, would it change the way they feel?

In short, you can enable them to talk about meaningful subjects without either saying you agree with ideas you oppose, or getting into an argument. Many people really appreciate the chance to explore topics which matter to them, and get very few opportunities to do this with someone who is interested but not judgemental.

The point is, you can offer them the opportunity to talk about things which matter to them. Whether they take up that opportunity, or not, is up to them: you never push them to talk about something if they don’t want to.

End Well

Be clear about how long they want to talk for, and check how they are doing. Don't prolong the conversation too long: they may be tired, or have other things they need to do.

When it gets towards the end of the conversation, try to round things off, rather than starting up new topics. And maybe talk briefly about next time: it helps to move the conversation on, and may serve to assure a lonely person that you really are planning to talk with them again, so they have something good to look forward to.

Look After Yourself

And, finally, be sure to look after yourself. If they have talked about problems or difficulties which you find challenging or upsetting, then talk with someone – either from *Local Friends* or elsewhere, it doesn't matter. But don't allow the conversation to worry you or wear you down. They need to talk to someone, and, sometimes, so do you.

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