



### **How to Make Your Small Talk Big**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have learned how to be apart. We have put a premium on efficiency, whether in masked exchanges on street corners or on work calls between distractions. We talk fast and abruptly shift from greetings to agenda-driven updates. Even before the pandemic, Americans have been leaning less on institutions and rituals to stand in for conversation when it all became too big. While there is more freedom now due to the lack of confinement from these rituals, but the result of this is fewer go-to scripts and shared customs. Small talk may get a bad rap, but this is how all conversations begin and we can use it to intentionally express how much we care about one another and to admit how much each of us is struggling.

#### **Why Small Talk is Important:**

- We do not have much of a choice. As the pandemic continues, our everyday conversations will inevitably run into death and sickness, lost businesses and livelihoods, questions about the future, and strained coping mechanisms for our mental health.
- Because there is a broad mistrust in government, the media, and community institutions, we rely on informal networks, the people in our lives to help us process it all.
- However, these social networks are under stress. More than a third of Americans reported in a Harvard study last November feeling serious loneliness.

#### **What Has Caused This Loneliness Epidemic:**

- We are hesitant about who is worthy of our clumsy attempts to connect.
- Over half of Americans told the Pew Research Center in 2020 that they believed most people in this country prioritize looking out for themselves over helping others. And that loss of faith compounds.
- As Pew noted, “The less interpersonal trust people have, the more frequently they experience bouts of anxiety, depression and loneliness.”

If a person’s behavior does not make sense to you, it is because you are missing a part of their context. You get that context by reaching out and listening, and this always begins with small talk.

#### **What Are the Most Comforting Exchanges?**

- The most comforting exchanges do not even have a motive to fix anything. People do not always need advice, usually they just want their feelings to be validated.

- We do not just use small talk with acquaintances, co-workers, and people at the store. We also use it with to begin updates with longtime friends and extended family, people we were previously close to but are not so much anymore.

### **What to Do in Moments of Tension and Disagreement**

- Recognize the situation- there may be an area of tension between you and another individual (for example political views). These areas of tension can be hard to escape but realizing that some issues are unavoidable can help in going about keeping a relationship healthy.
- Realize that relationships are more important than any one issue- if you find yourself strongly disagreeing with someone, do not let the issue escalate too much, instead talk about your differences in a peaceful manner.
- Be yourself- if there is a disagreement, do not feel like you need to give up your beliefs, just make sure you are respectful of other viewpoints presented.

### **How to Make an Extra Effort to Initiate Conversations**

- Start by reaching out to people. Be the one who extends beyond chitchat, to drop the bread crumb so people who need to talk realize you could be the one to hear them.
- Realize it is okay to not have closure- Many of us are grieving in different ways and are not going to feel better until we grapple with what has been lost. People just need someone to talk to and realizing there will not be closure will help you be someone people are comfortable talking with about something that is hurting them.

Small talk is one instrument of change available to all of us. All it requires is effort and humility so that we can make the first call, acknowledge the difficulty of small talk, to stretch a little beyond the usual platitudes, and to leave things untidy.

Sale, Anna. New York Times (Online), New York: New York Times Company. May 1, 2021

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