

launch the intricate dynamics of human communication with small talk.

Small Talk Gets a Bad Rap

How do great conversations start in the first place? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *small talk* as “polite conversation about unimportant or uncontentious matters.” People claim to hate it—some because they perceive it as a waste of time and an impediment to meaningful conversation and others simply because they are not good at it. But small talk turns out to be a much underrated pillar of everyday life.

Studies indicate that people are happier when they talk to others, even if it is just strangers on a subway and even if it is just small talk. But small talk does much more.

It begets big talk. Many critiques of small talk are artificially framed as a contest between the benefits of small talk versus the benefits of deeper conversation, as if people must be forced to engage in only one or the other. Of course, you are bound to be disappointed if all of your conversations are nothing more than superficial loops of chatter about things that no one really cares about.

The trick is to be skilled in both types of talk. Rather than being antagonistic to each other, different levels of talk work in tandem to create effective relationships. Small talk is best used as a social lubricant, opening the way to more consequential topics.

Think of it as foreplay, synchronizing the level of intimacy between partners in a conversation and as a mechanism for signaling friendly intentions while simultaneously minimizing uncomfortable situations. The actual topics of small talk do not matter very much; its purpose is not to convey information but rather to serve as an opening act to warm up the audience for the meaty stuff to follow, the stuff that elevates, exhilarates, and expands us.

Attention Conveys Intention

We spend more time looking at our partner while listening than while speaking. It's not just a way of signaling

attention; it allows us to give feedback to the speaker—say, widening our eyes to signal surprise, interest, and agreement, encouraging the person to continue the interaction.

Attention has its own magic. We crave recognition from others, and there is experimental evidence that being ostracized or ignored by others creates a pain that is every bit as real and intense as that caused by physical injury. In our prehistoric tribal groups, ostracism from the group could essentially be a death sentence.

According to social attention holding potential theory (SAHP), developed by British psychologist Paul Gilbert, we compete with each other to have people pay attention to us. When other people take notice, we feel good, enjoying all kinds of positive feelings—confidence, belonging, acceptance. Knowing that you are being heard by your conversation partner is part of the larger phenomenon. (On the flip side, being ignored by others produces much darker emotions, especially envy, anger, and despair.)

Your Turn to Talk

At some point, however, we might tire of listening, and we display signs that we are becoming impatient. We may start fidgeting, primping our hair, or tugging at our clothing.

Escalating, we may start nodding rapidly as if to say, “OK, OK, OK,” and may even grunt or make fake sounds of agreement to get the speaker to shut up. Eventually, we may become more direct, making exaggerated inhaled breaths and raising an index finger or even a hand as if we were a student in school trying to get a teacher's attention. A speaker not yet ready to yield the floor will avert their gaze and

pretend not to see their partner's non-verbal pleas. They'll likely turn up the volume of their voice. A skillful speaker may even make eye contact with the listener and make a “stop” gesture with one hand, simultaneously acknowledging the request to speak and signaling an intention to honor it soon.

When the speaker is finally ready to turn the conversation over, they will decrease the loudness of their voice, gaze directly into the listener's eyes, and slow the tempo of their speech so that the last syllable of the last word stretches out a bit longer than it normally would. A clear pause then serves as an invitation for the listener to jump in.

In most conversations, the exchange of roles from speaker to listener and back is seamless, and it is surprising how little talking over each other occurs. But then there comes that most awkward of signals to send—that you have nothing more to say and do not wish to speak.

If your partner appears to be turning the conversation over to you, but you are not interested in speaking, it is okay to just come right out and say so. Also, staying relaxed, maintaining silence, and avoiding eye contact will signal that you are comfortable allowing the other person to continue speaking. ■

THINK OF SMALL TALK AS FOREPLAY, SYNCHRONIZING THE LEVEL OF INTIMACY.

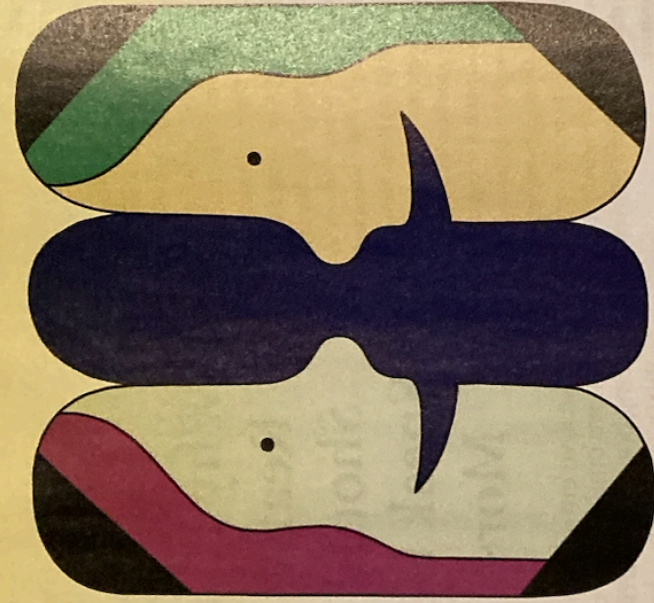
The sense of connection that makes talk so exhilarating comes from an array of synchronization strategies we unconsciously deploy.

BY FRANK T. MCANDREW, PH.D.

ONE OF THE most remarkable and least appreciated things about human social life is the speed and fluidity with which talk bounces back-and-forth between speakers, and there are few things more delightful than an effortless conversation. When conversational styles mesh smoothly, we walk away from social encounters feeling good, feeling connected, and flinging around words like *rapport* and *chemistry*

to describe the experience. That sense of interpersonal attunement is one of the biggest rewards for engaging in live, in-person interaction. And for many, it is one of the most welcome pleasures of postpandemic life.

Great conversations don't just happen. We take measures to subtly synchronize with the conversational styles of others, sending little signals to seamlessly switch back and forth. And we generally



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How to Have a Great Conversation