

How to Get Good at Small Talk, and Even Enjoy It

Small talk, I think, is actually a misnomer.

We refer to small talk as any chitchat or just conversation that we don't put a lot of import on.

When in fact, small talk is a wonderful way of connecting, bonding, learning, growing.

What makes it so challenging is the fact that we can't have a script.

We have to just go with what's happening in the moment.

We often think that it is a test for us.

It's like a tennis match, where I've got to lob something over to the person or people I'm talking to, and I hope it lands and goes well.

I think a better way to look at small talk is like that game of hacky sack, that little bean bag where everybody's trying to keep it up all at the same time and never have it hit the ground.

If you envision your job as collaborating with others to keep the conversation moving, rather than a hot potato tennis match where I just need to get it back to the other person, it can really change, one, how it flows, and two, the experience from your perspective.

All of a sudden, it's something that's enjoyable rather than something that's scary.

Establish Appropriate Goals

When you first get into a small talk situation, I think we need to establish appropriate goals.

Rachel Greenwald, a matchmaker and an academic, has this wonderful saying, your goal is to be interested, not interesting.

A lot of us go into these situations thinking that we need to be really fascinating, engaging, and interesting, when in fact, we just need to be present and be interested in the conversation that's happening.

It also helps reduce the anxiety many of us feel.

We feel like we are being judged, and the reality is, you are being judged.

You can reduce the intensity of that spotlight we feel by putting your attention on the other.

Give yourself permission to pause.

Many of us have this desire as soon as something spontaneous happens and we have to respond, to do it as quickly as possible.

We have this sense that speed to respond in somehow is associated with competence.

But really, what reflects best on your competence is an appropriate response, and appropriateness can take a little bit of time.

We have all said something we didn't mean to say because it was a little bit of a surprise, it wasn't clear, it wasn't appropriate.

Pausing helps reduce that likelihood.

So here's some things you can do to help slow yourself down.

How to Get Good at Small Talk, and Even Enjoy It

Paraphrasing is wonderful.

Why?

Not just because you are repeating the gist of what somebody said to make sure you're clearly going to respond to what's asked or what's needed, but paraphrasing forces you to slow down and listen more carefully.

Paraphrase isn't what a five-year-old does who parrots back what you've said.

It's a distillation of what the other person said, and when you paraphrase it, you do several things.

One, you validate the other person because you're saying, "I heard you."

You're not necessarily agreeing.

Paraphrasing doesn't mean agreement, it just means, "This is what I heard."

And it validates the content.

So you validate the person, but the content, the person can say, "No, no, no, no, what I really meant was this."

So it helps with fidelity.

Most of us listen just enough to get the gist of what somebody's saying, and then we immediately start judging, rehearsing, and responding.

When I paraphrase, I have to listen super intently.

I have to listen to understand what's the bottom line of what you're saying.

That slows me down.

And by slowing my own thoughts down and then paraphrasing them, I buy myself some time to really think.

What if you feel like you have nothing smart to say?

There's always something to say.

You can always ask a question.

My mother-in-law was amazing at small talk.

She had a black belt in small talk.

And her superpower was a simple phrase.

She would pause for a moment and she would say, "Tell me more."

If you are ever in a situation of communication, conversation, where you don't know what to say, most of the time you could simply say, "Tell me more," or "Give me some more detail," or "What did you mean about that point?"

And just by giving the person an opportunity to speak again, that gives you time to find what you might want to say and to connect to it.

How to Get Good at Small Talk, and Even Enjoy It

(Producer: "Tell me more.")"

When you say, "tell me more," you have to act inquisitively.

If you just say, "tell me more," it's not, but if you say, "tell me, yeah, tell me more. Tell me more about that, yeah."

What if I make a mistake or say something dumb?

Mistakes are normal and natural in communication.

We make them all the time.

Spontaneous communication is about connection, not perfection.

You know, in film and TV, directors will ask their actors to have multiple takes.

A take is just another shot at doing the same thing.

So an actor might say something in one way very passionately or they might say it in another way, being more curious.

Those are all different takes.

So I'd like people to reframe a mistake as a missed take.

What you did wasn't wrong.

There might be another way to do it and we can try it again.