



Small Talk Survival Guide: Navigating the Necessary Awkwardness for Meaningful Connections

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Objectives



Understand the role and importance of small talk.



Learn strategies to handle small talk more comfortably.



Use small talk as a tool for building meaningful connections.

What is Small Talk?

Definition:

- Casual, polite, and brief conversation between people who may not know each other well.
- Used to initiate or maintain social interactions. It's often about topics that are not deeply personal or controversial, allowing people to establish a connection without diving into more profound subjects.
- Polite conversation with someone you may not know very well or with someone in a professional or more formal context.

What is my goal?

Small talk is used to help you reach a goal during social activities.

We can make a **choice** if we want reach a social or professional goal or if we are just looking to enjoy the event on our own.

What is my goal at this conference?

Am I here only to enjoy the speakers and learn more about these topics?

- Watch this example

Am I here to enjoy the conference and find others that I may have common interest with?

- Now watch this

With that in mind- Let's figure out how to use small talk!

Small Talk Safe Zone Topics



Weather: "It's really sunny today. Do you have any plans to enjoy the nice weather?"

Hobbies: "I noticed you mentioned you like painting. What kind of art do you enjoy creating?"

Recent Events: "Did you catch the latest episode of that popular show? What did you think of it?"

Compliments: "I like your jacket. Where did you get it?"

General Interests: "Do you enjoy reading? Any good book recommendations?"

Sports: Only if you like and know about them! "Did you see that game last night?"



General Topics

- It is a way to show someone you are interested in getting to know them.
- If you want to start a conversation but don't see any obvious common interests yet.

Why Small Talk Can Be Tough

Unpredictability:

Small talk often involves thinking of spontaneous topics, making it hard to prepare for or predict what will be discussed. Brain freeze!

Feels Fake:

I am not really interested in asking someone I don't really know questions. I don't really care about the answers to small talk type questions, and I think it will probably be obvious.

Literal Thinking:

Many neurodivergent or autistic people interpret language literally, making abstract or figurative speech in small talk confusing. Ex. Break the ice, hit the nail on the head, I'm drowning in paperwork...

Use of sarcasm when people use the words that mean the opposite of what they are really trying to say. Used to express frustration or to insult, or just to be funny.

Why Small Talk Can Be Tough Continued

Social Rules:

The unwritten rules of small talk can be complex and hard to understand, especially when they change based on the social context, leading to anxiety about saying the wrong thing.

Interest Mismatch:

Small talk topics may not align with their special interests, making the conversation feel pointless or boring.

Processing Time:

Taking extra time to process information can make it challenging to keep up with the fast pace of casual conversations. Trying to think of the "perfect" thing impairs active listening and slows processing speed.

Why Small Talk Can Be Tough Continued

Fear of Judgment:

Overthinking and expecting the worst. Worrying about being judged or misunderstood can create anxiety and reluctance to engage in small talk.

Preference for Depth:

Preferring deep, meaningful conversations over surface-level interactions can make small talk seem trivial and unimportant. What's the point?

Sensory Overload:

Loud and overstimulating environments

Addressing the Challenges



- Recognize that these feelings are valid and common. Other people often feel the same way it's not just you!
- Practice strategies to manage anxiety and improve small talk skills.
- Prepare conversation starters and active listening techniques that are comfortable for you.
- Seek supportive environments and understanding conversation partners.
- The more you prepare before you go into situations where you may need to do it, the easier it will be to think of things to say in the moment.

Small talk vs. Deep Conversations

SMALL TALK	DEEP CONVERSATIONS
Short and brief	Longer and more involved
Light and general topics (weather, hobbies, recent events)	More personal and meaningful topics
Not deeply personal or hot button topics	More personal like values, beliefs, & life experiences
Helps make initial connections and feel more comfortable in social situations	Important for developing trust and closer relationships over time

Purpose of Small Talk Socially

- Important part of social interaction and can help identify common interests, and build relationships
- Helps people feel more comfortable and included in social settings.
- Helps you determine if someone is interested in talking to you.
- Builds rapport and trust and helps you find common interests that you can build on and use to transition to deeper conversations.
- Opens the door to deeper conversations.



The Role of Small Talk Professionally

- Can lead to greater connections and opportunities.
- Allows potential employers to see how you present in a formal setting.
 - Shows how you would represent their company if you worked for them.
- Opportunity to gather information in a low stakes setting.
- Small conversations about topics not related to work can help you feel more connected to your coworkers. These connections can reduce anxiety, make your work life smoother and can even help you be more productive.



How to Navigate Small Talk

- Don't start out with introducing yourself. Unless it is a work event or meetup where others typically are expected to introduce themselves.
- Let your environment do the work for you
 - Mention something that you see and comment on it.
- Ask Open Ended Questions
- Look like you are open and available for conversation
- If you are on your phone or computer people may think you are not interested in talking
- Show interest in your conversation partner. Are you looking at them (or in their direction), talking to them, and facing them?
- Don't get too personal too fast

Make a small talk cheat sheet

- It can be hard to think of potential small talk topics in the moment because they aren't naturally ones we *really want* to talk about.
- Make a list of topics related to the activity you will be attending.
- Make a list of your interests so it will be easier to remember them in the moment when you are likely to feel anxiety around talking.
- Practice asking and answering questions to yourself out loud and in the mirror. Practice helps the words come more naturally later.
- Keep your lists in the notes on your phone so you can review them to prime yourself. This helps reduce unnecessary pressure to memorize everything.





What to do if it gets awkward?

- Exit the conversation in a polite way
 - Use a cover story or reason for leaving
 - I'm going to go get a drink, I'll see you later.
 - I have to make a quick phone call, I'll be right back.
- Move on to talk to someone else
- Circle back around if you think of something to say later and try again

How to transition to Deeper Topics

Start with a Light Observation:

Begin with a general statement or question to test the waters.

Example: "Don't you just hate small talk sometimes?"

Assess Interest

Pay close attention to the person's verbal and nonverbal responses

Interested Positive Cues:

Engaged and enthusiastic reply.

Open body language (smiling, nodding).

Example Response: "Yeah, I find it pretty awkward too. I prefer talking about more meaningful things."

Not Interested Neutral or Negative Cues:

Brief or non-committal response. Ex. Ummm sure, or I guess so.

Closed body language (crossed arms, avoiding eye contact).

Example Response: "It's okay, I guess."

Assess Interest

INTERESTED CUES

Are they looking at me?

Are they facing me?

Are they talking to me?

Are they asking questions or sharing information?

NOT INTERESTED CUES

- Looking away
- Giving polite statements
 - Yeah...
 - Uh huh...
- High pitched voice
- Looking uncomfortable
- Turning away or looking at their phone

Example Situations and Goals

Workplace Interactions:

Situation: Casual conversations in the break room or during meetings.

Goal: I'm not here to make friends but, I am here to have positive interactions and get along with my coworkers.

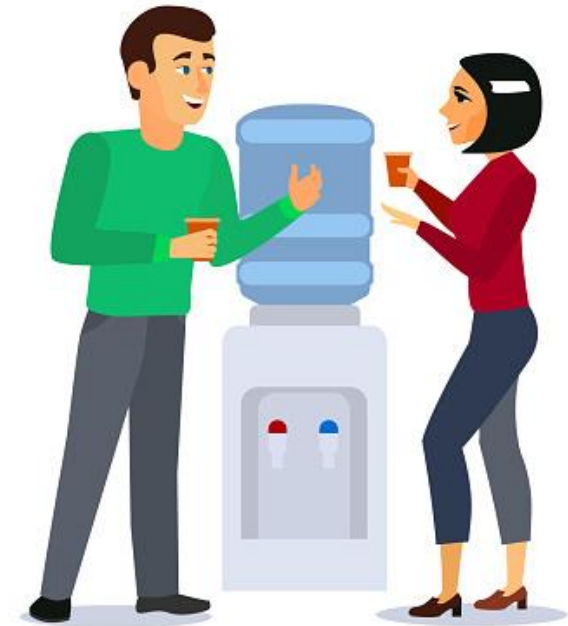
Problem: Uncertainty about appropriate topics, interpreting colleagues' non-verbal cues, and managing the flow of conversation.

Social Gatherings:

Situation: Parties or family gatherings with various small talk opportunities.

Goal: Find someone with common interests and possibly make a friend.

Problem: Finding relevant topics to discuss, managing multiple conversations, and dealing with unexpected social dynamics.



Let's Role Play



Scenarios of Challenging Small Talk Situations for Neurodivergent or Autistic People

Networking event

Situation: A large, noisy event where attendees are expected to mingle and make small talk.

Goal: I am here to meet people, make connections, in order to help me find a job.

Problem: Sensory overload from noise and crowds, difficulty knowing how to start or end conversations.

Questions?

