

# HOW TO MAKE SMALL TALK WHEN YOU'RE SOCIALLY ANXIOUS

FOR THE ESTIMATED 1 IN 20 PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE SOCIAL ANXIETY (ABS, 2008), OR THE EVEN GREATER NUMBER FOR WHOM SMALL TALK IS ANXIETY-PROVOKING, PARTIES AND OTHER SOCIAL SITUATIONS CAN SEEM QUITE CHALLENGING. BEFORE YOU DO A DISAPPEARING ACT, CHECK OUT OUR TIPS ON HOW TO MAKE SMALL TALK WHEN YOU'RE SOCIALLY ANXIOUS.

## + MANAGE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Anxiety around making small talk is often tied up with expectations such as:

- I must be a witty conversationalist
- I must keep the conversation going; silences mean that the conversation is going terribly and it'll be my fault
- I must contribute a worthwhile story or fact in response to the other person's comments

Yet, conversation is a two-way street. It's not solely your responsibility to ask the right questions, be witty and charming, know all of the answers, and to fill any silences during the conversation. So ease up on your expectations, and place some responsibility for the conversation onto the other person.

## + LISTEN RATHER THAN FOCUS ON YOUR THOUGHTS

Every been 'caught out' in conversation when it's your turn to speak or answer a question but you don't know what to say because you haven't been paying attention because of the nervous chatter going on in your head (e.g. "What can I talk about next? How do I work it into the conversation?")? A quick tip - Focus on what is being said, rather than what's in your head. Not only will this make it easier to follow the conversation, but it's also a great way to ask questions that flow on naturally from what has been discussed (so that the other person elaborates more on what they've said). That is, they end up doing more talking in the conversation, which takes the pressure off you.

## + ASK THE RIGHT TYPES OF QUESTIONS

While you may have a mental list of the questions you want to ask the other person, pay attention to what TYPES of questions you ask. That is, think about whether the majority of your questions tend to be closed questions or open-ended questions.

Closed questions typically invite a Yes/No answer, and examples of these include "Have you ever been to Paris?" or "Do you like football or tennis?". The answer can be a one-word response, which then places the 'turn' for conversation back onto you, and can leave you scrambling to find another question to ask.

In contrast, open-ended questions invite the other person to tell a story, for example "Where have you travelled to?" or "What types of sport do you like?". The answers tend to take longer, which means that the 'turn' for conversation takes longer to get back to you. Follow their response up with an invitation to elaborate, "Tell me more about..."

Spend some time practising asking the right types of questions. In doing so, you may find that small talk becomes easier and more bearable.

**SOURCES** Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008). National survey of mental health and wellbeing: Summary of results, 2007. cat4360. [https://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/A24556C814804A99CA257BF0001CAC45/\\$File/mha25.pdf](https://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/A24556C814804A99CA257BF0001CAC45/$File/mha25.pdf)  
Langewitz, W., Nubling, M., & Wieber, H. (2003). A theory-based approach to analysing conversation sequences. *Epidemiologia e Psichiatria Sociale*, 12, 103-108. [http://www.herzzentrum-region-basel.ch/fileadmin/unispitalbaselch/Bereiche/Medizin/Psychosomatik/Publikationen/Langewitz\\_Wolf/wl\\_analysing\\_conversation\\_sequences\\_2003.pdf](http://www.herzzentrum-region-basel.ch/fileadmin/unispitalbaselch/Bereiche/Medizin/Psychosomatik/Publikationen/Langewitz_Wolf/wl_analysing_conversation_sequences_2003.pdf)



Focus on what is being said, rather than what's in your head.

### ABOUT US

Want to build skills for better Wellbeing, Mental Health, and Performance? Here at The Skill Collective we translate science into practical, easy-to-use tips. Whether you want to Bounce Back, Achieve, or Grow, our team of clinical and consulting psychologists can help you build skills for a better life. You're reading tips from our Resource Library at:

[www.theskillcollective.com/resource-library](http://www.theskillcollective.com/resource-library)

**THE SKILL COLLECTIVE**

(08) 6382 0355 | [enquiries@theskillcollective.com](mailto:enquiries@theskillcollective.com) | [theskillcollective.com](http://theskillcollective.com)  
6/95 Hay St, Subiaco WA 6008

build skills. better life.