

## A moment that changed me: I gave up small talk for a month – and the world came alive

### Level 3: Advanced

#### 1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- Do people in your country or culture use 'small talk'?
- What topics are generally considered to be small talk? Why?
- How good are you at small talk?

#### 2 Key words

a. Match the words from the box to the following definitions.

deflect	hardwired	on edge	rusty
broad	mould	quizzical	vulnerable
at ease	interrogator	manic	common ground
exchange	networking	resenting	side hustle

1. the activity of building and maintaining professional relationships that may benefit people and groups \_\_\_\_\_
2. something that shapes someone's character or behaviour over time \_\_\_\_\_
3. open to emotional hurt, criticism or harm; without protection or defence \_\_\_\_\_
4. feeling nervous, tense or irritable \_\_\_\_\_
5. out of practice; having lost some skill in something through lack of use \_\_\_\_\_
6. to turn something aside or avoid dealing with it directly, especially a question or criticism \_\_\_\_\_
7. shared beliefs, interests or opinions that provide a basis for agreement or connection between people \_\_\_\_\_
8. a behaviour or tendency that seems to be a natural part of how a person thinks or acts \_\_\_\_\_
9. extremely busy or rushed; full of uncontrolled energy \_\_\_\_\_
10. relaxed and comfortable in a situation or with a person \_\_\_\_\_

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11. a way of earning extra money alongside your main job, often by doing something you enjoy or are skilled at \_\_\_\_\_
12. feeling bitterness or anger toward someone because of something they have done or a situation you consider unfair \_\_\_\_\_
13. wide in range or scope; covering many different things or people \_\_\_\_\_
14. a person who questions someone in an intense or formal way \_\_\_\_\_
15. a conversation or interaction in which people talk to each other, often briefly  
\_\_\_\_\_
16. showing mild curiosity or amusement, often through a look or expression with the eyebrows raised  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. Martha gave her husband a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ look when he told her he'd quit his job to become a professional dog walker.
2. After six months off work, Evelyn felt a bit \_\_\_\_\_ when it came to writing formal emails.
3. Kieran tends to \_\_\_\_\_ personal questions by changing the subject or making a joke.
4. The two rivals finally found some \_\_\_\_\_ when they realised they both wanted to cut costs.
5. I've been running a small \_\_\_\_\_ selling handmade jewellery at weekends to help pay the bills.
6. After the divorce, Patrick felt \_\_\_\_\_ and didn't want to be hurt a second time.
7. The conference was exhausting – three days of \_\_\_\_\_ with people and back-to-back meetings.
8. Lynda didn't fit the typical \_\_\_\_\_ of a corporate lawyer. She was too unconventional and far too kind.

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9. Humans seem to be \_\_\_\_\_ to respond more strongly to negative news than positive news.
10. Even the innocent witnesses felt uncomfortable being interviewed by the police \_\_\_\_\_.
11. After a brief but tense \_\_\_\_\_ with her manager, Pauline decided it was time to look for a new job.
12. The whole office felt \_\_\_\_\_ waiting for the results of the company review.
13. Fatima secretly \_\_\_\_\_ her colleague for getting the promotion she had worked so hard for.
14. The festival attracted a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ range of visitors, from young families to retired people.
15. Once the ice was broken, everyone felt completely \_\_\_\_\_ and the conversation flowed naturally.
16. The week before the product launch was absolutely \_\_\_\_\_ and nobody went home before midnight.

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*I was fed up with discussing the weather, so I started to ask unexpected questions. The conversations that resulted were revelatory*

**Claire Eastham**

**22 October, 2025**

- 1 For as long as I can remember, I have found small talk problematic. It was boring at best and stressful at worst. A colleague commenting on the weather, when I could see for myself that it was raining. The postman asking: "How are you today?" An impossibly broad question to answer briefly.
- 2 I worked in book publishing for years, where networking was essential. I could discuss authors, print runs or marketing budgets with ease. But asking how a buyer had travelled to the event? Or where a journalist had parked? I didn't care! So why were these the conversations we were all having? Everyone else seemed at ease, while I felt on edge.
- 3 Every exchange felt like a performance, an evaluation I was sure I was failing. I didn't understand the rules. For example, how long should small talk last? Should I answer honestly or with entertainment in mind? I worried that my responses were either flat or manic, my questions barked out like an interrogator.
- 4 When I became a freelance writer, I trained myself to make small talk in the same way that an actor rehearses lines for a play, desperately trying to appear relaxed and confident. Over time, I became more at ease with the performance and accepted that the discomfort was just a part of being an adult.
- 5 Then lockdown happened. For two years, I didn't have to perform at all. Perhaps because we were all feeling more vulnerable, the conversations I did have felt deeper and more authentic. I rarely had to speak to strangers – I didn't even have to wear pants!
- 6 But when the world reopened, returning to chat about the traffic and weather felt like psychological torture. My lines were rusty. The masks we had been, literally, wearing for so long had made me forget how to put my social one back on.
- 7 All that changed in May this year. While at a friend's art show, I suddenly felt inspired to try a different approach. I remembered the self-help author Wayne W Dyer's advice: "Change the way you look at things, and the things you look at change." Rather than continuing to force myself into a mould and resenting it, I decided to create a new one.
- 8 The first person I spoke to at the show was a freelance photographer. "What's your star sign?" I asked. She blinked, looked pleasantly surprised, then answered, "Aquarius." We spoke comfortably for 10 minutes. The next person I encountered, I asked, "What was your art teacher at school like?" By the end of the evening, I'd had several fun and enjoyable conversations.
- 9 There were 27 more days left in May, and one month felt like a suitable amount of time to continue the experiment. My rules were simple: without being rude, I would quickly deflect all questions about wellbeing, weather, transport or children's academic achievements and offer instead something I found genuinely interesting.
- 10 When a barista asked, "How are you enjoying the sun?" I replied, "I like spring, but autumn is my favourite season. What about you?" At a writer's event, when a woman commented that her kids were out of school, I asked: "What was your favourite subject to study?"
- 11 The results were astonishing. Most people weren't just willing to play along; they seemed relieved. It turned out I wasn't the only one who felt like small talk was an awkward and forced ritual. Instead of stiff exchanges, conversations became unpredictable and, more importantly, real. I learned about a bartender's successful side hustle, a recent graduate's passion for beekeeping, and the novel a mental health nurse was writing.
- 12 There were a few uncomfortable moments, of course. Some people just didn't get it, giving me a quizzical look before excusing themselves. A few reacted with outright suspicion. But I didn't take it personally; most people seemed to welcome the change.

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- 13 As the end of the month approached, I came to realise that small talk, for all its frustrations, has a purpose. It's a passport to the kind of interaction and the connection all humans are hardwired to seek out.
- 14 So small talk no longer causes me anxiety. Rather than being intimidated, I choose how I want to engage with it, without putting myself under so much pressure to "get it right". Giving it up for a month allowed me to see more clearly how we've all learned to follow the same script in order to reach common ground. But that doesn't mean you can't change that script, make it more authentic and have more interesting conversations, too.

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#### 3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and answer the questions.

1. What were the two specific reasons the writer found small talk difficult before she changed her approach?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What did the writer compare herself to when she was learning to make small talk as a freelance writer?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What were the three topics the writer decided to deflect during her month-long experiment?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Give two examples of how the writer redirected a conventional small talk question into something more interesting.  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What three things did the writer learn about strangers as a result of her new approach?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. How did the majority of people respond to the writer's unexpected questions, and how does she explain this reaction?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. According to the writer, what is the real purpose of small talk, and what image does she use to describe it?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. The writer describes two negative reactions from people who didn't respond well to her approach. What were they?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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#### 4 Key language

a. Read the article again and match the phrasal verbs to the correct definition.

- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| 1. come to _____    | a. to stop doing something or stop trying to achieve something                          |
| 2. give up _____    | b. to gradually begin to think or feel something after a period of time                 |
| 3. play along _____ | c. to actively look for someone or something  |
| 4. seek out _____   | d. to agree with what someone else is doing or saying, often to keep things comfortable |
| 5. turn out _____   | e. to happen to be the case in the end; to have a particular result                     |

b. Complete the sentences with phrasal verbs from a in the correct form.

1. It \_\_\_\_\_ that the quiet guy in the corner was actually the CEO of the company.
2. Tilly spent months trying to \_\_\_\_\_ the original manuscript in libraries across the country.
3. Daryl wasn't really enjoying the party game but decided to \_\_\_\_\_ anyway so as not to spoil the mood.
4. After years of working abroad, Yasmine \_\_\_\_\_ realise just how much she missed her hometown.
5. I'm not ready to \_\_\_\_\_ on the project just yet. I think we just need a fresh approach.

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#### 5 Discussion

**a. Discuss these questions.**

- Have you ever felt uncomfortable with small talk in a professional or social situation? What happened and how did you handle it?
- The writer suggests that deflecting conventional small talk leads to more authentic connections. Do you agree with this opinion? Why or why not?

#### 6 In your own words

**a. Design your own 30-day social experiment in the same way that the writer did. Choose a habit or behaviour that you don't like or feel uncomfortable about and plan how you would do it differently for a month. Then write a short presentation (of one or two minutes). Think about:**

- what the habit is and why you don't like it
- what you plan to do differently and why
- any problems you might face
- what you hope to discover by the end of the month

**b. Present your experiment to the class. Be prepared to answer questions from other groups.**