

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

Level 1: Elementary

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What do you think the phrase 'small talk' means?
- What topics are considered to be small talk? Why?

2 Key words

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

performance
ignore

approach
rude

experiment
lockdown

results
purpose

relieved
trained

1. the reason why you do something _____
2. a test you do to try something new and see what happens _____
3. happy because something bad didn't happen _____
4. a way of doing something _____
5. a time when people can't leave their homes so they can stay safe _____
6. not polite or kind _____
7. to not look at or listen to someone or something _____
8. practised doing something many times to get better at it _____
9. the things that happen because of something you do _____
10. something you do in front of other people, e.g. acting or singing _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. Annie felt _____ when she heard that her flight was on time.
2. We did a fun _____ in science class last week.
3. It's _____ to talk when your mouth is full of food.
4. Danny's _____ in the school play was really good – everyone loved it!

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5. I _____ hard for months before the race.
6. The _____ of homework is to help you practise what you learned in class.
7. During _____ in 2021, schools were closed and children studied at home.
8. The _____ of the test showed that most students did very well.
9. Pedro tried to talk to his girlfriend, but she decided to _____ him and didn't say a word.
10. Let's try a different _____. Maybe we can solve the problem another way.

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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

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- 1 For a long time, I found small talk a problem. It was boring and stressful. I worked in publishing for years. I could discuss lots of things easily. But asking 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.
- 2 Every conversation felt like a performance. I didn't understand the rules and I worried that my answers were wrong. When I became a writer, I trained myself to make small talk so I could seem confident.
- 3 Then lockdown happened. For two years, I didn't have to perform at all. The conversations I did have felt more real. But when the world opened again, returning to chat about the traffic and weather was difficult.
- 4 All that changed in May this year at a friend's party. I suddenly decided to try a different approach. I remembered the author Wayne W Dyer's advice: "Change the way you look at things, and the things you look at change."
- 5 The first person I spoke to was a photographer. "What's your star sign?" I asked. She looked surprised, then answered, "Aquarius." We spoke for 10 minutes. The next person I met, I asked, "What was your art teacher at school like?" That night, I had some fun and enjoyable conversations.

- 6 There were 27 days left in May, so I decided to continue the experiment for the rest of the month. My rules were simple: without being rude, I would quickly ignore all questions about the weather or transport and say something I found interesting instead.
- 7 When someone asked, "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 said that her kids were out of school, I asked: "What was your favourite subject to study?"
- 8 The results were amazing. Most people didn't just play along; they seemed relieved. I wasn't the only person who felt like small talk was difficult. There were a few uncomfortable moments, of course. Some people just didn't understand.
- 9 At the end of the month, I realised that small talk has a purpose. It's about human connection. Giving it up for a month helped me understand that. And now I have much more interesting conversations.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and answer the questions.

1. Why didn't the writer like small talk?

2. What happened during lockdown?

3. Where did the writer try a different approach for the first time?

4. What question did the writer ask the photographer?

5. What did the writer learn at the end of the month?

4 Key language

a. Read the article again and match the expressions to the correct definition.

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| 1. at ease _____ | a. nervous; uncomfortable |
| 2. fed up with _____ | b. to agree with what someone else is doing or saying, often to keep things comfortable |
| 3. on edge _____ | c. stop doing something that you usually do |
| 4. play along _____ | d. annoyed by or bored with something |
| 5. give up _____ | e. comfortable; relaxed |

b. Complete the sentences with expressions from task a.

1. After a few weeks in her new job, Almas started to feel _____.
2. Brody was _____ people asking him why he hadn't come to the party.

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3. I am going to _____ chocolate and sweets for a whole month!
4. I was a bit nervous, but I decided to _____ when my friends suggested karaoke.
5. The night before the show, Emily felt really _____ and couldn't sleep.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- How good are you at small talk?
- What questions do you usually ask when you meet people for the first time?

6 In your own words

a. Design a list of alternative small talk questions. Make sure they:

- are interesting
- cover topics that everyone can talk about
- don't focus on very personal topics

b. Present your list to the class.