

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

### Level 2: Intermediate

#### 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?

#### 2 Key words

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

common ground

last

lockdown

suspicion

authentic

awkward

networking

freelance

deflect

torture

1. the process of building professional relationships \_\_\_\_\_
2. something that causes pain or suffering, either physical or emotional  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. uncomfortable and embarrassing \_\_\_\_\_
4. continue for a period of time \_\_\_\_\_
5. a situation where people are not allowed to leave their homes, usually for safety reasons  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. to avoid dealing with something directly, especially a question or criticism  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. shared beliefs, interests or opinions that create a connection between people  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. describes someone who works for different clients or companies rather than being employed by one organisation \_\_\_\_\_
9. a feeling that someone cannot be trusted or that something is wrong \_\_\_\_\_
10. real; genuine \_\_\_\_\_

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

1. The silence after Cath made the joke was so \_\_\_\_\_ that she wished she could have disappeared.
2. During \_\_\_\_\_ in 2021, many people discovered new hobbies just to keep themselves busy.
3. Kieran tends to \_\_\_\_\_ personal questions by changing the subject.
4. The managers finally found some \_\_\_\_\_ when they realised they both wanted to cut costs.
5. The best travel writing feels \_\_\_\_\_, as if the writer is talking to you honestly rather than trying to impress you.
6. I have a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ Calum is trying to avoid me because he owes me some money.
7. The conference was exhausting – three days of \_\_\_\_\_ with people and lots of meetings.
8. Emma is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ make-up artist and she chooses her own hours and clients.
9. Sitting through three hours of speeches at the awards ceremony was absolute \_\_\_\_\_.
10. How long did the meeting \_\_\_\_\_? I lost track of time completely.

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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 impossible question to answer briefly.
- 2 I worked in book publishing for years, where networking was essential. I could discuss lots of things easily. 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 conversation felt like a performance. I didn't understand the rules. For example, how long should small talk last? Should I answer honestly? I worried that my responses were wrong.
- 4 When I became a freelance writer, I trained myself to make small talk in the same way that an actor practises for a play, so I would appear relaxed and confident. Over time, I became more at ease with the performance and accepted that feeling uncomfortable was just a part of being an adult.
- 5 Then lockdown happened. For two years, I didn't have to perform at all. The conversations I did have felt more authentic. But when the world reopened, returning to chat about the traffic and weather felt like torture. The face masks we had been wearing for so long had made me forget how to put my 'social mask' back on.
- 6 All that changed in May this year. While at a friend's art show, I suddenly decided 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."
- 7 The first person I spoke to at the show was a freelance photographer. "What's your star sign?" I asked. She looked surprised, then answered, "Aquarius." We spoke comfortably for 10 minutes. The next person I met, I asked, "What was your art teacher at school like?" By the end of the evening, I'd had some fun and enjoyable conversations.
- 8 There were 27 more days left in May, and one month felt like a good 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 say something I found interesting instead.
- 9 When someone 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?"
- 10 The results were astonishing. Most people weren't just willing to play along; they seemed relieved. It seemed I wasn't the only one who felt like small talk was awkward. Instead, conversations became real.
- 11 There were a few uncomfortable moments, of course. Some people just didn't get it, giving me a funny look. A few reacted with suspicion. But I didn't take it personally; most people seemed to welcome the change.
- 12 As the end of the month approached, I came to realise that small talk has a purpose. It's a passport to the connection all humans naturally seek out.
- 13 So small talk no longer causes me anxiety. 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. Why did the writer find small talk difficult? Give two reasons.

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2. What did the writer compare herself to when she was learning to make small talk?

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3. Give two examples of how the writer changed a small talk question into something more interesting.

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4. How did most people react to the writer's unexpected questions? Why do you think this was?

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5. The writer describes two negative reactions from people. What were they?

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6. According to the writer, what is the purpose of small talk?

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#### 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. to actively look for someone or something  |
| 4. play along _____  | d. annoyed by or bored with something   |
| 5. seek out _____    | e. comfortable; relaxed   |

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#### b. Complete the sentences with the expressions from task a in the correct form.

1. After a few weeks in her new job, Almas finally started to feel \_\_\_\_\_ with her colleagues.
2. Brody was \_\_\_\_\_ people asking him why he hadn't come to the party.
3. Denise always tries to \_\_\_\_\_ the best ingredients for her cooking, even if it takes a little longer.
4. I was a bit nervous at first, but I decided to \_\_\_\_\_ when my friends suggested we try 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?
- Think about a time when you had a conversation with someone you didn't know well. How did it start, and did it stay as small talk or become something more interesting?

### 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.