

## Do People Need Small Talk to Be Happy?

In one study, college students who had substantive conversations were more content than their peers who exchanged mere pleasantries. But don't write off chitchat just yet.



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**S**ECURITY GUARD, truck driver, salesperson—year after year, these jobs appear on lists of the unhappiest careers. Although many factors can make a job dismal—unusual hours, low pay, no chance for advancement—these three gigs stand out for another reason: They're characterized either by a lack of conversation or by obligatory but meaningless small talk.

Psychologists have long said that connecting with others is central to well-being, but just how much conversation we require is under investigation. In one study,

researchers eavesdropped on undergraduates for four days, then cataloged each overheard conversation as either “small talk” (“What do you have there? Popcorn? Yummy!”) or “substantive” (“So did they get divorced soon after?”). They found that the second type correlated with happiness—the happiest students had roughly twice as many substantive talks as the unhappiest ones. Small talk, meanwhile, made up only 10 percent of their conversation, versus almost 30 percent of conversation among the least content students. [1]

But don’t write off chitchat just yet. Scientists believe that small talk (which linguists describe as a form of “phatic communication”) could promote bonding. Late last year, Princeton researchers reported that ring-tailed lemurs reserve their call-and-response conversations, akin to human chitchat, for the animals they groom the most—suggesting that small talk maintains closeness with loved ones, and isn’t merely the stuff of awkward exchanges with strangers. [2]

Still, bantering with strangers could brighten your morning. In a series of experiments, psychologists gave Chicago commuters varying directions about whether to talk with fellow train passengers—something they typically avoided. Those told to chat with others reported a more pleasant journey than those told to “enjoy your solitude” or to do whatever they normally would. None of the chatters reported being rebuffed. [3] And the results held for introverts and extroverts alike—which makes sense, since acting extroverted has a positive effect on introverts. [4]

Small talk can also help us feel connected to our surroundings. People who smiled at, made eye contact with, and briefly spoke with their Starbucks baristas reported a greater sense of belonging than those who rushed through the transaction. [5] Similarly, one not yet published paper found that when volunteers broke the silence of the Tate Modern to chat with gallerygoers, the visitors felt happier and more connected to the exhibit than those who were not approached. [6]

Of course, some of us are better than others at turning small talk into something bigger. In one study, people who were rated “less curious” by researchers had trouble getting a conversation rolling on their own, and had greater luck building

closeness with others when they were supplied with questions that encouraged personal disclosure (“When did you last cry in front of someone?”). But people who were deemed “curious” needed no help transforming conversations about mundane things like favorite holidays into intimate exchanges. A “curious mind-set,” the authors concluded, can lead to “positive social interactions.” [7]

So go ahead, pry. Chitchat needn’t be idle. And nosiness isn’t all bad.

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#### The Studies:

[1] Mehl et al., “Eavesdropping on Happiness” (*Psychological Science*, April 2010) ^

[2] Kulahci et al., “Lemurs Groom-at-a-Distance Through Vocal Networks” (*Animal Behavior*, Dec. 2015) ^

[3] Epley and Schroeder, “Mistakenly Seeking Solitude” (*Journal of Experimental Psychology*, Oct. 2014) ^

[4] Fleeson et al., “An Intraindividual Process Approach to the Relationship Between Extraversion and Positive Affect” (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Dec. 2002) ^

[5] Sandstrom and Dunn, “Is Efficiency Overrated?” (*Social Psychological and Personality Science*, May 2014) ^

[6] Sandstrom, “The Art of Connection” (forthcoming, 2016) ^

[7] Kashdan et al., “When Curiosity Breeds Intimacy” (*Journal of Personality*, Dec. 2011) ^

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