

A group of four diverse people (two men and two women) are sitting on a grey couch in a bright room with large windows. They are engaged in a conversation, smiling and gesturing. One woman is holding a tablet, and another is holding a pen and a notepad. The overall atmosphere is positive and collaborative.

## Conversation 101: How to Overcome Shyness and Talk to Anyone

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# Conversation 101: How to Talk to Anyone

For many people, conversation feels as natural as breathing. You talk, they talk, and when the conversation reaches a natural stopping point, you bring it in for a soft landing and take your leave.

But for many others, these conversations feel like being on stage, with a 300 watt spotlight shining on you. You feel exposed, vulnerable, embarrassed, and worried that *you won't know what to say*. These feelings are perfectly normal. And more importantly, you can change this - with the right skills!

## Why conversations seem frightening

If you are shy or introverted by nature - or if you have become traumatized to the idea of being in conversation - understand that this is often part of your normal human nature. *But it is also an error in thinking.*

The human nature part comes in because introverts like to think *before* they speak - unlike the 75% of us who are extroverts, and think *by* talking. So the idea of being forced to talk without a complete, fully formed thought can seem painful and uncomfortable. Similarly, introverts often feel drained by human interaction, and try to conserve this precious resource of personal energy.

But here is where the error in thinking comes in. You probably see a conversation as being like a musical improvisation: you have to make up the notes as you go along, rapidly and in real time, and if you hit a single wrong note, everyone notices!

In reality, conversations are like following a recipe from a cookbook. It is a thoughtfully composed performance that follows a clear structure, with skills you can learn. And once you learn the skills, you can handle *any* conversation well. This e-book covers the basics of these skills.

## Skill #1: A good opening

How do you start a conversation? Simple:

- 1) Use their name once.
- 2) Ask them how they are.

Now suppose you do this, and they respond and say, "I'm fine, thanks." Now what? Have at least *3-5 prepared conversation starters* about things that normally interest most people. Here are some examples:

- "What are you up to these days?"
- "How is work/school/your band/your favorite project/etc. going?"
- "How is your partner/family doing?"

Once they answer, sit back, relax, listen, and go to skill #2 to learn how to always respond effectively.

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## Skill #2: Acknowledge what they say

This is your secret weapon. Most people do not know how to really acknowledge people. And this is probably the main reason you fear sitting in stunned silence when someone speaks to you. Here is how you fix this problem: choose one of four "octane levels" of acknowledgement, each of which will make people heard and felt:

**1) Paraphrasing:** Interpret their words, and hand their thought right back to them.

- "So, school is going really well for you these days."

- "Sounds like you've met the girl/guy of your dreams."

**2) Observation:** Play back what they are feeling. P.S. It's perfectly OK to guess - they'll correct you if needed, and it's fine!

- "You must be incredibly frustrated about that"

- "I can tell by your tone of voice how much that mattered to you"

- "You must be really proud of finishing that."

**3) Validation:** Not only are you observing their feelings here, but telling them these feelings are **valid** - by comparing them to **other people**. So simply invite a big crowd into your answer first:

- "That really stinks! Hard drive crashes are devastating for just about everyone"

- "No one likes having to wait for the plumber to show up"

- "There is nothing like a cold beer and a hot slice of pizza on a summer night."

**4) Identification:** The best one of all. Respond by sharing how you would feel:

- "That would bother me too."

- "I'm thrilled when something like that happens to me"

Note that you can use any of these four forms of acknowledgement, even when you violently disagree with what the other person is saying. Acknowledgement is not the same as agreement.

Simply choose one of these four responses *every time the other person opens their mouth*, and you will seem like the most engaged, interesting person in the world. People whom you think of as having "good people skills," more often than not, simply know how to acknowledge people better than others.

**TIP:** Practice these skills on a videotaped conversation, such as dialogue on YouTube or television. They get much, much better with practice, and will substantially build your confidence.



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## **Bonus skill: How to tell someone they are stupid without ever using the word "stupid" in the sentence!**

One very special form of identification is known as the "I technique": when someone says or does something really stupid, talk about it using "I" statements: for example, "When I haven't done my homework, I tend to fall way behind too, so I know how you feel," or "When I stuck my finger in the light bulb socket like you just did, it didn't turn out well for me either."

This uses a powerful principle of psychology known as modeling, which allows us to observe other people's stupidity without getting defensive. And when someone does something so stupid that you could never admit to it? You can still use this technique by observing others: "I've seen lots of people do the same thing."

## Skill #3: Ask questions

Asking good questions shows interest in the other person. Where do you find material for good questions? Simple - the other person will usually hand it to you! For example:

Them: "So I'm going to Florida this summer with my parents."

You: "Cool! What sights do you plan on visiting?"

Them: "This was a really tough breakup for me."

You: "Sorry to hear. How are you taking care of yourself these days?"

Good questions show interest - and more important, lob the ball back to the other person to continue the conversation.

## Skill #4: Your turn

Listening and acknowledging people is very powerful - but unless you put a little of yourself in the conversation, it can turn into an interrogation rather than a dialogue. So prepare 3-5 common things to say about yourself in the course of the conversation - either about you personally, or a topic of mutual interest. For example:

- "I'm planning to change my major in school this year."

- "I've met a nice person and we're trying to start a relationship."

- "How about those Mets! Are they ever going to win the pennant?"

- "Did you catch the latest episode of *Mad Men* this week?"

You only need to *start* the conversation - then the ball goes back to them. And then you can keep acknowledging them, or add your own observations. Normally this will feel like a very satisfying dialogue to the other person.



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## Skill #5: Welcome silence

People with social anxiety fear silence. They presume it makes them look bad. In reality, comfortable periods of silence are part of the rhythm of any normal conversation. Relax, smile, and learn to be comfortable with increasingly longer periods of silence. And remember, it's up to the other person to speak as much as it is up to you!

## Skill #6: Wrap it up

Silence also serves a valuable function in dialogue - it lets both people know that the conversation has reached a logical stopping point. Whenever you are ready to break away - whether it is after just basic pleasantries or a longer dialogue - have *3-5 prepared phrases ready to end the conversation gracefully*. For example:

- "It was great to see you again, Sally!"

- "Hopefully we'll catch up on campus again."

- "I have to run to a meeting now. Talk with you again soon!"

**TIP:** Psychologists know that we often judge experiences on the last things we hear. So leaving a conversation on a very positive note will usually cancel any negative or awkward impressions during the course of the conversation.

## Skill #7: Understand the exceptions

Most conversations really do follow this simple formula: opening/acknowledgment, questions/acknowledgement, and self-disclosure - followed by a good closing. But what if someone doesn't respond to your questions, or your acknowledgement, or respond to what you say?

The answer is deceptively simple: relax, smile, and close the conversation early. Particularly when your conversational partner is an introvert, a strong positive closing will make *them* feel better too. Either way, this approach honors the other person's readiness and willingness to talk, which in turn leaves a good impression.

### In summary

Each of these seven steps are *skills*. You can learn them and practice them, like any job or social skill. And the more you use them, the more confident you will feel - with no change in personality required. Good luck!

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