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COMMUNICATION SERIES: ENGAGING IN CONVERSATIONS

Where do you Start?

Practicing can decrease your anxiety. Prior to attending a social or work event, you may want to practice speaking. It may sound funny to practice something you have done since you were a toddler...but it truly can help decrease your anxiety. Many people feel more relaxed if they give themselves time to prepare & practice conversation starters ahead of time.

- Write down a list of possible conversation starters. You may want to anticipate the people you will be seeing and think about their known interest. You could talk about an art exhibit with your friend who loves collecting art, or about a recent book you read with someone who enjoys reading.

Smile and make initial eye contact. When trying to initiate small talk, scan the room. See if there's anyone not talking to someone. Try to make brief eye contact and offer a smile. You can then approach this person to begin a conversation. When you approach the person, try a simple greeting like, "Hello" or "How are you?".

- While practicing your speaking try to pay attention to your eye contact in the mirror. This practice may help decrease your stress at the time of the event.

Find a good conversation starter. It can be difficult to strike up a conversation with a stranger. However, there are many ways to initially engage with someone. Here are several tips on conversation starters.

- Conversation starters should be personal & reflect genuine interest. Instead of commenting on the weather, mention something the other person relates to. Bring up a topic that is actually interesting to you as well, so that your interaction is genuine. For example, you're at a party and you see an acquaintance who recently took the bar exam. You're interested in law so you can say something like, "How did the bar exam go?" This is a great way to begin a conversation. If you're very nervous, you can look for something nearby to discuss. While this is less personal, it can work in a bind. You can, for example, comment on a painting on the wall.



Keep the Conversations Going...

Ask questions. People want to feel that you are interested in them. A great way to keep a conversation running smoothly is to ask questions about the other person.

- Asking follow-up questions regarding to what a person is saying. Make a rule that, before you bring up your own experience or interests, you ask at least one question about what the person has said. For example, you're talking about a mutual interest in hockey. Ask something like, "Did you play basketball as a kid?" before talking about your favorite teams.

Listen to the other person's response. It is common for people to plan their own responses while listening to another person speak. Refrain from doing this. It's important that you actively listen to what another person says.

- Remember to engage in only one thing at a time. When a person is talking, pay attention to what they're saying. Keep your mind focused on the present moment instead of planning what you'll say next.
- It's inevitable that you will think of something that relates. That's okay. It can be good to have some response ready, but don't spend time thinking of how to word your response. You can figure that out after the other person stops talking.

Pause between your sentences. This is important. You want to give another person the chance to join in the conversation. Even if you have more to say, you want to make sure the other person has a chance to relate or respond.

- Make a point of pausing for a second between sentences. If the other person does not say anything, continue talking. If the person wants to end the conversation, a brief pause can give him or her the opportunity to do so smoothly.

Keep the Conversation Going.... (continued)

Remember information. If you want to be engaged in conversation, your focus & attention is very important. Try to actively remember what the other person says about a certain topic. When appropriate, you can bring this up later. This can show you're engaged & interested in the other person.

- What is this person passionate about? What does he or she do for fun? These are things to keep in the back of your mind. If you're able to bring them up later, this shows you were listening.

Attempt to relate. This can help you form a connection with the other person. As they share their own hobbies, interests, and passions, see if there's a way to relate to this. This will help form a mutual understanding between you and the other person.

- Be genuine when trying to relate. If your relation to the situation is a stretch, people will pick up on this. Do not force the conversation. Wait for a moment you can genuinely relate to.

Allow organic conversation development. Allow the conversation to unfold naturally. At times, you may have had something to contribute. However, the conversation went in another direction. Let this go. You can share this thought at another time, in a different conversation.



Allow the conversation to come to a natural end. Most conversations will run their course. You and the other person may have exhausted discussing a topic. You may notice natural pauses coming between topics and enthusiasm will have dwindled slightly. In this case, gracefully leave the conversation on good terms.

- Give a reason you must leave the conversation. At an event, you could say you need to meet up with a colleague or friend or you must go find the bathroom. If you're conversing at work, you can say you need to get back to a task.
- Express gratitude for having had the chance to talk. For example, "It was really great talking to you."
- Restate something that was discussed. This shows you were engaged & attentive., "I am going to check out that book you mentioned."

Do not over share. Many people get nervous and over share information. You may also misread social cues, and think the conversation is becoming deeper than it is. Try to avoid this tendency. In conversation, stay calm and avoid sharing too much information too soon.

- Remember, there's a good chance this person knows someone you know. Avoid speaking poorly of friends, family members, or colleagues. You should also avoid sharing very private information, especially with strangers or acquaintances. For example, avoid talking about or asking someone about their income, religion, health problems, family issues, politics, abilities, and race/ethnic/religious differences, especially if they are not close friends of yours. If an event that includes alcohol, you may loosen up a bit, but try to remember to avoid over sharing. Avoid complaining about a breakup or telling your life story.

Avoid trying to one up the other person. Many people find this obnoxious and rude. Always having to have the better story, the worse problems, or the more exciting life comes off as annoying. It's okay to share anecdotes that are relatable but avoid slipping in your own stories every time someone finishes their story. This can come off as one-upping.

- One way to avoid one-upping is to keep the focus on the other person. Ask questions about things that the person has mentioned and comment on what they have shared as well. For example, if someone mentions a recent vacation they took, then you might say something like, "That sounds amazing! What sights did you see while you were there?"

Limit use of certain phrases. If you're at a crowded event, it can sometimes be difficult to hear the other person talking. However, use tact when asking for clarification.

- Phrases like, "Huh?" and "What?" come off as too abrupt. It can make the speaker feel awkward. If you need clarification at any point, try something like, "Excuse me?" or "I'm sorry, I'm having trouble hearing. What was that?" These come off as more polite.



Please reach out to me if you experience distressing symptoms or feel you need help in developing strategies that **can conquer what concerns you**. It's important to know you are not alone. Many suffer in silence. You don't have to. I am here to help. **Heather Cohen Meiselman, MSW, LCSW**