3 Tips to Have Better Conversations

Be genuine. Be interested. And stop hogging the conversation.

Don’t enter a conversation with the intent of leaving everyone in stitches, unless you're a professional comedian.CreditDolly Faibyshev for The New York Times



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We all want to be charming, witty conversationalists who can work a room and give people the comfort that they’ve been truly listened to.

But how?

[Jen Doll](https://twitter.com/thisisjendoll), friend of S.L. and one of my absolute favorite writers, wrote [this guide](https://www.nytimes.com/guides/smarterliving/be-better-at-parties?module=inline) that has everything you’ve ever wanted to know about being better at parties. In it is some of the wisest advice on being an engaged conversation partner you’ll find anywhere.

Being someone people enjoy talking with really boils down to being genuine and being genuinely interested. But that’s much easier said than done, so here are three concrete tips from Jen that will help you become a more engaged — and enjoyable — conversation partner.ADVERTISEMENT

1. Know the three tiers of conversations

* Tier one is safe territory: sports, the weather, pop culture, local celebrities and any immediate shared experience.
* Tier two is potentially controversial: religion, politics, dating and love lives. “Test the waters, and back away if they’re not interested,” one expert told Jen.
* Tier three includes the most intimate topics: family, finance, health and work life. “Some people love to talk about what they do and their kids, but don’t ask a probing question until the door has been opened,” said Daniel Post Senning, an etiquette expert and the great-great-grandson of Emily Post.

Note also that while “So, what do you do?” is a pretty common and acceptable question in America, in Europe it’s as banal as watching paint dry. Instead, ask “What keeps you busy?”

[Debra Fine](http://www.debrafine.com/), a speaker and the author of “[The Fine Art of Small Talk](https://www.amazon.com/Fine-Art-Small-Talk-Conversation/dp/1401302262/ref=sr_1_1),” has another basic rule: “Don’t ask a question that could put somebody in a bad spot: ‘Is your boyfriend here?’ ‘Did you get into that M.B.A. program?’” Instead try: “Catch me up on your life” or “What’s going on with work for you?”

2. Be more interested to be more interesting

Don’t enter a conversation with the intent of leaving everyone in stitches, unless perhaps you’re a professional comedian.

“Channel your inner Oprah,” said [Morra Aarons-Mele](http://www.womenandwork.org/" \o "" \t "_blank), author of “[Hiding in the Bathroom: An Introvert’s Roadmap to Getting Out There (When You’d Rather Stay Home)](http://amazon.com/author/morra).”

“If you just talk a lot you might get exhausted, but if you ask questions and listen and draw people out, they’ll think you’re a great conversationalist,” she said.

“For me it comes down to being aware that I should be more interested than I should be interesting,” said Akash Karia, a speaker and performance coach who has written books including “Small Talk Hacks: The People Skills & Communication Skills You Need to Talk to Anyone & Be Instantly Likeable.”

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He brought up a study in which two researchers from the psychology department at Harvard found that [talking about yourself triggers the same pleasure sensation](http://www.pnas.org/content/109/21/8038) in the brain as food. “People would forgo money in order to talk about themselves,” he said. You can use this to your advantage simply by listening.

3. Don’t be a conversation hog

We’ve all been involved in those irritating conversations where we can never get a word in edgewise. Unfortunately, we may have been on the other side, too. Mr. Post Senning said it was crucial to “share the conversation pie. Share half if there are two of you, a quarter if there are four. The share of the pie is never as large as what involves you listening.”

To be a true conversation superstar, try these tips:

* Be attentive and give eye contact.
* Make active and engaged expressions.
* Repeat back what you’ve heard, and follow up with questions.
* If you notice something you want to say, don’t say it. Challenge it and go back to listening.
* For bonus points, wait an hour to bring up that thing you didn’t say earlier.

And keep in mind that when you say something declarative, seek out the other person’s opinion as well.

“If I say, ‘The Jets don’t stand a chance,’ I’m entitled to my opinion, but I have to say, ‘What do you think?’ afterward,” Ms. Fine said. “You don’t want to be a conversational bully.”

What are your tips for making good conversation? Tweet me at [@timherrera](https://twitter.com/timherrera) or email me at [tim@nytimes.com](mailto:tim@nytimes.com).