

Conversation skills



Talking to people can sometimes feel really difficult, especially when you're feeling low or anxious. At these times we tend to worry more about what people think of us. We may worry about what to say and fear we are going to say 'the wrong thing' and make a fool of ourselves. Often though, we **DO** have good conversation skills, but are just lacking the confidence to use them!

This resource can help you build skills that you can use to make social situations a bit easier. Remember, though, it's all about practice—so choose the skills you want to try, find some people you want to talk to, and start putting them into action!

1. Building your conversation skills

Basic communication includes verbal (spoken) and non-verbal (unspoken) skills. These support us with what we are trying to say and help us build connection with others, making communication clearer and easier.

Verbal skills

Verbal skills relate to how we speak in conversation. This includes our:

- Volume—speaking loud enough so people can hear us.
- Tone of voice—talking in an interesting way by varying our tone of voice.
- Use of pauses—to make a point or give the listener time to think.
- Rate of speech—speaking slowly enough so people can follow you.

Non-verbal skills

A large part of communication comes from what we do with our body when we speak (our non-verbal communication). This includes:

- Personal distance—the physical distance between people to allow a sense of closeness, whilst respecting their personal space.
- Posture—holding our bodies in a way that helps us relax and gives other people a sense we are open to them and what they're saying.
- Eye contact—meeting the other person's eye to show we're interested and listening. In some cultures, long periods of direct eye contact can be seen as disrespectful. In this case, we can let the other person's level of eye contact guide our own. Facial expression—allowing emotions to show on our face to let the other person get a sense of how we feel about the situation and what is being said.
- Body contact and touch—touching someone's shoulder, for example, can be show we care in closer relationships. Be aware, though, not everyone feels comfortable being touched.

- Gesture—using our fingers, hands, arms, heads and body as we talk, helps us highlight points we are making or show our emotions.

2. Other communication skills

Judging the situation

Choose the right language and topics for the situation. For example, using slang or swearing around our boss or someone we don't know might not go down so well. But it may be ok in more casual conversations—for example, with friends. We need to work out what kind of language is best for different situations.

How to start a conversation

Start by making eye contact and smiling, so the person gets a sense you want to talk to them. 'Conversation starters' can be really helpful, so have a few ready to use.

Some good examples include:

- *"Hi, how's your day going?"*
- *"How was your weekend?"*
- *"What are you up to this weekend?"*

How to keep a conversation going

Avoid 'closed' questions that only require one-word answers like yes or no. For example, *"Are you having a good day?"*

Instead, use 'open' questions that encourage people to answer with a sentence, which can then lead to a conversation. For example, *"What have you been up to today?"*

How to end a conversation

Ending a conversation by saying something nice, can be a great way to finish, helping the other person feel positive about how it went. Examples of this include *"Nice talking to you! Have a good day"*, or *"Good to see you, we should catch up again some time."*

Hints & techniques

Some other helpful skills include:

- Complimenting the other person—for example, *"You look really nice today"*.
- Welcoming them—for example, *"It's really nice to see you"*.
- Asking questions—for example, *"What are your plans for the rest of the day?"*
- Using humour—sharing a funny story related to your topic.
- Talking about things you have in common—for example, *"I heard you like football too. What team do you support?"*

Keeping the conversation going

Showing we're interested in the other person and what they are talking about is the best way to encourage them to keep speaking, and keep the conversation going. This includes listening and using non-verbal skills like nodding or smiling, or saying things like, "yes, yup, I agree, uh-huh", to show we're paying attention.

Asking open-ended questions and talking about our own experiences or thoughts really help as well.

Look out for great conversation skills to try out

Try watching TV or paying attention to other people you enjoy having conversations with. What skills do they use that you can try?

3. How our expectations affect our experiences

When we're struggling with confidence or feeling low or anxious, we can doubt ourselves and set high expectations on how we think we should act. It's really common to put pressure on ourselves, such as thinking:

- *"I must be funny or tell interesting stories or the other person will think I am boring."*
- *"If the other person notices I'm anxious, they'll think I'm weird and won't like me."*
- *"If I don't perform well, the other person will dislike/reject me."*
- *"Any silences/pauses in the conversation are my fault."*
- *"If we don't have much to talk about it means I'm no good at talking."*

These thoughts and beliefs can really impact our confidence, making it hard to talk to others. They also aren't helpful, or even necessarily true! You can challenge these beliefs using our Thought Challenging resource.

Also, being good at conversation doesn't mean knowing everything about the subject you're talking about. Asking questions, or even pointing out interesting information the other person has, all helps make conversations more enjoyable and interesting.

Some questions to ask yourself to challenge unhelpful thoughts about conversations:

- Are my expectations of myself reasonable?
- Is it realistic to expect to have a great conversation with everyone, all of the time?
- Did it go better than I thought?
- Is it all my responsibility to make conversations go well or is the other person responsible too?
- Are there other reasons it might have been a struggle?
- Is the person friendly, open and able to talk?
- Is it the right time and place?
- Could they have something else going on?

When we're worried conversations won't go well, it's really common to look out for signs the other person didn't enjoy talking to us. We might look for things like the other person yawning or looking at their watch, and tell ourselves it must have been because they were bored. Remember, this may have nothing to do with you, so try not to take it personally.

Don't forget it takes two people to have a good conversation, so don't be unfair on yourself by thinking it is all your responsibility.

4. How do I get better at conversations?

Start by **rating your conversation skills** out of 10 and thinking of **areas you would like to work on**. We all have areas we can improve! Ask someone you trust for their feedback on your skills.

Use an **'Exposure Stepladder'** to build your confidence. Start with easier, simple conversations (like saying "hi" to a shopkeeper), building up to longer, more challenging ones.

Tackle unhelpful thoughts. Practise recognising unhelpful and unrealistic thoughts and challenging them (see suggestions above)!

Watch the conversation and the other person, not yourself. If you start to focus on negative thoughts about yourself, or looking for evidence the other person isn't enjoying talking to you, try to shift your focus back to what the other person is saying. This will help you stay tuned in and make the conversation easier to maintain.

Don't avoid—just do it. Avoiding talking to people just makes things harder in the long run. Challenge yourself to have a conversation with someone each day. The more you practise, the more confident and competent you'll feel.

Final Thought

Reflect on what works for you! We've given you some ideas, but with practice you'll find your own phrases, questions, and your own style.

Finally, remember to have fun with your conversations! Happy chatting!

Ngā mihi nui

The Just a Thought Team

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