

## Getting a Conversation Started with Someone You Don't Know at a Social Gathering

**Here's the big secret:** No one else knows how to start a conversation either! In a social gathering with a lot of strangers, everyone is nervous and a little shy. It's a big relief to most people if someone comes up to them and starts a conversation.

### Rules to follow:

First, look for people who are not already talking to others, who are by themselves.

### Why?

It's easier to start a conversation with someone who is by themselves not talking to someone.

If there are only pairs or groups of people talking, you will have to get a conversation started with one of these groups. Observe some pairs or groups of people talking. Do not stand right in their group, instead stand a little bit away, and look somewhere else. Try to listen in and decide whether they know each other.

If they are gossiping about people using names you don't know, then they probably already know each other well, and this is not a good conversation group to try to enter.

If they are talking about general topics, such as what they do, where they've traveled, where they live, then they probably do not know each other well, and this is a good group to start a conversation with.

### Starting a conversation with a person who is by himself/herself.

**Step 1)** Go up to him or her, look them in the eye while smiling, and say, "Hi. My name is \_\_\_\_." He/she will usually say hello or hi and introduce himself/herself.

### Starting a conversation with a group of people who are already talking to each other.

**Step 1)** Go up to the group, look at everyone while smiling and say, "Hi. My name is \_\_\_\_." They will usually say hello and then introduce themselves.

### Keeping the conversation going:

Step 2) Ask the person you're talking to or the group one of these Conversation Openers: If you are at a party hosted by someone you know, a good question to ask is "How do you know [the host/ess of the party]?" If you're at an event, such as a professional conference or a public event, a good question to ask is, "What kind of work do you do?" People will usually answer, and ask you the same question.

Step 3) In answering their questions, limit your answers to a few sentences, maybe 2-8 sentences.

Step 4) Next, ask the person you're talking to or the group another question about themselves. Try one of the "Conversation Continuers" listed on the next page. They will usually answer and ask you questions.

Step 5) In answering their questions, limit your answers to a few sentences, maybe 2-8 sentences.

### How to tell if the person does not want to talk

If the person starts responding to your questions with one-word answers and does not smile or look friendly, or if he or she does not ask you questions about yourself, then he or she is not interested in talking to you. Leave that person and start over with someone else.

**Remember:** The first person's lack of interest may not have anything to do with you. He/she might be upset about something private, or drunk, or any number of things that mean they want to be alone.

### How to tell if this group does not want to talk

If many of the people in the group respond to your questions with one-word answers, or if they don't smile or look at you, or if they don't ask you any questions and then they are not interested in talking with you. Leave that group and start over with another group.

**Remember:** their lack of interest may not have anything to do with you. They may already know each other and have something they want to talk about amongst themselves.

**Congratulations! You can start a conversation with a stranger! See the next page for more ideas.**

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## Getting a Conversation Started with Someone You Don't Know

**General rule:** People like to talk about themselves, so you can usually get a conversation going by asking them questions about themselves. Don't ask questions that are too personal, but do ask questions that show that you're interested in talking and want to find some common ground with the person. Below are some Conversation Continuers, ideas of questions that are OK to ask, and things to avoid asking.

### CONVERSATION CONTINUERS

#### Questions that are OK to ask:

- If you're in the city where you live, you can ask "Have you lived in [city] for a long time?" If they have not lived here their whole lives, you can follow up with "Where did you move here from? How do you like living here?"
- "What do you like to do in your spare time?"
- If they're older than 30, and you've talked for a few minutes, you can ask, "Do you have any children?" If they say yes, ask how old the kids are, and what they're like. (People love to talk about their kids.)
- Questions about where they've traveled, where they like to go on vacation.
- People often talk about movies they've seen recently that they enjoyed. You can say something like, "I haven't been to the movies in a while. Have you seen anything recently that you really liked?"
- If you're talking to them about their work, you can ask more questions about it, such as "What is your favorite part of your job?" or "How are your co-workers?"

#### Questions that are too personal to ask:

- Do not ask anything about their relationship status, such as "Are you married?" or "Are you dating anyone?" Asking such questions usually puts people off, because it can signal that you're thinking of asking them on a date, instead of just being friendly.
- Do not ask anything about money or wealth, such as how much they earn.
- Do not ask about their politics or religion. Avoid questions such as, "What do you think of the President?" or "Which political party do you belong to?" or "What is your religion?"

**Note:** These ideas apply to social conventions in the U.S. Different cultures have different rules.

#### **A. Situations in which it is OK to start conversations with strangers**

Anywhere that is a deliberate social gathering, like:

- A gathering of people at a public event, such as a conference, convention, reception, or book talk
- A party
- A club or bar where people gather socially
- A group or club meeting, where the group has met for some specific purpose, for example, a photography group, a hiking club, or a train-spotters club

#### **B. Situations in which you should avoid starting a conversation with a stranger**

Public settings where people run into strangers all the time, and not in groups, such as:

- Train platforms or on the train
- Grocery stores or other stores
- Bus stops or on the bus
- Libraries
- Parks
- Malls
- Doctors' offices

**Why?** Two reasons: to avoid annoying people and to keep yourself safe.

At a deliberate social gathering, it is accepted that people will try to meet and talk to other people — that is the point of the gathering. In public settings, people often do not want to be bothered by strangers — they're busy, or trying to do their job. They may be annoyed by being approached for social conversation.

More important is the fact that social predators often look for victims in public settings. By having a conversation with a stranger in a public setting, you open yourself to the risk of being a victim of a robbery, a rape, or a scam. See "Avoiding Exploitation and Bullying" for more on keeping yourself safe.

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