

Small Talk

Start a real conversation with a stranger — commute, line, waiting room — and see what actually happens.

15 min practice + 5 min journal

Standard practice

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Moderate



1 Why you should try it

You might think that making small talk with a stranger won't be pleasant. If you do, you're not alone — most people believe it would be difficult to start a conversation with a stranger and likely that the stranger wouldn't want to talk to them. On top of that, social norms often encourage us to stay quiet.

In reality, though, we're wrong. Studies have shown that people are more interested in connecting — and these kinds of conversations are more pleasant — than we expect them to be. In fact, talking to a stranger can be just as enjoyable as talking with a friend (and the strangers enjoy it, too). Even if you're an introvert, getting a brief boost of social connection can be a positive experience — despite what your intuitions are telling you.

2 The session — Prof. Magee's 15-minute protocol

Follow these timings, not the website's. Set a timer. One session = the 15 minutes below, then 5 minutes of journaling immediately after. At least 4 sessions in your 2-week window, each with a different stranger. Safety first: public places, daylight, and trust your instincts.

3'

12'

3 MIN Pick the spot and load two questions

Choose a setting with strangers and a little time: the subway, a line, an elevator ride that becomes a lobby, a waiting room, the campus café. Prepare a context question ("What are you going to make with that?" / "How's your shopping going?"), a go-to question ("What do you do for fun?" / "Where are you from?"), and something current to riff on. Write a one-line prediction of how it will go.

12 MIN Have the conversation

Start it. Try to make a real connection: find out something interesting about them and share something about you. Ask *follow-up* questions rather than flitting between topics — that's what makes you liked. The longer the better (the research conversations ran 10–20 minutes). Be sensitive: if they clearly don't want to engage, thank them and let it go — that attempt still counts as a session.

3 Then journal — 5 minutes, by hand

- Top of the entry: **date and time**. Entries without both lose credit.
- Write for **5 minutes without stopping** (about 300 words). Messy is fine; stopping is not.
- Before / during / after: how did you feel at each point? Be specific — body, mood, thoughts.

- What surprised you? What felt fake, awkward, or easier than expected?
- **Prompt:** Compare your prediction line with what happened. Who was wrong about whom?
- **Prompt:** What did you learn about them in 12 minutes that you'd never have guessed from looking?

4 Evidence that it works

Epley, N., & Schroeder, J. (2014)

In a series of experiments, people on public transit, in taxis, and in a waiting room were assigned to either make conversation with a stranger or stay silent. Participants who made conversation reported having more positive and no less productive interactions, and they had positive impressions of their interlocutors.

5 Why it works

Social connection is crucial to our happiness, and yet we spend many moments of the day in polite solitude — sharing silent elevator rides, standing in line feeling impatient, or crammed on public transit without making eye contact with anyone. This practice transforms moments that might otherwise feel slightly negative — particularly commuting, ranked as one of the least enjoyable daily activities — into an opportunity to smile, share something about yourself, and brighten someone's day. Socializing is ranked as one of the most enjoyable daily activities, and the "micro-moments" of connection we experience with others can uplift us and bring us a sense of common humanity.

6 Know the research — for your presentation (APA 7)

In your presentation you will explain, **from memory and without notes**, the evidence behind each practice — who studied it, when, and what they found — plus something *not* written on the GGIA site or on this handout. Read these papers (SJNY library or Google Scholar), then follow their citations forward to find **your own article** — one more peer-reviewed study on this topic that is not the source study here (due Sun Dec 6). Take photos along the way; they are your slides.

Epley, N., & Schroeder, J. (2014). Mistakenly seeking solitude. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(5), 1980–1999. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037323>

Adapted for PSY 251 from Greater Good in Action, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley — original at https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/small_talk. Practice sources: Nicholas Epley, Ph.D., University of Chicago; Juliana Schroeder, Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley. Timings, session structure, and journal rules are Prof. Magee's and override the website's.