

the wheels of social interaction. But linger too long on the safe shores of shallow banter and you'll miss out on an extraordinary opportunity to connect with people in a much deeper, more meaningful way.

When we make the choice to connect with someone, and take the risk to do it, the benefits are manifold. "You meet friends, make business acquaintances, and build a network of people you care about and who help each other," says Debra Fine, author of *The Fine Art of Small Talk*. "At the very least, you make a positive impression and have a real conversation."

Moving past the anonymity of small talk requires a bit more intimacy, says Sally Horchow, coauthor of *The Art of Friendship: 70 Simple Rules for Making*

Meaningful Connections. "You have to reveal yourself to some degree," she advises. As Fine explains, "You can discover a connection with someone that begins with something as relatively meaningless as a haircut or a television show. If we let them, these small details can draw us into more meaningful interactions." With Fine and Horchow's help, we've pulled together some strategies for turning a socially awkward situation into a potentially rewarding conversation—and perhaps even a new friend.

+ Put up your friend antenna. To connect with new people, you have to let them know you're interested. Your antenna works both ways, says Horchow. When you put it up, you send out a signal that you're open to talking to

someone, and at the same time use it to pick up on other people's vibes. It can be as simple as making eye contact, smiling, or complimenting someone on what he or she is wearing.

+ Take a risk. When it comes to breaking the ice, don't worry so much about how you do it. "You know why most of us don't walk up to someone we don't know? Because if we can't think of the perfect icebreaker, we abandon the effort altogether," says Fine. Be the first to say hello, and rather than fretting about what to say, focus on being authentic.

+ Assume the burden. Don't leave the weight of the conversation for others to carry. Take the initiative to keep it moving. One way to do this is by considering the other person's comfort. Ask her name, listen and ask questions, and introduce her to others. Once you get outside of your own insecurities, you help make the inter-

+ Tune in. It might seem as if you're listening, but how many times have you found yourself distracted by your own thoughts? Showing that you're a good listener requires verbal cues ("That must have been fun!" "What happened next?") and physical ones (eye contact, nodding). Most people really appreciate and recognize this kind of behavior, as it's not something they see very often, says Fine.

+ Manage expectations. It's one thing to be optimistic about the connections you'll make, but another to expect to find a business partner or soul mate. When you set your sights too high or have a very specific, preconceived goal in mind, you may miss out on meeting potential friends and contacts. "I approach every conversation as an opportunity to connect. I don't put parameters on it," says Fine. "You never know who you'll meet or where your connection will take you." +

5 Conversation Killers

We've all been cornered by "social vampires" who suck the energy out of any conversation. Trend and lifestyle expert Sally Horchow shares her advice for combating some of the most common offenders.

THE CULPRIT

The cut-in. For the serial interrupter, anything you say is a prelude for her next big point.

The one-way talker. This person believes he's here to perform a one-man show. And there's no intermission.

The confessor. While a little self-disclosure goes a long way, her divulging makes Sylvia Plath look shy and evasive.

The distracted gazer. A wildly wandering eye sends a clear message: "I'm not interested."

The human Velcro. The conversation is going nowhere, but this person won't leave—ruining your chances of finding a real connection elsewhere.

THE SOLUTION

Be assertive, but polite. "I'd probably blame my own forgetfulness," says Horchow, "and say 'Yes, I really want to hear about that. But first, before I forget, let me just finish my thought.'"

Derail this act by calling attention to something specific, reasserting your role in the conversation. ("I like how you describe scuba diving—I felt the same thing when I took a class.")

If you find yourself hearing too-intimate details, try what Horchow calls "downshifting": Shift the focus to something immediate, like the party itself, the food, or something more mundane.

Give subtle cues that you're aware of what he's doing, even if he's not. Turn around to see what he's looking at, maybe adding, "Do you know someone else here?" or "Am I keeping you?"

Make a quick, clean, polite getaway. It's not rude to say, "So nice to talk to you," and thank him. You don't need an excuse—in fact, if you say you need a drink, you may find your partner following you to the bar.

action easy, not forced—what Fine calls "host behavior." Seek out those perched at the edge of the group and invite them into the conversation.

+ Give away free information. "When you share something personal, you give the other person what I call 'handles'—something for them to pick up on," says Fine. For instance, rather than respond to a comment on the lousy weather with a one-word agreement, take it as a chance to compare it to weather in Arizona, where you used to live, or how, if it keeps up, you may get to go skiing earlier than expected.

+ Learn to be a receiver. Sometimes we go to the other extreme—we are so conscious of moving the conversation forward that we end up not letting the other person take an active role. "Try not to make it one-sided," advises Horchow. "Make sure you're watching and listening for what the other person has to say."