

Conversing with Confidence

By Anne McDonagh

Rewarding conversations require a combination of many personal skills such as expressing ourselves accurately, listening carefully, being able to put ourselves in another's position and responding sensitively. It doesn't hurt to have some self-awareness, to be able to think logically and to have some knowledge of current events. Although there are many different types of conversation, these skills will come into play to some degree in every conversation. How does a person develop these skills?

Really Listen: People like to talk about themselves, but even more they want to be truly heard, that is, they want to be understood. At first glance many social situations seem superficial, but if you are genuinely interested in the people you talk to, you may find that far from being superficial, the time together has been an interesting and engaging sharing of ideas. Ask your companions—whether friends or mere acquaintances—about their interests, work, opinions, families etc. Before long you will have a sincere interest in them although there must be a balance between drawing out the other person and communicating your own views and who you are. A genuine conversation requires sharing—on your part as well as on the other person's part.

Share some of yourself: To do this, you should have an idea of who you are, what your interests are and what you value in life. Moreover, you need to have the vocabulary to express yourself, and one of the best ways to gain both insight about yourself and others and to develop a good vocabulary is to read books both fiction and non-fiction. Another way to improve your knowledge and vocabulary is to watch the educational television channels like TVO, PBS, CBC Newsworld or the History Channel. The many documentaries about current and past events will

both engage and inform you. Even the drama is sophisticated enough to stimulate your thinking and develop your vocabulary.

Don't take yourself too seriously: One of the reasons people find conversations uncomfortable, especially with people they don't know well, is their own self-consciousness. Instead of thinking about your own discomfort in a social situation, think about putting other people at ease. One way to do that is, as suggested above, to ask people about themselves. Another is a little self-deprecating humour, which shows you don't take yourself too seriously. Besides, everyone feels more relaxed after a good laugh.

Brush up on current events: As a good citizen in a democratic society, you have an obligation to keep up with what's happening in the world. However, that knowledge will also provide you with conversational fodder. You can inform yourself about current events by subscribing to a weekly news magazine like McLean's Magazine or at least skim the headlines of a daily paper. You can catch up with the news online at your convenience or read the newspaper regularly. You don't have to be an expert in order to refer to the important issues of the day. Who knows? You just might become a genuine enthusiast for the environment or politics or social justice....

Have some interesting experiences to share: What have you done recently that you enjoyed? A new restaurant? A particular movie? A good book? Don't hesitate to express controversial opinions. They always contribute to stimulating conversation. If you observe an interesting incident in your daily life, perhaps you can hone it into an appealing anecdote.

Be Positive and Cheerful: A happy person attracts others. So avoid talking about concerns you have that are sad or upsetting. Above all, don't talk about your health problems or any other personal problems in a social setting. Only your best friends care about your troubles. Of course, you can and should have such serious conversations with your closest friends.

Although these suggestions by no means exhaust the ways in which you can build strong conversational skills, implementing a few of them will improve these skills, boost your self-confidence and enhance your life in many ways.

July–August 2006