

Getting beyond small talk: Study finds people enjoy deep conversations with strangers

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People benefit from deep and meaningful conversations that help us forge connections with one another, but we often stick to small talk with strangers because we underestimate how much others are interested in

our lives and wrongly believe that deeper conversations will be more awkward and less enjoyable than they actually are, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Connecting with others in meaningful ways tends to make people happier, and yet people also seem reluctant to engage in deeper and more meaningful conversation," said Nicholas Epley, Ph.D., a professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. He is a co-author of the study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. "This struck us as an interesting social paradox: If connecting with others in deep and meaningful ways increases well-being, then why aren't people doing it more often in [daily life](#)?"

To answer that question, Epley and his colleagues designed a series of twelve experiments with more than 1,800 total participants. The researchers asked pairs of people—mainly strangers—to discuss either relatively deep or shallow topics. In some experiments, people received shallow or deep questions to discuss. Shallow questions included typical [small-talk](#) topics, such as, "What is the best TV show you've seen in the last month? Tell your partner about it" or "What do you think about the weather today?" while deep questions elicited more personal and intimate information, such as, "Can you describe a time you cried in front of another person?" or "If a [crystal ball](#) could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, your future, or anything else, what would you want to know?" In other experiments, people generated their own deep and shallow conversation topics.

Before the conversations, participants predicted how awkward they thought the conversations would be, how connected they thought they would feel to their conversation partner and how much they would enjoy the conversation. Afterward, they rated how awkward the conversations actually were, how connected they actually felt and how much

enjoyment they actually experienced.

Overall, the researchers found that both deep and shallow conversations felt less awkward and led to greater feelings of connectedness and enjoyment than the participants had expected. That effect tended to be stronger for deep conversations. Participants who discussed the deep questions overestimated how awkward the conversation would be significantly more than those who discussed shallow questions. Deep conversations were also more enjoyable and led to a stronger sense of connection. In one experiment, participants who had a deep conversation with one partner and a shallow conversation with another partner initially expected to prefer the shallow conversation but actually preferred the deep conversation after having both of them.

If deep conversations are genuinely better and people in these experiments said they wanted to have deep conversations, then why aren't they actually having more of them? The researchers suspected it might be because people underestimate how interested strangers are in learning about their deeper thoughts and feelings. In some of the experiments, the researchers asked participants to predict how interested their conversation partner would be in the discussion, and then afterward to indicate how interested their partner actually was in the discussion. On average, people consistently underestimated how interested their partners would be in learning about them.

"People seemed to imagine that revealing something meaningful or important about themselves in conversation would be met with blank stares and silence, only to find this wasn't true in the actual conversation," Epley said. "Human beings are deeply social and tend to reciprocate in conversation. If you share something meaningful and important, you are likely to get something meaningful and important exchanged in return, leading to a considerably better conversation."

In the final experiments, the researchers examined whether having more accurate expectations about a conversation partner increased people's interest in having a deeper conversation. In one experiment, they told the participants to imagine that they would be speaking to a particularly caring and interested person, or to a particularly uncaring and uninterested one. Participants who expected they would be speaking to the caring person chose to discuss deeper questions than participants who expected to speak to an uncaring partner. In another experiment, the researchers simply told people about the results of the previous experiments—letting them know that most people underestimate the degree to which other people are interested in hearing about their personal and deeper thoughts. People given this information later chose to discuss deeper questions with a stranger than people not given the information.

These findings have important practical implications, according to Epley. "Our participants' expectations about deeper conversations were not woefully misguided, but they were reliably miscalibrated in a way that could keep people from engaging a little more deeply with others in their daily lives," he said. "As the pandemic wanes and we all get back to talking with each other again, being aware that others also like meaningful [conversation](#) might lead you to spend less time in small talk and have more pleasant interactions as a result."

More information: "Overly Shallow? Miscalibrated Expectations Create a Barrier to Deeper Conversation," by Michael Kardas et al. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published online Sept. 30, 2021.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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