



Oxfordshire Adult Autism Diagnostic and Support Service



# Making Conversation and Small Talk

A workshop by Aspiration



# What is Small Talk?



As an adult on the autistic spectrum small talk is the most difficult of all communication and yet it is likely the most important communication skill when it comes to developing real relationships.

Think of small talk as all the word fluff that people “lacking” the spectrum or the “neuro typicals” seem to require.



# Small Talk and the Neuro Typical.....



Neuro typical people expect small talk. It is a part of that ever illusive word “communication”– that word that all neuro typical people are wired to naturally understand and need never be taught.

People like yourselves on the Autistic Spectrum, on the other hand, have a neurology that does not permit you to automatically pick up all the hidden understanding of communication and words.

Small talk which can often mean very little becomes a **BIG** deal in the social arena because it is expected as normal- understandably this can make things difficult for people on the Spectrum.



# Small Talk and Work.....



Small talk is also a BIG deal in the work place especially when it comes to working relationships.

It may be difficult to understand why, when a boss says, “Time is money” meaning that workers should not waste time, they would EXPECT all workers to engage in a certain amount of small talk with every business transaction or their colleagues.

I promise you that as strange as it sound this is seen as the norm in a working environment.



# Small Talk and Strangers....



Small talk is in fact such a **BIG** deal that you are even expected to carry it on with perfect strangers!

This is particularly confusing to many on the autistic spectrum, but it is true that the expected polite thing to do is use the “fluff” words of small talk everywhere you go.



# Let's Talk about Small Talk!!

- Think about situations in everyday life where you have been expected to use small talk, or have been bombarded with it:
- How did it make you feel?
- Did you understand what was being expected of you and why?
- How did you respond?
- Are there some places/people you feel more comfortable making small talk? Why?

# Making Small Talk



- There's nothing small about small talk. Though you may think that making small talk is just a way to pass the time or avoid awkwardness, many great friendships and relationships have started with a discussion about the weather.
- Small talk can not only help you build a meaningful bond with a person, but it's also a vital skill that will benefit you in the professional world. If you want to know how to master small talk, just follow these steps.



# Step 1

- Have approachable body language. If you want to make a person feel comfortable, the best thing to do is to have an "open stance" and to direct your body toward that person without being too forceful.
- If possible make eye contact, don't cross your arms, and face your shoulders toward that person. This will make the person feel like you're giving them all of your attention and that you're not just lukewarm about talking to them.
- Maintain the right distance from the person.



## Step 2

- Give a friendly greeting. If you're seeing someone you already know, just say hello and greet her by her name: "Hi, Kirsty, it's good to see you." This is simple and direct and lets the person know you're willing to talk.
- If you don't know the person, introduce yourself first so you feel more confident and in control of the conversation. Just say, "Hi, I'm Abi, what's your name?"
- Repeat the person's name when they tell it to you, and she'll feel more special.

## Step 3

- Keep things light and positive. Conversations are just as much about an exchange of energy as an exchange of information. To make great conversation and great small talk, you should keep things light, fun, and positive.
- If you're upbeat, ready to smile at a moment's notice, and laugh over things that aren't that funny, then you'll make the other person want to keep talking to you -- even if you're only talking about your favourite brands of cereal.

## Step 4

- Start with a small compliment. Just a simple, "I love your shoes -- where did you get them?" can get you into a fun conversation about shoe shopping.
- Even if the compliment doesn't lead anywhere, it will still make the person feel more appreciated before you start discussing other subjects. You can also use this move earlier, as a way to actually introduce yourself to someone.

# Getting to know you?



- Spend the next ten minutes getting to know someone in the room-
- Find out something that no one else knows in the room about that person
  
- Feedback to the group-
- What did you find out ?
- How did it feel?



# Finish strong....

- If it's going well, mention hanging out again.
- If you've really enjoyed talking to the person, whether you're developing a friendship or more intimate relationship, you can say that you really liked talking to this person about a certain subject and ask if the person wants to meet up again or get the person's number.
- Or you can just mention a place where you both will be.
  
- **How would you initiate another conversation?**



# Moving on from small talk.....



- Finding common ground.
- Common ground doesn't mean that you and the other person are both die-hard anime fans.
- It can just be as the fact that you've both had to deal with a lot of bad weather that week. Anything that the person can relate to and that establishes a connection, however tenuous, can be considered common ground.
- Just because you don't want to talk about the weather, remember that the "small stuff" can lead you to talk about the things that matter to you.

**Give an example of common ground?**



# Building up to Conversations



- Reveal something about yourself.
- Once you've established some common ground, you can use it to elaborate and say something a bit more personal. You shouldn't say something so personal that it freaks the person out, like, "I've actually been in love with you for the last five years," but you can ease in to talking about yourself just a bit more.
- **Give us an example of something you could reveal about yourself?**



# Engaging someone....



- Engage the other person.
- Now that you've established common ground and have revealed something about yourself, it's time to engage the other person and get her talking by asking her to reveal some information about herself. Don't ask anything too personal, like asking about the person's health, religion, or political views. Just keep it light and fun and ask open-ended questions about the person's interests, job, or surroundings.
- **How can you engage the other person?**
- **Do you know what an open ended question is?**



# Follow up...

- Follow up with a question or statement.
  - The person's response will influence whether you follow up with a question, a statement, or a joke. Try to find a balance between questions and statements. Too many questions will make the person feel like he's being interrogated, and too many statements won't give the person room to talk.
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- **How can you keep these conversations going ?**
  - **Do you know the difference between a statement and a question?**

# Notice things.....

- Notice your surroundings.
- Once you start really talking to the person and get your back-and-forth banter going, you can also look around for cues for what to talk about next.
- You can notice anything from what the person is wearing or holding, to a sign on the wall that may apply to both of you.
- **Think of some things you can say?**



# Listen....

- Take the time to listen.
- Really listening to things that the person says can help you pinpoint new common ground and to steer the conversation in a more fun or productive direction. The person may make a small comment that's related to your question or topic, so keep your ears open and see if something the person says can trigger a new line of conversation.
- **Give an example of how you can pick up on cues and steer a conversation in a new direction?**

# Say Goodbye.....

- Say goodbye nicely.
- After you've made small talk but have to go, whether it's to get back to work or to talk to someone else, you should make the person feel important, not like you were just killing time by talking to them.
- **How would you say goodbye to someone new? A friend or family member?**



# A quick recap....



- Remember Small Talk is the word fluff that the Neuro Typical perceive as the norm.
- Remember the simple steps;
- Have approachable body language.
- Give a friendly greeting.
- Keep things light and positive.
- Start with a small compliment.
- Find common ground- turn your small talk into a conversation.



# Communication- it takes two!



- The most important thing to remember about small talk and communication is- it takes two.
- You can only make a conversation when someone else is willing to engage.
- Don't take it too personally not all small talk will turn to a conversation- not everyone will be a good match for you.
- We all have good and bad days- and even the Neuro Typical find the Small Talk difficult sometimes.
- Practice makes perfect- small talk can be done in small steps.