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Cut the chit-chat: why this member is saying no to small talk

In our busy lives, banal pleasantries often replace meaningful conversations. Here's why one Soho House member wants to take small talk off the menu

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By Hynam Kendall

We are more connected than ever before, with everything you could wish for only a click away, and yet as a society, we seem to be becoming more disconnected than ever. Smart technology has made interactions sparse, face-to-face meetings limited and, as a result, we are losing out ability to communicate.

Cities Without Houses member Carolina Gawronski created No Small Talk as a response to this social impasse. A series of events that provide guests with conversation prompts – 'Do you prefer your mother or father?' 'What is the most expensive item you've stolen?' – Gawronski also bans all banal pleasantries and smart devices. Here, we discuss the causes of the 'small-talk epidemic', as well as practical ways in which we can all inject a bit more big talk into our daily lives.

Hynam Kendall: Is small talk wholly bad?

Carolina Gawronski: Short answer: no. It can be done well, and it can be done not so well. I don't think it would be possible to have only deep and meaningful conversations, but there is a way to engage in small talk that is not banal. The problem is that we automatically revert to the same stock questions that we have used 100,000 times before, and will use 100,000 times again. They become meaningless. There is no value added to the interaction at all. And you know what happens? The other person just gives their stock answers back. Where is the connection?

HK: How do you define small talk?

CG: That's a good question, and this is my response... I'm going to be silent and think for a minute. [One minute of silence]. We have become so scared of silence that we fill it with small talk. What just happened makes people uncomfortable. I believe small talk is essentially killing silence.

HK: Is it binary, one or the other: small talk or deep connection?

CG: I don't think in black-and-white terms, although that seems to be a trendy way to discuss topics now, especially this one. I think it can't be that clear-cut, because 90 per cent of communication is actually nonverbal. Body language and voice tone far outweigh the words you are actually choosing. So for me, communication is almost like flirting: you're testing one another. To ask the same redundant questions is not much of a test.

HK: Gen Z is the first 'digitally native' generation and people often say their ability to focus has been affected by technology. Do they require more help than other generations?

CG: Not necessarily, because I don't think that the issue is only technology. The problem is actually the way society is structured. What fascinates me is that communication is not taught in schools – how do we learn how to do it well if it's not being taught to us? It's why a lot of people come to our No Small Talk events: to experience great conversation and authentic human connection.

Carolina Gawronski

HK: What about learning the art of listening?

CG: Yes, many people now confuse conversations with an opportunity to speak, but it is also about receiving. Who are good listeners? They're people who are empathic. That's why the power of genuine and sincere conversation has been shown to improve empathy, intimacy and overall wellbeing. Because when you have face-to-face intimate conversations you also allow yourself to be vulnerable, and there's no better way to feel really connected to a person than when you allow yourself to be vulnerable.

HK: Dating apps and so-called social media aren't very sociable at all, are they? The behaviour they encourage says it all: ghosting, blunt propositions, collecting matches like medals...

CG: In fact all the people who are, let's say, 'naturally sincere' tend to fail on these platforms because they don't know how to play the game. And it is a game. These apps are all games. They are designed to create addictions and they are dramatically affecting our mental health; loneliness and online presence are totally related. There's an Aristotle quote: 'Man is by nature a social animal.' Our existence is not for gathering digital likes.

HK: From your experience of running No Small Talk, what are the practical takeaways for more authentic connections?

CG: There is no one-size-fits-all; we are all beautifully different. But engaging at a deeper level requires practice connecting with someone – it is like a muscle, it can get stronger. Experience the different roles in conversation first-hand, be vulnerable, by which I mean embrace and show your weaknesses. Have an open mind. And something that we have learnt from our events is to talk to people that you would not normally talk to. We live in echo chambers now, creating safe spaces where everyone has the same opinions in order

to validate our own. So it's essential to talk to people who are not like you. Be curious. Don't judge. All of these help ensure the final, and possibly most important, part of a sincere connection: trust.

No Small Talk hosts events in London, Milan, Paris, Rome, New York, LA, Hong Kong and Singapore. Find all upcoming experiences at no-small-talk.com

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