

DON'T BE SHY: SMALL TALK IN A BIG WAY

Making chitchat can seem daunting, but try tips to ease pressure

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The Christmas season brings with it all sorts of challenges, from the previously unidentified circle of hell that is holiday shopping to dealing with annoying uncles, aunts and cousins you can only vaguely recall being related to.

But, for the painfully shy among us, no yuletide challenge is more feared than having to make small talk with a roomful of strangers at holiday parties.

The bad news: There's no way around it unless you're willing to leave the planet until Jan. 2.

The good news: By reorienting your thinking and packing away a few useful tips, gambits and techniques, navigating holiday parties will be easier than sending a quick online gift certificate to that hard-to-buy-for aunt.

Darrell Harmon knows about the challenges of holiday party chitchat. He, like most of us, used to hate speaking in public, be it formal workplace presentation or casual cocktail party.

But thanks to techniques he learned through Toastmasters International, Harmon now considers effective holiday mingling a snap.

Harmon, past president of the Northern Voices Toastmasters, suspects that, for many tongue-tied partygoers and public speakers, "it's just a confidence issue. I think most of us have less confidence than skills."

Debra Fine, author of "The Fine Art of Small Talk" (Hyperion) agrees. Among the reasons so many of us have so much trouble chatting with strangers, she says, are a fear of making a fool of ourselves in front of others, a fear of saying the wrong thing, and, most of all, a fear of rejection.

"I think a lot of us are born shy," Fine says. "But I think even the most un-shy have some fear of rejection at some level, to some degree, depending on the situation."

Jeanne Martinet, author of "The Art of Mingling" (St. Martin's Griffin), notes that a fear of rejection is "always in the back of your mind when you approach a stranger. They're going to look at you funny or turn away and leave you embarrassed and unprotected, or you'll say 'Hello' and there will be silence."

So the art of navigating holiday chitchat begins here: Remember that you're not the only one who's nervous about flubbing up.

The reality, Martinet says, is that people in social situations tend to be more preoccupied with themselves -- how they come across, how people react to them -- than they are with anybody else.

In fact, she adds, "the more people who are in the room, the less chance anyone is thinking about you or even noticing you're there."

So, consider the playing field leveled. Now, have fun.

Seriously. Fix it in your mind that you're not at the party to entertain other guests. Rather, Martinet says, "they're here so they can entertain you, so you'll have a good time."

Now would be the time to come up with the perfect icebreaker, that exquisite opening line that will wow everybody within earshot. Except, Fine says, "there really is no perfect line."

Take, for instance, that classic approach that asking somebody what he or she does for a living is a good icebreaker. Actually, Martinet says, that's a dangerous question.

"The answer could be, 'I just lost my job today.' Or it could be, 'I'm a proctologist.' Maybe to some people that's interesting, but maybe it's something you don't want to talk about."

In some circles, the question is considered rude, Martinet says, akin to "asking you how much money you make."

Instead, Martinet suggests approaching a stranger and making a flattering observation, perhaps followed by a question that invites an open-ended response.

"You can say, 'Oh, I love your earrings. Where did you get them?' " Martinet says. "Or: 'Isn't it crowded in here?' 'Don't you love this wallpaper?' 'Isn't this salmon delicious?' "

In each case, she notes, you're inviting more than a one-word response.

Another tactic is what Martinet calls "the honest approach," which, she says, is great when you don't know anybody at a party.

"You go up to a group of people who are laughing and seem nice and say: 'Excuse me. I don't mean to interrupt, but I don't know a single soul at this party.'

"It's amazing. People are usually quite flattered and charmed that you've sort of laid the power at their feet. Most people, once you say that, not only will want to help you and let you into the conversation, but will also introduce you to other people they know at the party."

Another tactic is what Martinet calls "the flattery entree."

"Say, 'Excuse me, I don't mean to interrupt, but those are the most fabulous glasses I've ever seen,' " Martinet says.

"Everyone loves flattery," she explains, adding that the tactic is particularly good for holiday parties, where people tend to dress to the nines.

Fine also notes that asking for a referral -- if, say, the person knows of a good club or good shop to buy a specific product -- can be a good way to initiate a conversation.

In any case, pay attention to the listener's verbal cues, Fine says. If, for example, the person replies tersely or looks away as you speak, "they're either a lousy conversationalist, which is possible, or they don't want to hear any more."

Dealing with the occasional conversational faux pas -- say, mistaking the boss' wife for his daughter -- can be tricky. One tack, Martinet suggests, is "the faux pas moi, where you pretend nothing has happened."

A better tack is what Martinet calls the "anecdotal antidote."

"Say, 'I'm so sorry. I'm such an idiot,' " she explains. "And say, 'If you think that faux pas is bad, you should have seen me a year ago when I did such and such a thing.' And you have to have an amusing faux pas story at your fingertips."

At any party, knowing how to exit a conversation is just as important as getting into one. One tack, Fine says, is signaling the imminent end of the conversation by saying something such as, "Before I head off, I notice my buddy from work there and I don't want him to think I'm ignoring him."

There's also what Martinet calls "the human sacrifice" approach, which involves drawing someone else into the conversation and then adeptly easing yourself out a few minutes later.

Just like anything else, making artful small talk is a learned skill that takes practice. Fine says that, for years, she made herself initiate conversations with strangers -- in supermarket lines, for instance -- several times a week.

Harmon adds that the public speaking skills taught in Toastmasters groups do carry over into everyday conversation.

And like any art, learning the art of small talk is worthwhile. Fine notes that friendships, romances and business relationships all begin with small talk.

Small talk is, she explains, "the appetizer for any relationship."

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