**Starting a Conversation**

Have you ever felt your stomach sink as you looked around a large crowded room and failed to recognise a single face?

Have you ever been in situations where you wanted to talk to people but felt unable and uncomfortable about doing so?

The difficulty you experienced is common to many people. Fortunately it can be overcome with work on your part. Reading this brochure and applying the techniques that it suggests will improve your ability to begin conversations.

**Starting a conversation: The first step on the path of friendship**

There are four stages in the development of skills required in starting a conversation.

<table>
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<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stage one</td>
<td>Involves your examining who you are. In other words, why will it be good for other people to get to know you?</td>
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<td>Stage two</td>
<td>Involves your showing you are a person who is open and receptive to a conversation.</td>
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<td>Stage three</td>
<td>Involves possessing topics that you can use to begin conversations.</td>
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<td>The final stage</td>
<td>Requires your overcoming common internal barriers people have to starting conversations.</td>
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**Who am I? What will people gain by talking with me?**

Make a list. It is important to write this down. You, like most people, tend to minimise your good qualities and your accomplishments. Don't exaggerate or be falsely modest, simply be realistic and honestly list the facts for the following.

- I do these things well.....
- I am proud that I have done.....
- It may interest others that I have.....
- The qualities that make me a good friend are.....

As you have possibly realised, part of the purpose of this activity is for you to acknowledge all your positive qualities and to encourage your acceptance of yourself. To develop friendships, to start conversations you have to believe and feel that you are a worthwhile person and thus deserve to engage in meaningful contact with others. When you feel worthwhile and pleased with yourself this will be transmitted to those around you. Consequently they will feel that they can gain something through conversation with you. A good way to practice these skills is to meet and talk more with people with whom you already share an interest or an activity.

**Looking right - “soften” your stance**

Before starting an initial conversation picture in your mind's eye one of your most recent accomplishments. Re-experience the pleasure you felt when you finished the task. Let this positive feeling spread throughout your body. Notice how it makes your body posture change and relax and your facial expression soften. Combine this pleasant feeling with your sense of being worthwhile to create an inviting presence. Having softened your posture and your thoughts soften your approach to those with whom you wish to start a conversation.

Try to get onto a soften set:

- **S** Smile, in a warm inviting manner.
- **O** Open posture, hands to your side or in a relaxed position.
- **F** Forward and engaging lean in your body.
- **T** Touch hands, handshake, or display a friendly hand gesture.
- **E** Eye contact. Keep appropriate eye contact while talking.
- **N** Nod in agreement at the correct moments in the conversation.
What can I say?

What can you say to begin a conversation? Spend some time developing topics or areas that seem to be applicable to your situation. For instance:

- It's fairly crowded/ empty...
- I wonder what we will do...
- Have you been to one of these before...
- My name is...
- How did you get here...
- Are we in the right room?

Conversations will often start at a factual and impersonal level. Both people will be sending feelers out to determine what the other person is like. Depending upon how the conversation is handled it may move on to something more satisfying, or it will stop. What happens with any conversation is dependent upon you and the other person. If the conversation stops, don't assume that it is due to blunders or errors you made. This may not be the case.

Once a conversation starts it is important that it is maintained. It may seem surprising, yet it is obvious when you think about it, that an important skill to have when starting a conversation is that of listening. Listen to what the other person is saying and pick up on areas that you have in common. By seeking clarification and elaboration you will often find some areas of shared interest. Use these areas to maintain and extend the conversation.

Taking the brakes off... fear!

There are many benefits to starting a conversation. These need to be borne in mind and you need to constantly remind yourself of them so that you will overcome some of the four internal barriers that stop people from starting a conversation. The first three internal barriers, of not knowing what to say, not believing that you are a worthwhile person, and not displaying that you are open to communication have already been dealt with. The last barrier that remains is fear.

The fear that most of us have about commencing a conversation is that the other person will reject us. "What will I do if the other person doesn't respond? I'd simply die!"

It certainly is painful to believe that you have been rejected by another person. You have to remind yourself that conversations are a two way street. Don't bear all the blame for what you classify as a rejection. Objectively all that occurred was that the conversation was not maintained. Your approach did not work with that person at that point in time. That is all, nothing more and nothing less.

Go back and think of why the communication ended. If necessary change your approach to include any new information and behaviour you have learnt from this rejection.

The rejection can not be a failure if you learn from it. You are learning a new skill, thus it is realistic to expect that the process of refinement will take time. Just do it, just do it, and do it again. Each time you do it you will feel less uncomfortable and you will learn how to do it better. The same attitude that you have to learning other skills, ranging from learning how to use a computer to improving your tennis game needs to be applied when you are learning to initiate conversations. Put all these four steps together and practice, practice, practice. Remember that practice in your head - seeing yourself going through the sequence of initiating a conversation - is a beneficial form of practice. But, it is not a substitute for real-life practice. Bravely go and do it! You will do it and succeed, or you will try it, refine your approach, and then succeed.

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm.

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