

**THE**  
**FINE**  
**ART**  
**OF**  
**SMALL**  
**TALK**

Tips for Little Conversations  
That Make a Big Impact »

Chitchat about the weather can seem trivial. But the truth is, small talk done well can be a great way to connect with people on a meaningful level. All it takes is a little preparation. Our expert Debra Fine shares six surprisingly simple tips to make you a better conversationalist.



### GET PREPPED

“Before an event, I remind myself who I might run into — including spouses and partners,” says Debra. “This is important because using a person’s name is one of the best ways to make them feel comfortable and special.”

Debra also advises taking time to come up with a few ideas for topics. “The worst time to think of something to talk about is when there isn’t anything to talk about,” says Debra, “so I always have three topics thought out ahead of time.” Having topics at the ready will help you feel confident if you encounter a lull in conversation and will take the pressure off your conversation partners to come up with topics, too.

### CHECK YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Small talk is an opportunity to meet someone new or get to know someone better. “Think of the close relationships in your life; they probably started with small talk,” says Debra.

Her advice is to think of small talk as the appetizer for a relationship, rather than the main course. “I like to think of every conversation as an opportunity, but approach it without an agenda,” says Debra. You might even find that approaching a conversation without expecting anything in particular can help you relax and enjoy yourself.



OUR SHOPPER AND EXPERT CONVERSATIONALIST DEBRA FINE IS A KEYNOTE SPEAKER, TRAINER AND BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *THE FINE ART OF SMALL TALK*.

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## LOOK THE PART

For successful small talk, what you say is only part of the picture; body language plays a role, too. “Always look approachable,” advises Debra. She encourages smiling and holding your shoulders back to send a positive, confident message — even if you find yourself feeling nervous. “This posture will make others feel more comfortable and will help you feel comfortable sooner, too,” she says.

Eye contact also plays a key role. “In groups of three or more, people feel like it’s okay to let their eyes scan the room. But your conversation partners notice and may feel as though they’re boring you,” warns Debra. Instead, keep your eyes on the people you’re talking with to let them know you’re interested in what they have to share.

Looking the part is also about being available. In your neighborhood, for example, taking advantage of shared or common space — whether it’s the cul-de-sac or even your own front yard — can go a long way toward making you more approachable. You’ll put yourself in a better position to see your neighbors and wave, say hello or strike up a conversation.

## BRANCH OUT

“Connecting with neighbors, co-workers and others in your network helps build a safer, stronger community,” says Debra. “Studies have even shown that having connections — including simple ones — with other people helps you live a happier, healthier life.” >

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But you don't have to host big block parties to make connections. Building community can be as simple as taking a jar of jam or small bunch of flowers to a neighbor, along with a note introducing yourself. Taking the initiative to show you're interested in staying connected will help you make deeper connections within your neighborhood.

### SHOW YOU'RE GENUINE

"A lot of times, especially in North America, we speak in rhetorical questions," says Debra. "How are you?' just means 'Hello.' So it's important to dig in deeper and let people know you're genuine," she advises. "For example, if you run into someone at the grocery store you haven't seen in a while, the conversation may go, 'How was your summer?' 'Good!' they say. Now it's time to dig in deeper: 'What was one of the highlights?'"

Asking follow-up questions not only shows that you're interested in what the person has to say, but that you're listening to them, too.

### EXPERT ICEBREAKERS

Ready to chitchat like a pro? Debra suggests focusing on finding the other person's connection to the event or location and aiming for open-ended queries instead of yes-or-no questions. Below are a few ideas to get you started, with phrasing tips to help you avoid dead ends and sore subjects. ●

"How do you know the host/hostess?" instead of "Are you here with anyone?"

"What do you enjoy about this time of year?" instead of "Did you have a good summer?"

"What's been going on with work?" instead of "How's your job at \_\_\_\_?"

"Catch me up on the family." instead of "How's your spouse/parents?"