

# LET THE SMALL TALK BEGIN

ALL RIGHT, YOU'VE GOT FOUR MINUTES TO MAKE NICE WITH YOUR BOSS, YOUR BEST FRIEND'S BROTHER-IN-LAW, THAT WOMAN IN ACCOUNTING WHOSE NAME YOU CAN NEVER REMEMBER.

## WHAT ON EARTH DO YOU SAY?

BY BETH TEITELL

**W**hich is scarier — a root canal or a party? Marcia Yudkin, author, consultant, and self-described “serious introvert,” doesn’t hesitate. “The dentist’s job is to take care of you,” she said, “but at a party, no one’s job is to take care of you. You’re on your own.”

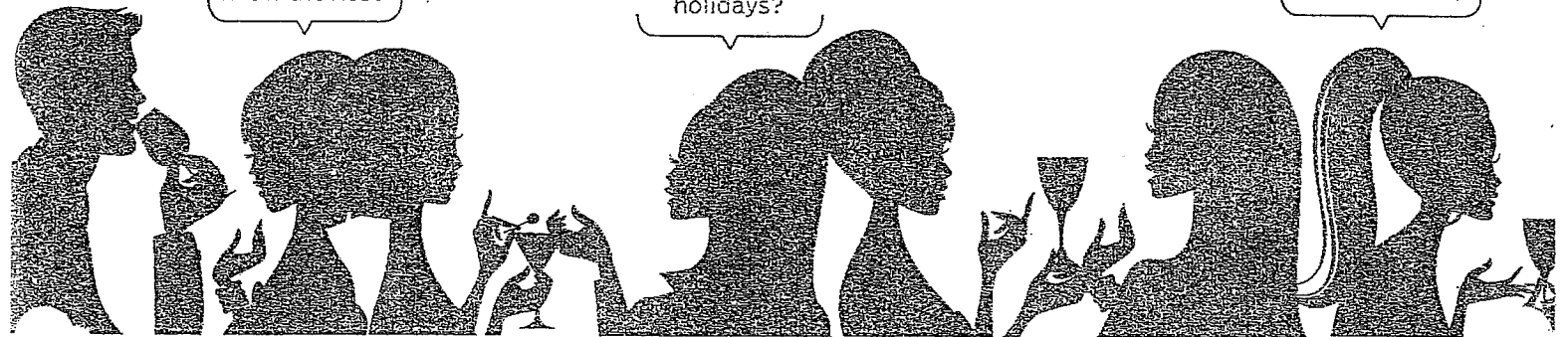
Yudkin, of Goshen, manages to avoid most parties. But playing hooky from the office holiday celebration, or your best friend’s potluck, isn’t always possible. While the holidays test even the hardiest, the small-talk challenged have it particularly rough. Bosses, friends of friends, distant relatives, they all need to be chatted up. And there’s only so long you can spend patting the dog or feigning interest in the host’s Hummel collection before attracting unwelcome attention.

But the tongue-tied need not despair: Mingling can be taught, at least to some degree. For starters, it helps to understand where the sweaty palms and dry mouth come from. Martin M. Antony, author of “The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook,” explained that “socially anxious individuals worry that others will judge them negatively if they say the wrong thing, or if they draw a blank.” The anxiety can make the situation worse, added Antony, a professor of psychology at Ryerson University in Toronto, “because it interferes with the person’s concentration, making it harder to think of what to say.”

How do you know the host?

What are you doing for the holidays?

Hey, did I hear you got a dog?



Katner of Cambridge. She's a gregarious project-and-everyone who occasionally struggles in talking to new people. Her challenge is not starting the exchange, but sustaining it past the "do you know so-and-so?" stage. "Sometimes the conversation abruptly stops," she said, describing a scenario in which she and her interlocutor both feign the urgent need to find a drink. "You're outgoing but awkward," her friend Allie Hunter, observed.

Small talk experts stress the importance of preparation. Plan answers to questions likely to arise, compose opinions on issues in the news, go armed with conversation starters. Maiblehead-based etiquette consultant Jodi R.R. Smith calls it "preemptive etiquette."

"When you see people," she explained, "the first thing they say is, 'What's new?' You say, 'Nothing,' and then there's nothing to talk about." She counsels the nervous to have an answer ready — and to make it a positive one. "If you're going through a divorce, and you don't want to discuss it, talk about how you've just started jogging." If the inquiries are about your struggling business, segue into discussion of an interesting project you're working on.

Still, small talk involves more than answering questions as if you're on the witness stand. A good mingler needs to initiate conversation. Finding the right questions can be challenging, though.

"Sometimes you have to take shots in the dark," Smith said. "If I'm talking to someone elderly at a holiday party I'll relate something I'm doing to them. If I'm about to buy a new car, I'll ask, 'Do you remember the first time you bought a car or drove a car? If I'm talking to a middle-school kid, I'll say, 'Tell me one of the things about school you don't hate.'"

to fight your instincts to arrive late and then, once there, cover in the corner, said Leil Lowndes, author of "How to Instantly Connect With Anyone."

"People are afraid of big parties, but any big party starts as an intimate gathering," she said. "Go early, and all of a sudden you're an insider."

But don't overdo it, becoming so focused on helping the host or other tasks that you shut yourself off from conversation. That's what Annette Therrien, a teacher from Allston who lacks the mingling gene, tends to do. She said she tries to look like she's on a mission, to get an appetizer, perhaps, or find another partygoer. Her husband, a kindred soul, nodded vigorously.

"You hide in the corner," said Joe Therrien, an audio engineer, as the two took a break from shopping at Target in Watertown to discuss a painful subject. "I guess it's a confidence thing."

It helps to market yourself as if you were a product or a politician, Lowndes added. "The way to look well-connected is to walk in, wave at someone across the room. You're not really waving at anyone, you wave between people, but no one's going to turn and say, 'Who's she waving to?'"

Once you've established yourself — with the fake wave — as someone who's worth talking to, look for someone appealing, introduce yourself, and ask an open-ended question, such as "What brings you to the party?" Unfortunately, the lousy economy has made chitchat even harder. Americans' favorite conversation starters — "Where do you work?" and "Are you taking a vacation?" — have turned into potential land mines.

Lowndes recommends not only rehearsing answers, but making them content-filled enough that the other

"Don't just say, 'I'm a teacher,' say, 'I'm a teacher and I specialize in helping with reading disabilities.' You give them some fodder so they can jump in."

It also helps to remember that many people at the party feel as shy as you do, even the boss, said Susan RoAne, author of "How to Work a Room." "You be the person to go over to him."

And don't, she added, wait until you think of something brilliant to say, because by then he'll be gone. "It's a party, you can talk about the food. You can thank him for having a party, or say 'I really liked working on that project.'"

But meeting with success at a party — or even simply surviving it — takes more than a few rehearsed answers.

It's a mental game, said Debra Fine, author of "The Fine Art of Small Talk: How to Start a Conversation, Keep It Going, Build Rapport, and Leave a Positive Impression."

Fine, a former engineer with serious socializing problems — and now a nationally recognized expert on small talk and networking — said her research taught her important lessons. "The risk I perceived of walking up to someone at a party or function did not truly exist. It's far riskier to get on a plane from Denver to Boston than to walk up to you at a business or social event."

She also realized that some people just don't want to talk to you, no matter how clever or appropriate your banter. "There is no perfect thing to say. If the other person has decided they are unwilling to talk to you — if they don't like my type or I'm too old — there is no way I can engage them in conversation."

And in that case, consider yourself given license to start patting the dog, or admiring the host's Hummel collection.

What did you think of that Pats game?

Well...uh...um...

You try that spinach dip?

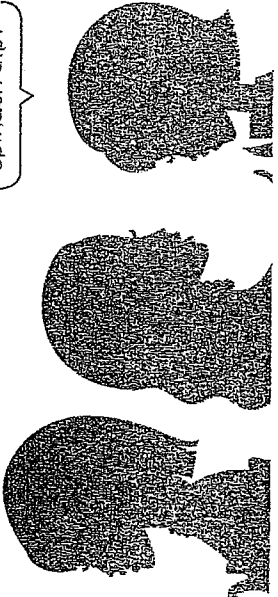
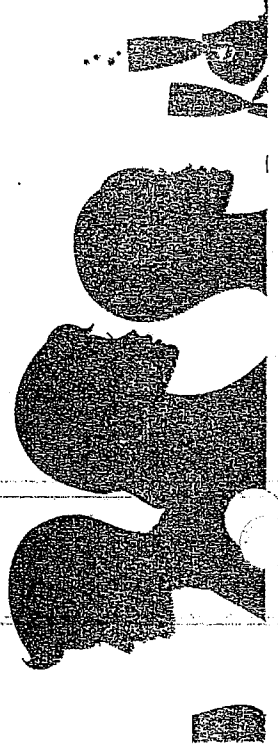
For most guests, a pre-party checklist does not include a list of small-talk dos and don'ts. But what good is a fantastic outfit or an attention-grabbing hostess gift if you spend the party struggling to connect with others? Debra Fine, author of "The Fine Art of Small Talk," says smart minglers go armed with conversation starters, and, just as important, remind themselves what *not* to ask, no matter how curious they may be. The crucial thing is to ask open-ended questions and avoid queries that put people on the spot or imply a judgment. — B.T.

#### TOP 5 ICEBREAKERS

1. "What is your connection to the host/hostess or event?"
2. "What do you enjoy the most about this time/season of the year?"
3. "Bring me up to date about your life/work/family since the last time we got together..."
4. "What keeps you busy outside of work?" "What keeps you busy beyond taking care of your family?"
5. "What is your favorite holiday? Why?"

#### CONVERSATION KILLERS

1. "Are you married?" or "Do you have any kids?"
2. "How's your job at (fill in the blank)?"
3. "How's your husband?"
4. "When are you two getting married?" and "When are you two going to have a baby?"
5. At all costs avoid: "Is that real?" or "Are those real?"



***Let the Small Talk Begin***

By Beth Teitell, Boston Globe 12/3/2009

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. Are you usually “tongue tied,” “small-talk challenged”, a “socially anxious individual” or one of those people who just loves mingling and talking to everyone at parties, especially new people? How do you feel about talking to strangers and meeting new people?
2. How does the article advise us to overcome difficulty in talking at parties to people we don’t know well? Which of those techniques do you personally feel comfortable trying/using?
3. With Americans, what are some topics to avoid when talking to people you do not know well? In your own culture?
4. What are some usual or preferred small talk topics in your culture? How do they compare with what the article recommends?

**Vocabulary: Any specific expressions/terms about which you have questions?**

