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Starved for Conversation: The Lost Art of Human Connection

By Emily Scott

Students line the bus on a dark January morning at 7:42 a.m. No one acknowledges the others around them as they scroll, tap, text, and like. Tired eyes strain and stare with heads bent down into isolated worlds. No one talks, all is silent.

For years I’ve walked around my college campus, ridden the bus, and sat in class watching dozens of people with their earbuds in and eyes down. They seem to have a weight on their shoulders and dark clouds overhead. Their faces are lit up by screens, but they lack the light of genuine connection.

As we try to replicate human interaction with virtual connections like social media and texting, we talk to each other face-to-face less than we did even a year ago. Research indicates there has been an 11% decrease in face-to-face contact with colleagues in the past year as coworkers prefer to use alternative means of communication.¹.

We avoid each other, isolate ourselves, internalize and bury our feelings. We avoid the simple connection of a smile or a “hello” -- but at what cost to ourselves?

How Do Isolation and Connection Affect Us?

The relational toll that this reduced interaction has on society is disheartening. A study performed in 2021 by Cambridge University in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that social isolation and lack of human company were associated with psychological distress and that this distress increased with the increase of social isolation.²³ The National Institute of Mental Health estimates about 21 million adults and 4.1 million adolescents experienced one major episode of depression in the year 2020.⁴⁵ With the global COVID-19
pandemic and the recommendations to limit contact with others, it is no surprise that more and more people feel isolated and alone.

Research points to at least one simple solution to reduce the increasing rates of mental health issues: connection. While avoidance of face-to-face interactions leads to a host of negative effects, seeking connective interaction can enrich our lives in positive ways. Not only can human connection combat depression, it is also linked with higher flourishing and well-being. Connection can help us deal with challenges and support us in our desire to thrive in all aspects of our lives.

How Can I Find Interest and Meaning in the Lives of Others?

Author John Koenig defines the word sonder as “the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own.” It’s easy to be so absorbed in our own lives, cheering for ourselves as the main character in our stories, that we overlook the fact that other people are the heroes of their own stories. Each person possesses a wealth of knowledge with a collection of interesting thoughts and experiences—a storybook waiting to be opened. But their book must be opened before we can read their stories and connect.

Kalina Silverman explains how we can open our own storybooks and encourage others to open theirs to us. She tells of her experience moving away from home and struggling to find connections with others through dull, uninspiring conversations. She decided to perform an experiment and asked what would happen if, instead of starting with small talk, people started with “big talk.” Big talk is a way of conversing that consists of deep and meaningful conversations about important issues that helps people get to know each other. The results of this study showed that both the speaker and listener benefited from the connection big talk created between them: the speakers because someone could finally hear them, the listeners because they were uplifted and edified.
How Can I Bolster My Efforts to Connect with Others?

As we begin this journey to open our storybooks to others, it may seem intimidating. If that is the case, start small. Try leaving your phone in your bag or pocket, practicing saying hi to a stranger once a day, or sitting next to someone new in class or on the bus. These steps can help provide comfort when interacting with strangers.

If talking to strangers seems too difficult right now, start talking to yourself. By engaging in big talk with yourself, you will learn more about your inner being and become confident in interacting with others—you will recognize you have deep, meaningful thoughts to share. Try asking yourself, “What makes me feel fulfilled right now?” “What can I change about my life so I can become happier?” “How much have I grown in the past five years?” Armed with the answers to these questions, you can organize an arsenal of personal stories that, when recounted to others, can expand their perspectives and understanding.

When you’re ready to engage in big talk with others, you ask them the same questions you asked yourself. They don’t have to be long conversations, and can simply start with questions on the theme of reflection and self-discovery. As you begin to practice these skills, keep a few tips in mind: Asking yes or no questions can quell discussion, whereas open ended questions can encourage thought and personal disclosure. Starting conversations with open-ended questions like, “What do you think about...?” or “In your opinion...?” can lead to discussion, as can hypothetical questions: “If this [situation] happened, how would you respond?” Asking “why” as a follow up question to their response can continue the conversation past the initial question and encourage vulnerability and sharing, which are main attributes of big talk.

How Can Big Talk Help Those Around Me?

As we look up from our phones and start turning toward others, we can help them begin their own discovery expeditions. We can ask our family, roommates, or strangers on the bus exploratory questions to
help them reflect on the “why’s” in their lives. The vulnerability in these questions can deepen the relational bonds of trust, allowing us to progress to higher levels of connection.

I remember practicing my big talk skills on a packed bus ride home after school. Surrounded by people submerged in their own worlds, I stood by Nick from the building next to mine, who told me he had a test that morning. After I inquired about the test, he asked me how my day was and if I was doing anything fun that weekend. I replied, and then I asked him to tell me a story from when he lived abroad. His face immediately brightened. He wasn’t expecting that. He reminisced about his time there, weaving me a tale of hope and an unexpected turn of events. We got off the bus and he thanked me for my question. He smiled at me with genuine gratitude. Even though Nick and I never became good friends, this small interaction and connection made a positive impact on both of our days.

As these small moments add up into days, months, and years of meaningful connections, we can lay aside the weight of isolation and enlighten our lives little by little and create a rich tapestry of lived experience. We can create supportive relationships that enable us to lift up the hands that hang down, take care of our neighbors, and build a protective network of trust that makes the world an open and joyful place to live in.

After all, learning to experience joy through human connection is one of the key reasons we’re all here.

**References:**


