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[Wellness](#)

After a year of covid life, we've run out of things to talk about. Try these conversation tips.



By Galadriel Watson

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Up to three times a week, I Zoom with acquaintances to practice speaking French. Shortly into the chats, a variation of, “What have you done lately?” comes up. These days, the answer is always: “Not much.”

The activities of our daily lives are no longer conversation starters, but I don’t want to give up these social activities simply because I have little to say. So, I asked three experts how we can keep conversations flowing and meaningful. Here are their suggestions, some of which can apply

both to chats with people you don't know well, and conversations with family and friends for whom you have no exciting updates.

Gillian Sandstrom, psychology professor

"I've had the same experience" with acquaintances, said Sandstrom, a senior lecturer of psychology at the United Kingdom's University of Essex. When her tennis club had a group Zoom session, the momentum quickly stalled. But, Sandstrom said, we shouldn't give up.

"Conversations put us in a good mood," she said. They make us feel valued, respected and understood. Plus, "We don't know how we're doing unless we compare ourselves to how others are doing." During the pandemic, she said, hearing that someone else is in the same boat may help us feel better.

While Sandstrom gets the sense that close friends and family have stayed in touch, it's clear we're not crossing paths with casual acquaintances and strangers like we used to. And that can affect our mood. A couple of her studies — in which participants chatted to fellow [university students](#) or to a [barista](#) — found that interactions with "weak ties" bump up happiness. So, we shouldn't retreat behind masks and distancing. It can make "a huge difference," she said, "just to feel seen and connected."

But what if you're an introvert? "I am unequivocally an introvert," Sandstrom said, and yet she approaches folks as often as the opportunity comes up. With a casual chat, you can always walk away.

Here are her top conversation-sparking tips:

Find common ground. It's no wonder acquaintances often mention the weather; it's perhaps the one thing that affects everyone. So, if you're outside, you could comment on spring flowers or point out a playing dog. "Draw attention to something that's in your shared space," Sandstrom suggested.

Be observant and curious. Study your speaking partner and then pose a question about what you've noticed. For example: *I see your earrings are shaped like airplanes. What's the story behind those?* "People like it when others show an interest in them," Sandstrom said.

Look forward. "We can look forward to things that draw some enjoyment," said Sandstrom, mentioning a [study](#) that found that holiday-goers can receive a significant boost in happiness thinking about upcoming holidays. And if you've known the person you're speaking with for a while, "thinking back on old times is good, too."

Do something different. We can also make what we can of the present. Between chats, read a new book or cook a different recipe. "We can make efforts to introduce novelty," Sandstrom said, and then we'll have things to talk about.

Celeste Headlee, radio journalist

“We have to have social interactions with other humans” for our emotional and neurological health, said Headlee, author of “[We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter](#)” and a [TEDx speaker](#) on the topic of conversations.

In a best-case scenario, our exchanges would be in person. Now, they’re often over Zoom. However, Headlee highly encourages picking up the phone instead. A phone call doesn’t exhaust us in the same way [as Zoom](#): there’s no constant eye contact, no nonstop self-evaluation, no reason to sit still for so long.

Headlee also cited a [study](#) that found listeners can better understand their conversation partners’ emotions when only hearing their voices, rather than also seeing them visually. By using the phone, Headlee said, we quickly “have a very accurate picture of someone’s emotional state.” Plus, a recent [study](#) found that phone calls during the pandemic were associated with decreases in stress, loneliness and difficulties maintaining relationships.

Here are more of Headlee’s suggestions:

Cut out distractions. “It’s super easy on Zoom, especially, for people to tune out,” Headlee said. Put your cellphone out of sight and close your tabs — don’t just minimize them. “You’re not fooling anybody. Your brain knows they’re still there.”

Pass the ball often. Headlee said conversation is like a game of catch: “You’re trading back and forth between who catches and who throws.” Don’t hold onto the ball by babbling for too long — the other person also wants a turn. “Keep it brief, which is going to allow people to get engaged.”

Think: What can I learn? “Worry less about what you’re going to say and more about what you want to learn from the other person,” Headlee said. Think back to your last conversation with this person: What were they working on? What was concerning them? Ask follow-up questions.

Limit the complaints. “We have this myth that ranting brings relief,” Headlee said. However, “You’re actually reliving all the crappy things that you’re describing.” So, while you may feel compelled to complain — an easy thing to do in our current situation — “You just have to keep it limited.” You can even set a timer.

Alison Wood Brooks, business professor

“Conversations underlie, determine, cause, surround, create, ruin and reflect everything that’s ever happened to and for humans,” said Brooks, a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School. “We start to converse soon after birth, and we continue to practice talking nearly every day of our lives.”

This doesn’t mean we’re amazing at it, however, which is why Brooks teaches a course called “[How to Talk Gooder](#).” While there’s no specific formula of dos and don’ts — “The students

learn that conversation is far too complex and unpredictable,” she said — there are a few fundamental principals. The acronym is TALK:

Prepare some Topics. “Try keeping a list of good topics on hand,” Brooks said. These can be out of the ordinary and thought-provoking. Here’s one she suggested: *If you could live 10 independent lives, in how many of them would you have children?*

Focus on Asking. As Brooks has [written](#), “The wellspring of all questions is wonder and curiosity and a capacity for delight.” Listen to your conversation partner and ask questions that build on what they’ve said. Avoid ones that will give you a yes-or-no response; instead, try to keep your partner talking.

Keep a sense of Levity. Be humorous and playful. “We often get stuck on a serious topic and don’t know how to switch to something lighter,” Brooks said. Plus, one of her [studies](#) has shown that telling a joke — as long as it’s appropriate — can make you look confident and competent.

Emphasize Kindness. Remember to speak respectfully, listen responsively and be open to other views. You can also apply this tip while selecting your topics. “Thinking about people when you’re apart is an act of kindness,” Brooks said, “and focusing on things *they* will find interesting is often a more productive exercise than thinking about what *you* find interesting.”

Conversational difficulties abound these days. “Let’s be patient with ourselves and with others during this impossible time,” Brooks said. “Ask how others are doing, really listen to their answers and think about how you might be able to help them. When we re-emerge from lockdown, maybe we’ll appreciate the joy and serendipity of conversation a little more than we used to.”

Galadriel Watson is a freelance writer and author of children’s books, including “[Running Wild](#)” and “[Extreme Abilities](#).”