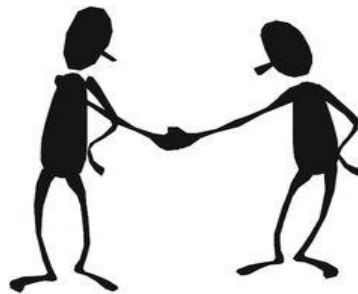


Surviving in Social Situations



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Everyone can feel stuck in some social situations; we might not know what to say and feel as though we don't fit in, but want to feel connected to others, make friends and get on with colleagues.

Often these feelings and difficulties are overcome by practice, but if we find they don't go away we can start to dread the awkwardness and effort involved in being around anyone.

However, sometimes things can improve if we take notice of what is happening when we are with other people, try making small changes and see if it helped.

It is also important to know why and how we struggle in some situations as individuals so that we have a better chance of choosing the best strategies to help us.

Basic Conversation Skills

- **Take Turns to Talk** – i.e. allowing the other person the opportunity to talk
- **Interrupt Carefully** – too many or inappropriate interruptions may be seen as disrespect or disinterest in the other person
- **Use Questions** – ask and answer questions to stimulate conversation (but don't interrogate!)
- **Be relevant** – don't suddenly go off topic unless it seems to naturally happen
- **Politely Correct**– e.g. if someone calls you by the wrong name or states a fact you know is wrong (e.g. 'oh, I thought that was....., but maybe I'm wrong')
- **Avoid saying things when you feel very emotional** – we can sometimes say things we regret when we are angry or upset or excited
- **Mind your language!** What does not offend us might offend other people and consider if it is age appropriate (if you are around children or older people).

Think about the 3R's before speaking – is it Relevant, Respectful, at the Right time?

(But don't expect perfection, we all make mistakes at times)

Listening Skills

- **Show You Are Paying Attention** – i.e. being focused on what the other person is saying using your ears, eye contact and posture
- **Acknowledge What the Other Person/People Say** – i.e. indicate you've heard what they have said, by saying "Mmm", "yes" or nodding/shaking head

- **Respond** – i.e. answer questions that have been asked, share your opinion or give question-type feedback (i.e. “Did you really?”)
- **Avoid visibly checking your watch (even if you are bored)!**
- If you start to zone out and miss something – apologise, explain and ask what was said

Other Tips for Successful Social Situations

- Set a limit for the amount of alcohol you want to drink or how much (and what) you want to smoke before meeting people
- Notice any negative self-talk in your mind beforehand and remind yourself that this is just your nerves talking
- Make sure you know where you are going and at what time, before you go
- Plan beforehand how you will get there and back to a social event and make a note of it to take with you

Some Common Conversation Problems and Suggestions to Overcome

Them

When engaged in conversation/discussion or using a structure like those suggested above, if you still experience difficulties then consider if it could be related to any of the following:

1. Do you become stuck or stressed and forget what to say?

Suggestion → Use a structure or communication routine, such as:

- Respond to a question → provide 1-3 details of relevant information
- Ask a question to the other(s) in return
- Wait for them to respond
- When they seem to have finished responding, make a comment to show recognition for their input e.g. “I’d never thought of that”, “that’s interesting”, “thanks for your input guys.”, or if the conversation is going well, continue using the structure/routine.

2. Are you trying to change things too quickly hoping to be an amazing socialite in a few weeks?

Suggestion → Set small goals for yourself, e.g. I'll ask one question to the group/person over lunch today/this week

3. Pay attention to your body language, e.g. are you sending out unintentional messages that you aren't interested (looking away from everyone or distracted by worrying what to say)?

Suggestion 1 → Try to glance at people who are involved in the conversation

Suggestion 2 → **Focus on what they say** and try to avoid worrying about how you appear or what you might say in response

4. Pay attention to your tone of voice e.g. could you be coming over as critical when you are intending to be open/honest or justify your opinions?

Suggestion 1 → Practice using gentler ways to phrase your thoughts and opinions and avoid being personal e.g. 'I don't think I can completely agree with you on that', rather than 'I completely disagree with you, that's a ridiculous thing to say!' (even if you really feel the later).

Suggestion 2 → Try giving a general response and only give extra detail if people ask

5. Do people seem to just say 'yes/no' in response to you? If so, you could be asking closed questions.

Suggestion → Ask open-ended questions to encourage discussion rather than closed questions i.e. start your question with 'how' or 'what' or 'where' e.g. rather than ask 'did the interview go well?' ask "how did the interview go? What parts do you think went well?"

6. Do others seem to get bored with what you want to talk about or ignore you?

Suggestion 1 → Encourage others to talk about themselves (we all like this!) – people will feel that you are interested in them and are likely to enjoy being with you more

Suggestion 2 → Pay attention to the subjects that others seem to enjoy talking about and start with those before moving on to a topic of your choice

Suggestion 3→Remember that not everyone will like or get on with us, just like we don't with some other people – that's OK! Interact with those you feel are more responsive and interested in you.

Suggestion 4→Offer compliments, but be genuine – e.g. “that was a really interesting point you raised in the meeting today”, “I really like your approach to...X”

Mockery OR Banter?

It can be very difficult working out if someone is engaging in 'banter' with us or if they are being mocking as they can seem very similar.

Banter is the **playful and friendly** exchange of teasing remarks.

Mockery is **bullying and disrespectful** language or behaviour such as ridicule or taunting or making caricatures.

It can be difficult to tell the difference and sometimes, banter can turn into mockery and bullying.

Mockery

- Mockery is behaviour that leaves people feeling humiliated
- Mockery can make us feel silenced or afraid to respond
- Someone who is being mocked shows quite hostile body language such as:
 - sneering or frowning
 - invading your personal space so that you feel uncomfortable near them
 - Avoiding eye contact or giving a sideways glance
- Someone who is mocking might speak 'under their breath' so you can only just hear them or say something hidden by a cough
- Mockery is a form of disguised aggressive behaviour
- Sometimes people are mocking and say 'it's just banter' – but if it isn't funny, keeps happening and you find it upsetting, **it is bullying** (see the section after 'Banter')

Coping with Mockery

- Try not to get drawn into insults or criticism

- Ask the person politely to stop e.g. “Please stop saying that kind of thing, I don’t find it funny”
- Remind yourself that this behaviour is insulting and treat it as you would other insults → assertively (see guidelines in this booklet)
- Remind yourself that whatever you have been mocked about is an exaggeration or simply not true
- If you feel upset by it, accept that this is a natural and valid response because it is a form of bullying
- Bring to mind the people who love/like you and the nice things they say about you
- Talk it over with someone you trust who is understanding, such as a family member or friend – even a pet! Although pets cannot talk to us they provide us with loyalty and love, which can lessen the effects of being upset.

Banter

- Banter encourages a conversation and can be annoying but tends to be funny
- The banter includes people in conversation it does not try to exclude them
- Banter does not intend to be hurtful to someone
- People engaging in banter show a relaxed body posture and often grin in a cheeky way
- E.g. if a colleague comes to work dressed unusually nicely:
 - Banter might be, “ooh, who are you trying to impress today?!” whilst smiling and speaking in a friendly fun way.
 - Mockery would be, “Nice clothes shame about the face “ said in a quiet serious way so the person could only just hear, or jokingly but avoiding eye contact with the person (and looking at others).

Coping with Banter

- ***If it is funny to you***, try and go along with the fun by smiling or laughing
- Try not to take comments personally (they aren’t usually intended to be personal or hurtful)
- Maybe you have some banter you can use, BUT be careful not to say things that are hurtful (insulting, offensive, criticizing) or personal (i.e. about a person’s family or friends or health or looks)

Bullying

Bullying is the “**repetitive, intentional hurting** of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an **imbalance of power**.”

It can happen face to face or online” (from the Anti Bullying Alliance: <https://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk>)

Bullying behaviour can be:

- Physical – pushing, poking, kicking, hitting, biting, pinching etc.
- Verbal - name calling, sarcasm, spreading rumours, threats, teasing, belittling.
- Emotional – isolating a person, tormenting, hiding their belongings, making threatening gestures, ridicule, humiliation, intimidating, excluding, manipulation and coercion, threatening to create stories about a person
- Sexual – inappropriate touching, rude comments, homophobic insults, making someone watch sexual films
- Online /cyber – posting on social media, sharing photos, sending nasty text messages, excluding people from conversations and groups
- Indirect – taking advantage of people, manipulating, preventing a person from getting fair treatment at work (e.g. by lying about or to them)

False Friends

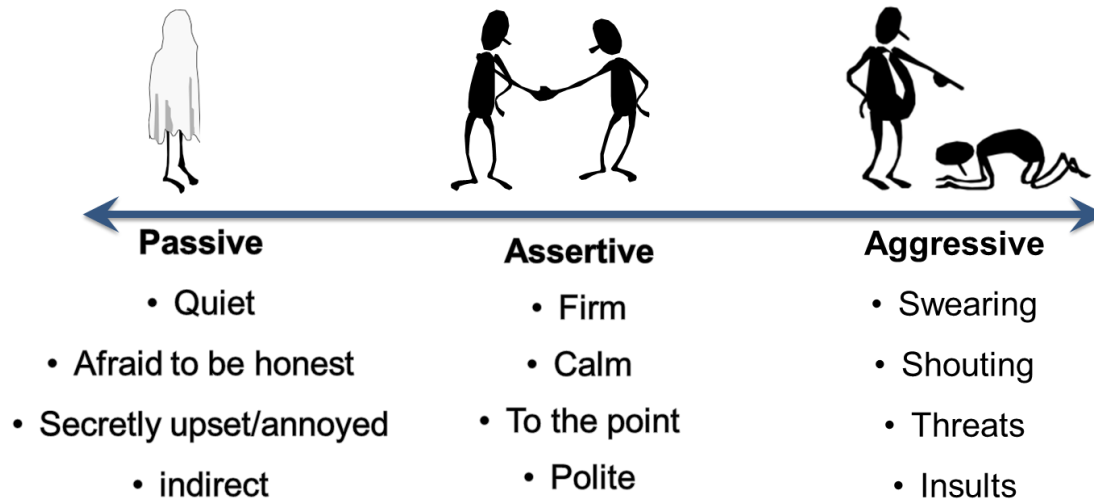
This is a form of bullying where someone pretends to be your friend or is your ‘friend’ sometimes but uses their power to bully you.

Coping with Bullying

- Talk to someone you trust about it
- keep a diary logging every incident that makes you feel belittled or afraid
- Note down the names of people who witnessed this
- Log what occurred but also how it made you feel. Keeping a diary can help you understand that it is not you with the problem, but the bully.

Being Assertive

Below is a diagram showing the difference between aggressive, passive and assertive behaviour. Ideally, we would all be assertive, but this can be difficult at times and nobody is perfect!



Rights and Responsibility

But it's important to try to be assertive because we all have some basic human rights:

- The right to say "No" without feeling guilty
- To make our own decisions and make mistakes
- To express our opinions and feelings including anger and to be listened to and taken seriously
- The right to consideration from others and be treated with dignity

But these come with some responsibility for our actions and their consequences and for treating others fairly, honestly and with respect.

5 steps to assertiveness:

1. Describe the situation you want to change
2. Say how it affects you
3. Say what you would like to change
4. Be willing to negotiate but not back down
5. Thank the person for their cooperation

For example:

Step 1. “You regularly seem to walk away from the kitchen after a meal without cleaning up”

Step 2. “This isn’t fair when we’ve both eaten and made the mess”

Step 3. “I’d like us to share the cleaning and not leave the house looking a mess”

Step 4. “I’ll clear the table and work-tops and you could load the dishwasher... does that sound reasonable?”

Step 5. “Thanks!”



How to be assertive when feeling angry (and not explode!!):

- Don’t stand too close to the other person
- Keep your body relaxed but upright (no clenched fists or waving arms!)
- Maintain some eye contact (but don’t stare)
- Use a firm facial expression - you want the person to know you’re serious
- Maintain your voice volume at a steady level – no shouting or whispering
- Be willing to walk away calmly if you start to feel you’re going to explode!

Rephrasing What We Say to Get on Better With Others

Getting our point across when we feel strongly about something is difficult!

We can often find ourselves shouting, swearing and saying really nasty things (i.e. being rude or insulting), which can make other people upset and react badly towards us. Sometimes we just keep quiet and put up with things we aren’t happy with (i.e. become passive) but end up feeling miserable when nothing changes.

People are more likely to listen and be cooperative and nice when they feel we are being nice and considerate to them.

Remember, the intention is to make a situation better not worse!

Here are some suggestions of how you could say something in a nicer way, so that people are more willing to listen to you:

TURNING AN INSULT INTO A CONSTRUCTIVE COMMENT!

<u>Instead of Saying....</u>	<u>Try Saying....</u>
<p>You can't just... e.g. you can't just walk off</p>	<p>Would you just.... before... e.g. would you just finish this before you leave?</p>
<p>You never help with anything, you're so lazy!</p>	<p>I know you don't want to do this but I'd appreciate some help</p>
<p>Get back here and do something for a change!</p>	<p>We haven't finished here, would you mind giving us some help, please?</p>
<p>You're so awkward; it's impossible to get anything done when you're around!</p>	<p>We don't need to agree, let's just get on and finish it</p>
<p>- You're so selfish - You don't care about anybody but yourself!</p>	<p>The way you're behaving isn't very considerate</p>
<p>I HATE YOU!</p>	<p>I don't like being around you when you behave like this</p>
<p>Don't ignore me</p>	<p>I'd appreciate it if you listened to what I'm saying</p>
<p>You're lying or you are a liar</p>	<p>I wish you felt you could tell the truth <u>or</u> I hope you you are being honest with me</p>
<p>Just get on with it and stop complaining!</p>	<p>Could we do something that would make this easier (or more fun or faster)</p>
<p>It's all your fault</p>	<p>We both need to take responsibility for our part in this</p>
<p>It's the least you could do!</p>	<p>Thanks, I appreciate your effort</p>
<p>That's a stupid idea</p>	<p>I don't really like that idea I'm not keen on that idea</p>

<p>You're doing it all wrong</p> <p>OR</p> <p>You're making a complete mess of it</p>	<p>Maybe you need some help?</p> <p>Could I give you a hand with that?</p>
<p>You're talking a load of rubbish</p>	<p>Everyone's allowed an opinion</p> <p>That's an interesting opinion</p>
<p>It's your job to...</p>	<p>You're in charge of...</p>
<p>Get on with that or you'll do badly</p>	<p>Can I give you some help with that?</p>
<p>-You are ignorant/narrow minded</p> <p>-You haven't given any thought to...</p>	<p>Have you considered...?</p>

Ways to improve Social Confidence

- Observe other people - friends and family are a good start because:
 - This can feel safer
 - It is often done in a consistent way e.g. watching friends and family interacting in shops
 - It is an opportunity to learn stock phrases for situations like when you make mistakes, such as ways is gently making fun of yourself as away to excuse yourself in an acceptable way, for example:
 - If you drop some money at the till, "here I am throwing my money around again!"
 - If you didn't understand something someone said, smile and say, "sorry I didn't get that, I haven't had enough coffee today!"
 - If you get flustered and not sure what to say, "sorry I (have ASD and) get nervous sometimes"

- Sometimes it can be helpful having your own flowchart or notebook to systematize or summarise this kind of information, so you know what responses and actions that work well in different shops and situations.

- It's important to ***stay in your comfort zone and expanded it slowly*** to avoid being overwhelmed e.g. if you enjoy going to a particular shop, such as Whittards, because you like the products and the staff are friendly, you're likely to feel comfortable and find the staff easy to talk to. However, you aren't likely to improve by only going there, so you need the next challenge, such as going to WH Smith or Marks & Spencer.
- Use your imagination and interests to make it easier e.g. If you enjoy gaming imagine that you are going out on quests to build up your levels (like 'leveling up') or to find something valuable (e.g. like searching for the ring in Lord of the Rings).
- It is OK to lie a bit if you are stuck about what to say to strangers (but not usually with friends and family!)
 - E.g. if you are approached by a salesperson or collectors for charity or a homeless person, it is OK to ignore them if you do not know what to say and feel uncomfortable. You can also say, "Sorry, I'm in a hurry and I will miss my bus/train" and keep walking.
- If you have to go out into a busy area it can help to avoid doing this first and go somewhere quiet first instead, such as a walk in a museum, by a canal, river or a quiet street. This can:
 - Give you the opportunity to relax and get the confidence
 - Make sensory sensitivity easier to deal with when you have to go into busy shops (It can also help to go somewhere quiet afterwards to chill out again)

Familiarity reduces anxiety so **GET OUT AND PRACTICE!**