

SOCIAL SKILLS 101

For various reasons many of us are socially undeveloped. This can lead to isolation, which has been correlated with a host of problems including addictions, abuse, depression and physical health issues. We were designed for connection, and we suffer without it. Fortunately, the principles of relationship formation are quite simple and universal and within the reach of all.

Relationships begin with socializing, and socializing is about communication. Human beings are communicative creatures. God has given us complex systems for this purpose. For instance, we have 10 groups of facial muscles which can account for the multitudinous expressions we make. Our voices are capable of subtle changes that reflect our many emotions. We are the only animal that has spoken and written languages. We have finely woven musculature that gives us the ability to talk in “body language.” You and I were made for communication!

When humans communicate, something of their inner life spills out and is taken in by another. The best communication involves reciprocity, or give and take. Think of your life as a banquet—you’ve been invited to an important event. You’re not a nobody, or you wouldn’t have received an invitation. There will be plenty of other important and interesting people there, too. Get ready for the banquet by attending to etiquette, grooming and conversation.

Etiquette

Some of us are terrified of this word because we fear a list of detailed behavioral rules that we will never be able to memorize, much less follow. Actually, true etiquette is simply based on the principles of love and respect of all human beings. Jesus conveyed the essence of true etiquette when He said, “Treat others the same way you want them to treat you,” (Luke 6:31, NASB). Etiquette is simply serving others. Some simple practices that illustrate this are:

- Opening the door for another
- Treating the elderly with extra care and tenderness
- Saying “please” and “thank-you”
- Watching out for children
- Addressing others as “m’am” and “sir”

Being courteous won’t always elicit the same, but most of the time polite treatment results in others treating you politely. This creates a social environment in which good communication can take place. It also builds your social confidence as you see yourself having a positive impact on people

Grooming

We might be tempted to think that the way we present ourselves isn’t really important in the grand scheme of things; but good grooming communicates positive social interest and self-respect. Part of good etiquette is giving others, in ourselves, someone who is clean and tidy. A person who doesn’t attempt to look pleasant to the eye and who doesn’t take

care to be clean conveys a lack of self-respect and elicits pity. Ask yourself the following questions objectively:

Do my clothes look sloppy, torn and dirty?

Does my hair look dirty or unkempt?

How do I smell to other people?

Even the poorest of people can be clean and tidy, so start scrubbing! Brush your teeth regularly and use mouthwash. It's the polite thing to do. Plus, you'll feel better about yourself and more socially presentable.

Conversation

Remember the golden rule as you enter a social situation, and treat others as you would like to be treated.

The primary means of social communication is the conversation. It may seem that technology is threatening to drive the simple one-on-one, face to face conversation into extinction, but the person with good conversation skills is still at an advantage in all areas of life including vocation, social life, spirituality, and mental and physical health.

A good conversation involves give and take, listening and speaking, flowing back and forth like a wave on the beach. It is tiring to do all the talking, but also very tiring to do all the listening. In contrast, good communication is energizing rather than tiring.

Conversation typically works in layers. Let's say you're meeting a person for the first time. You don't want to open the conversation with, "So, have you ever been in love? I mean really, deeply in love?" The person will run the other way! Think of a person as an onion with layers. At first the conversation is superficial, but as trust builds it may deepen. Here are the typical layers of conversation:

Outer layer- events, conditions and situations both people share. Some examples are:

The weather (Don't belittle the power of talking about the weather!

It's a great start!)

Local or national elections ("I didn't think she'd win, did you?")

The current situation such as delayed flight or stalled elevator

Recent world events such as disasters, wars, and famines

Middle layer- thoughts, opinions and observations. Some examples are:

Moral issues (Focus on universally agreed-upon concepts such as loyalty to family.)

Truisms (Seeing a cute child and saying to a seat mate, "They grow up so fast.")

Social trends ("It seems like people are more and more tense because of terrorism.")

Your reflection on recent events

Inner layer- personal feelings and experiences. Some examples are:

Children in your life—yours or others’ whom you connect with
Pets you love
Monumental events such as getting married or graduating
Spiritual beliefs
Your personal information- where you live, what you do, marriage status

Balance putting out your own thoughts with drawing out the thoughts of others. Provided that things don’t get too personal too quickly, people generally like to talk about themselves. Show an interest in them and in most cases they will open up.

Starting a conversation can be the hardest point. One of the most effective ways is to start a conversation employs the same give-and-take principle. Typically, one gives out some bit of information or opinion and elicits a response.

Some examples of conversation starters are:

“It’s a gorgeous day outside! Was it this nice last year this time?”
“The traffic out there is crazy. I think I’ll take the subway more often.”
“Does anyone know if they caught the guy that lit the courthouse on fire?”
“How do you like your Volkswagon? Does it get good gas mileage?”
“Have you ever eaten at Bruno’s? What did you think of it?”
“Main street is so full of potholes! Didn’t I hear that the town voted to fix it?”

Notice that these starters generally make a statement then elicit a response. This way you put something out, but also show a desire to take something in. The idea is to get a flow of thoughts going back and forth. Remember that it’s okay if such comments don’t successfully start a conversation. You spoke up, which is an achievement in itself. With each attempt to socialize, you increase your talent for it.

Pay attention to your body language and posture. By putting yourself in a confident, relaxed stance you will tell your unconscious that you are indeed relaxed:

Shoulders back, erect posture

Breathe deep (Oxygenates your brain, supports your voice)

Chin level (Show self respect but not arrogance.)

Smile slightly (Seeing a smile relaxes people.)

Unclench your fists

Remember to think in terms of being a guest at a banquet. You’re not the star of the show, but you are an important person. God has invited you to the banquet of social life on planet earth.

As the talk starts to flow, remember to balance between giving and receiving, sharing yourself and asking the other person to share themselves. Remember the onion. Begin more cognitively by asking their opinion, thinking or observations. As trust develops, you can progress to feelings, beliefs and personal experiences.

At some point in the conversation, you will want to introduce yourself and ask the other person's name. This is generally done with a handshake, but not always. It is always nice to say, "Nice to meet you," after exchanging names.

Because listening is so essential to good conversation, shy people actually have more of an edge in the art of conversation than they realize. Use reflection, or summarizing back to the person what you have heard them say. This will capitalize on your listening skills while still keeping you active in the conversation. It is extremely gratifying to be understood well, and it often entices the person to talk more. For instance, a conversation might go like this:

Person: I really liked the food at that restaurant, but the waitress kept ignoring us and it seemed like the kitchen hands were all talking rather than working. We had to wait a long time even though we were the only people there.

You: So the food was good even though the service was poor.

Person: Yes. The desert made it almost worth waiting for.

You: Really? What did you have?

Person: Strawberry shortcake like I have never had before.

You: What was so special about it?

Person: It had this very light shortcake with fresh strawberries in a tangy-sweet sauce, and it was smothered with whipped cream.

You: I'm getting hungry just listening to you. But my Aunt Betty's peach cobbler might be even better, I hate to tell you. . .

Person: Oh, yeah? Does she make it often?

You: Well, she lives in Georgia, so I don't see her much.

Person: Is that where you're from?

Notice your summarizing and questions drew out the person and made them feel safe to ask questions, too. The conversation flowed from food to home state in the matter of a few seconds.

Closing the conversation is another essential skill. Awkward, abrupt closes may leave someone feeling snubbed or brushed off. Some people are too passive to end a conversation, even when they have a pressing appointment. Remember that when you must move on from a conversation, a simple statement that you enjoyed speaking with the person will do much to smooth things over. If you would like to keep the relationship

open, you might indicate that you'd like to talk more in the future. Here are some suggested closing lines:

“I have an appointment, but I'm enjoying our talk. Perhaps we'll talk again some time.”

“It has been good to meet you. Hopefully we'll bump into each other again.”
Simply extending your hand for a handshake is often a good way to end a conversation.

As you forge ahead in the development of social skills, remember that practice makes perfect. You will make mistakes, but so does everybody. In time and with consistent effort, plus the blessing of God, you will see results you never dreamed possible.