

Jessica Salter, January 12 2025, *The Times* (abridged)

How to have the perfect conversation — and why it's good for you

I realised recently that I hadn't spoken to several of my closest friends in over six months, maybe more. I mean properly spoken. We'd WhatsApped, of course, some of them I "knew" what they were doing from social media (although the glossy carousel never even approximates the truth of a life), but seeing and speaking to them? That had fallen by the wayside.

I remember as a teen spending hours on the landline, chatting to friends. But these days I rarely find the time. And I'm not alone — we're all speaking less in real life and on the phone. At the same time, we're communicating ever more. [...] "There's so much more communication via text and writing, and that can feel like an amazing opportunity, but there's a cost," says Professor Alison Wood Brooks, the author of a new book, *Talk: The Science of Conversation and the Art of Being Ourselves*.

[...]

What we need, Wood Brooks believes, is better conversation. [...] This is what forms the basis of the book, which covers the history of the science of conversation, along with research and practical lab work all aimed to help us converse and connect better.

Of course, as the interviewer, I've researched her. But what feels charming is that she has prepped about me too. She compliments me on a recent article and asks me about my own children. Prepping is an important part of having any conversation, she says. I realise that I often do this in micro format as a way to feel less nervous about social encounters.

So on the way to a friend's house, I'll try to recap a few of the things we last spoke about and make mental bullet points of discussion topics; if it's a work dinner I often try to find out who the other guests are beforehand so I can have a few conversational tidbits up my sleeve. [...]

Nor should we fear going to hard or emotional places. "Often our instinct leads us away from sad or sensitive topics because we don't know if we will upset someone, but sometimes a little bit of courage can lead to the most meaningful conversations," she says. One of the most rated conversation starters among her students was one many of them initially shied away from: what last made you cry?

Still, she doesn't believe that all our conversations have to be groundbreaking heart-to-hearts. "Actually, having conversation diversity throughout your day is the way to feel happiest. So, you and I have this Zoom interview, then I might go to the store and talk to a cashier briefly, then meet a work acquaintance for lunch, then call my best friend, and then see my children at the end of the day." She says that, in her research, a mix of interactions has been shown to make people feel happier "than if they spoke the same amount of conversation but just to their partners". It's comforting to think about how those small exchanges add up. [...]