



# Tea & Toast: How to connect with people: a look at social chemistry

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## A look at the basics

### Closing the mirror neuron gap: it's all about connecting

We all have mirror neurons in our brains— in our prefrontal cortices to be exact. They allow us to feel what others are feeling. They're like our empathy neurons. They cause us to care for others.

But look at them from the angle of connecting with others. The person or people you want to connect with are constantly mirroring the world – sending out messages saying: *I want your approval and for you to tune into what I'm feeling*. Each time someone puts something out there, they're really saying: *I'm hungry for you to reciprocate and to feel what I'm feeling*. If that hunger isn't satisfied, we have a mirror neuron gap.

If we recognise what others are feeling, we're closing the mirror neuron gap. Then it keeps going. When we mirror what another person feels, they're wired to mirror you in return.

That's what builds a connection.

## Four levels of connection: version one

This is a simple way of understanding how we connect:

1. Politeness
2. Exchanging facts
3. Sharing emotions
4. Reaching intimacy

And it's at the last two levels that really connect – we're closing each other's mirror neuron gaps.

## Four levels of connection: version two

### 1. Talking nice

We listen from within their own story, but without any self-reflection. We only hear/confirm our own story.

### 2. Talking tough

We start listening to each other's ideas, but focus on the differences and don't look for common ground.

### 3. Reflexive dialogue

We listen to ourselves reflexively and listen to others empathetically. We recognise our own paradigms and assumptions. Then we focus on unity.

### 4. Generative dialogue

This is when a conversation connects people to the extent they create a new reality – a new understanding of what's going on in the world and/or their relationship.

## Really connecting with people

### How to savour fleeting moments

Marissa King, *Social Chemistry*, 2021: "Humans have a profound need to be seen, heard and understood." And fleeting moments can contribute to feeding this profound need by being high-quality interactions; they can have high emotional carrying capacity.

Focused eye contact, a smile and interacting with strangers or people you don't know that well can be as pleasant as communing with a loved one – for both parties. That's according to researchers at the University of British Columbia.

But strangers hardly ever make contact with other strangers. If you glance at a stranger, the chances of them looking at you is about 55%. If you look at them and smile, they'll be 2.75 times more likely to make eye contact with you than if you ignored them. Of course different cultures operate differently. But cross-cultural studies from 306 countries found eye contact was the most frequently mentioned cue for connecting with others. Only Zulus find it negative.

### Fall in love with eye contact

Mutual attention, empathy and memory all increase as a result of mutual and direct eye contact. We tend to make eye contact with those we love, but it works the other way around as well. Strong eye contact can make us fall in love. King: "Our eyes convey how we feel."

Try checking out your eye contact recognition skills at: <http://socialintelligence.labinthewild.org/mite/>

But what's the ultimate eye contact duration? When you're connecting with strangers, about three seconds seems comfortable.

But listeners are two/three times more likely to make eye contact than speakers. Intimate matters may lead to less eye contact and not surprisingly people who are co-operating make more eye contact than those who are competing.

## Listening makes pain go away

Clinical trials have found listening reduces physical pain. Yet we're poor listeners, but we think we're not. Accenture conducted an extensive listening survey and found 96% of respondents thought they were good listeners: a positive illusion.

Nichols and Stevens concluded: "If we define the good listener as one giving full attention to the speaker, first-grade children are the best listeners of all." They were listening 90% of the time. Why? It seems counter-intuitive. The key to their listening success was open-mindedness. Younger minds are more open, flexible and exploratory.

Alison Gopnik from Berkeley adds her voice: Kids are "less biased by their existing knowledge."

We know about the listening basics: nodding, smiling, asking open-ended questions, probing and paraphrasing. But is this enough? Let's break listening down as follows:

**Cognitive:** Hearing and remembering – Yes, I understand

**Behavioural:** Nodding, smiling, eye contact, etc – I get it

**Meaning and emotion:** Picking up all the signals – I value you

**Deep listening:** No judgment

Here's a question that will help you get to the fourth level: *What's it like being you today?*

## Are all questions equal?

No. So which ones help you connect better than others? Four researchers, led by Karen Huang, found that people who asked more questions were more likely to connect with a stranger. No surprise there. But which questions connected better? Here are six categories:

- **Introductory** – *How are you?*
- **Full switches** – *What's your role? So you're an accountant. Do you support the Warriors?*
- **Partial switches** – *What's your role? So you're an accountant in Nelson. Do you like the beach?*
- **Follow up** – *What makes accounting attractive to you? Was it always what you wanted to do?*
- **Mirror** – *Thanks for asking, I've got three kids. How about you?*
- **Rhetorical** – *How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?*

Follow up questions explain virtually all the benefits of asking questions for two reasons: they help establish rapport and encourage self-disclosure. They're question magic. Simple examples are?

- *Tell me more*
- *What else?*

## 36 questions that will connect you with another and fall in love with them

Psychologist, Arthur Aron with others, devised 36 questions, broken into three sets, with each one more revealing than the previous ones. Aron: "One key pattern associated with the development of a close relationship among peers is sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personal self-disclosure." In short: vulnerability. Here's the link to the full 36:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/style/no-37-big-wedding-or-small.html>

And here's a sample:

### Set 1

- What would constitute a "perfect" day for you?
- For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
- If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?

### Set 2

- Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
- What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?
- What is your most treasured memory?

### Set 3

- Make three true "we" statements. For instance, "We are both in this room feeling..."
- When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
- What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?

## A look at our brains when we're connecting

The Italian researchers, who identified mirror neurons did so, when they connected up electrodes to a primate's brain and saw them flash on in the same place as the researchers when they (the researchers) were eating an ice cream. The primate could sense the pleasure ice cream generates.

Princeton University researchers have used MRI machines to scan the brains of story tellers and listeners. The brains of listeners and story tellers were in unison; the same brain areas were activated. And of course the deeper the listening the greater the brain synchrony and mutual understanding.

Back to eye contact for a minute. Babies don't avert their eyes; they stare. King: "A direct gaze is detected faster, generates more physical arousal and makes hearts race. Joint attention, empathy and memory all increase when we look straight at each other. Individuals who make direct eye contact are perceived to be more likeable, intelligent, credible, attractive than people who look away."

## The case for face-to-face interactions

University of Virginia neuroscientist, James Coan: "The brain processes all manner of information more efficiently in the presence of other people, even if they are six feet away, than it does while alone, or while engaging with someone on a screen or a phone...It's a biological principle called the economy of action. The brain wants to do something at the lowest cost possible, and being with others lowers the cost of almost everything it does."

## Our bodies respond to high-quality interactions

Also our bodies respond physically when we're in high-quality interactions. Specifically, our blood pressure lowers, our heart rates slow and oxytocin is released. We can feel a high-quality connection.

### Physical proximity matters

Proximity, the physical or psychological proximity between people matters has its own law: the law of proximity. It says the chances of two people communicating with each other is inversely proportional to the physical distance between them. Put simply, we connect overwhelmingly with people with whom we are in close physical contact. In studies of two companies over half of all interactions took place between employees sitting next to each other.

Let's add the mere exposure effect to this. Psychologist, Robert Zajonc, developed this idea and it's simple. The more you are exposed to people, the more you like them.

So where does this leave open-plan offices? Do you get more interactions and innovation? Probably not. Because for trusted relationships to develop we need repeated interactions. If you want to meet up with more people more regularly, sit by the office exit, bathroom or kitchen.

## Touch increases positive perceptions

Touch is overwhelmingly powerful to connect and add to our social chemistry. When you touch someone – appropriately of course – our stress reduces, blood pressure lowers and our heart rate slows. Hugs and handshakes can boost our immune systems and creates synchrony between people.

Touchers are considered more friendly, sincere, agreeable and kind.

So what is an appropriate touch? According to neuroscience it's warm skin, moderate pressure and moving at one inch per second.

## A look at your networks

King identifies three kinds of networks people develop based on whether they're expansionists, brokers or conveners. You may have elements of all three. Which are you?

### Conveners

These people have strong ties but not that many of them. Their networks are comfortable and safe. Members collaborate well and share knowledge and sensitive information. Relationships have high trust and help build resilience. But they can also be cartel-like, exclusive and lack diversity. You stick to who you know and what you know.

Conveners may fear social rejection, favour certainty and avoid risk.

### Brokers

Brokers are rare. They have diverse networks that span what Sociologist, Ron Burt, calls structural holes. They know people in IT, audit and marketing. King: "Employees who bridge structural holes are likely to receive positive outcomes such as favourable job evaluations, raises, bonuses and early promotions." But why? They're more creative, because they're exposed to so many different world views. And this research has been repeated over and over again.

Most people, particularly conveners, focus on their own world. Hamel and others talk about finding creative ideas at the edge, not the mainstream. That's where brokers are.

But there are two sides to brokering. You can use brokering for positive and co-operative purposes that benefit a whole group or organisation. Or you can take an arbitrage approach. This means you take advantage of your brokering position to control information and ideas. This benefits the broker and gives them power.

### Expansionists

As the name suggests, expansionists know far more people than the average person. Super expansionists can know 6,000 or more. Why? Because they're popular, likeable, confident, have status and are generous. They have social intelligence, can read others and listen deeply. And using these skills in a large network means you find out about more opportunities and offer social support.

King: "Expansionists are extraordinarily good at being able to read others. They excel in one-to-one interactions and understand how to make an instant connection."

Confidence is contagious. Cameron Anderson, a psychologist at the University of California, studied MBA students and assessed their popularity. Confidence, and even over confidence led to popularity. And it doesn't matter if the popular people are actually right!

We tend to focus on popular people and that's partly unconscious. Expansionists pay even more attention to who's popular and also pick up status signs. And they include both in their network.

But they also take the time to respond to people - anyone - who contacts them.

And they're generous. Researchers, Seibel, Rifkin and Ferrazzi: "It's better to give before you receive. And never keep score. If your interactions are ruled by generosity, your rewards will follow suit."

The downside for expansionists: they can spread themselves too thin.

## Three key points to end with

### Reciprocity

A fundamental building block of connecting and social chemistry is still reciprocity. It's our social exchange currency. Sociologist, Howard Becker, says we should be renamed Homo Reciprocus. Give rather than expect to receive.

MRI scans show when we give, the same reward-processing areas of our brains are activated as when we eat ice cream or receive money.

### Trust and vulnerability

Anton Chekhov: "You must trust and believe in people, or life becomes impossible." King argues that rather than working out who to trust and then being vulnerable with them, we have to be vulnerable to build the trust. You're saying you have weaknesses and need help. And you want the other person to reciprocate. We're back to closing the mirror neuron gap.

### People like you more than you think

We can often experience a liking gap. We're so concerned about how we come across and are self-conscious that we miss positive signals. And after an interaction we can be pessimistic about how we came across. To add to this, we then compare ourselves to expansionists and feel even worse.

And it's not a question of extraversion versus introversion. It's more about having a growth mindset and being self-aware.

King: "The truth is that people like us more than we think they do."

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## Inclusion at Work

Kristen Gyorgak

Friday 27 August 8:30am – 9:30am

All welcome

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