Self-Study Kit

Have confidence that your hard work will pay off. The effort you put in to improving your communication skills will pay off for the rest of your life. Be proud that you’ve taken this step. Below is a table of contents for the modules so you can choose the order you work through them. Most of them have exercises or worksheets associated. You will also see references to the e-Book An Introvert’s Guide to Extroverting. I suggest you start there. If you are not engaged in one-on-one accountability coaching with Freeborn Achievement, then getting your own accountability coach will make this kit much more valuable. I know, as introverts it can be tough to engage another person, even when we like them. Having a second person to bounce ideas off of and tell you when you’re making excuses will help you make the most of this kit.

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# Barriers to Learning New Skills

**Metacognition** is sometimes explained as thinking about thinking. We will use this technique to learn about our own learning styles to make the effort you put in, pay better dividends. In this section we will reflect on experiences in learning. Evaluate what was effective and try to replicate it, and then decide if it was a good strategy. If possible, set up a space that will help you learn. Is there a quiet library, or time of day that you feel most motivated? Do you like having pictures of loved ones and indoor plants at your desk or music playing? Get your cup of tea, or desk fan ready before you dive into the material.

As an adult you probably have a motivation for working through these modules and some experience knowing what helps you learn, like experiencing something hands-on vs reading about it. We’re going to work on refining these skills so that learning new skills is easier. To start, if you are progressing through these modules on your own pace, set goals with a timeline. Try to be challenging but realistic so you aren’t adjusting it later. Skim over some of the material and think about how much time you have to dedicate to the goals. Know where your skill or knowledge gaps are and plan to compensate for them. Prepare to be successful; very few people do their best work when they are winging it. For our purposes of improving social skills and communication, are there people you can ask for actionable feedback? Self-evaluation is useful, but feedback from others may be timelier. Even if you didn’t ask for the feedback, is it useful information worth acting upon?

As you progress, check yourself against the timeline. If you are not meeting your goals, consider if you are doing your best work before you automatically extend the timeline. If not, troubleshoot what is holding you back. Are you able to study in a better environment, is there someone you can ask for help, where are you losing focus? Of course, you want each goal to go efficiently but you will be more in-depth with this analysis once a step is completed. Look back at your strategies and evaluate what worked and what didn’t, then change your plan for the next goal.

Aside from a timeline and self-evaluation, you may consider having an accountability partner to keep you on track and honest about your progress. Perhaps your strategy is to space out your study sessions by a few days and repeat the information a few times to help retain it, or maybe you just space out studying with a few-minute break. You might use flashcards, or color-coded highlighting to help you mentally organize information you want to be able to recall quickly in social situations. Hopefully these skills become second nature to you, but in the beginning, you may want to work on memorization.

A note to my fellow introverts: eventually you will need to put these skills to use in real life. You will have to talk to people you may not know or address a demeaning boss, or ask someone for a favor. It might be terrifying, but it gets less terrifying the more you practice. The first time will be the most difficult to initiate and it will slowly improve.

Know that you can do it! We’re breaking the goal into actionable steps and holding ourselves accountable.

**Emotional barriers**

For some of us, the social skills exist, but the barriers holding us back are emotional. Fear of rejection or conflict, lack of confidence or imposter syndrome keep us from being more assertive with our communication. Because this is a very common barrier, we will spend quite a bit of time learning to identify and address the barrier so we can change our reaction to the situations that cause us anxiety.

Exercises in the program are not a replacement for therapy. Hopefully some of our topics will help you decide if you need to dive deeper and get clinical help. There are a lot of different reasons people find socializing or communicating difficult. You may have grown up in an environment where you were discouraged from expressing any emotions, ignored, or your over reaction was reinforced. Whatever the reason, accepting that gaining new skills and reacting differently to the events that trigger the emotional reaction, has to be the first step. You cannot believe that the changes will cause more stress than the current situation or there is no point in moving forward.

Once you commit to working to change your reaction, you can get started. In our Metacognition section, we discussed setting up an environment conducive to learning. I also want to address removing things that hold you back. If you had a gambling addiction and you wanted to change that part of your life, it would be a lot easier if you changed your circle of friends to people who do not gamble. When the triggers happen, it would be easier to fall back into your old familiar ways with old friends than with the new friends, and new hang-outs. Set up an environment where you can be supported in your goal. Have an accountability coach, let people know your goal so you can practice in a comfortable place. Practicing small-talk or a job interview with a family member might be easier for you to start growing your confidence and skills. Imagine you just started learning swimming and you know how to do one thing and you paddle around the shallow end of a pool with ease. It would be irrational to go out and start swimming in a current with a strong undertow and big waves. You need to keep expanding your skills and practicing gradually more difficult scenarios.

Realize that you will feel the tug toward your old reactions. Like being shy, or reacting aggressively or timidly instead of assertively. Acknowledge that it exists and realize you have a choice to act differently. Practice, practice, practice. It will probably feel difficult, I know for me it is. But it gets easier over time. There was a time when I would be sick to my stomach at the thought of introducing myself to a stranger at a networking event. At my last event, I introduced myself to several people, and got their cards. Then I was able to follow up in a one-on-one basis where I was more comfortable and got to know them better. I was exhausted after the networking event; it is draining to act differently than my default introvert setting.

In our Conflict module we address reactions to opposing or adversarial interactions, but skills for managing emotions can be used in other stressful situations too. When you walk into a room of strangers and you’re terrified, ask yourself if that is a rational response. Are you worried you will be judged or shamed? While I’m sure it happens in terrible workplaces, it is not the norm, and it is certainly not the norm at networking events where everyone has the goal of meeting new people. They WANT to meet you, that is the whole reason they are there.

**Preventing the unpleasant emotion:**

Prepare.

Getting ready can help alleviate stress. Imagine being asked to give a speech at work five minutes before the event vs being given a week’s notice to prepare. Most people would be more stressed by a last-minute notice. Going to an event where we need to use our extrovert skills gives us the opportunity to prepare. Reviewing the Small-Talk module might be on the preparation list. You should dress so you feel confident, maybe you listen to a music mix or go to the gym to get a boost before the event. Remembering a confident event for reference can be valuable too. If you start feeling insecure, recall a time where you felt great about an accomplishment and it can alleviate potential negative self-talk. Imagine how you will feel after accomplishing the intimidating task, whether it be a networking event or just introducing yourself to the neighbor, whatever it is, think of how good that accomplishment will feel.

You might have assumptions or negative judgements about yourself, but to be straightforward, they probably aren’t true. Do you assume everyone here is confident, everyone knows other people in the room, they all have more interesting things to say? Nope, nope, nope. Negative self-talk can be a big barrier, and it’s the one we have the most control over! If you tell yourself, you make a lot of mistakes so you must be stupid and terrible at everything, try being more realistic. Everyone makes mistakes and you learn to be better from them. Or perhaps you judge yourself in other ways like thinking you are stupid for being intimidated to go to the networking event, or asking or a raise. It’s not true and it’s not helping you reach your goal. It’s just wasted energy. Preparing can help, but actual experience is the most effective way to learn a lot of these skills. Don’t get caught in analysis paralysis and over think it. Eventually you must take the plunge.

Review Small Talk module and exercise

**Addressing the Unpleasant Emotion:**

You will likely be able to anticipate some of the emotions you will feel going to the social event. Acknowledge the emotion, fear or shame or shyness, and recognize it might not be rational. Take a few breaths, run your hands under cold water if you can, keep a fidget toy in your pocket, whatever helps, and choose to move forward DESPITE the emotion. Your first reaction doesn’t have to call the shots, you let it subside and do not let yourself fixate on the stress. Remember a time you felt confident, or give yourself a pep talk about all you have to offer. Imagine yourself after the event looking back at the worry you had and think of how you will view yourself. Will you look back and wish you could comfort yourself and say “You will meet interesting people tonight and feel more confident about yourself”?

Using these skills outside of professional situations might benefit from adding some empathy. Of course, empathy is useful in a workplace too, but a lot of personal situations that result in strong emotions would benefit from putting effort into seeing it from other perspectives. If this is difficult for you, take topics that are not emotionally charged and try to think of a couple different perspectives for them.

Another technique to prepare for intense emotions you feel in social situations is to practice mindfulness. If the emotion is overwhelming, try to recognize something with your senses. Is it warm or cool in the room? Feel the texture of the linens on the table, or the cool granite of the countertop. Remind yourself of some physical sensation and the emotion will be less intense. Be kind to yourself. You have chosen to put effort into growing and learning, don’t beat yourself up because the first few tries are awkward or don’t go how you’d like. Keep track of your successes. In An Introvert’s Guide to Extroverting, I discuss writing a performance review for yourself and having a Brag Book. It’s how you monitor your progress toward your goal and you can hold yourself accountability.

# Confidence and Overcoming Negative Self-Talk

Perfectionism is not healthy.

In some of my other resources, I address parts of perfectionism indirectly because I think it is a common issue among introverts and people who have difficulty networking or getting ahead at work. It is hard for perfectionists to mention their accomplishments because bragging feels unnatural as they look back and think “I could have done better.” Let's consider some habits of perfectionists and some strategies to manage them if you have them.

For a perfectionist, the phrase “you are your own worst critic” could not be truer. They beat themselves up because nothing they do is ever good enough. They will find fault even if it was something out of their control and have severe negative self-talk. They don’t need anyone to put them down, they already do it to themselves and imagine other people are thinking the same. This is far from the truth and in reality, a lot of perfectionists are seen as very productive or reliable sources of help, especially in the workplace. Oddly, procrastination is common practice among perfectionists because they set the bar so high, they dread having to undertake such a daunting task (that they’ve set for themselves). Setting realistic and achievable goals can help confidence by increasing success (see SMART goals in An Introverts Guide to Extroverting). There is a book about the best damn ship in the Navy that is a quick but worthwhile read for people who wait until conditions are precisely perfect before attempting something. While they are procrastinating, perfectionists tend to plan out every detail of a task to kind of self-soothe and feel like they have some control over a situation.

Aside from setting realistic goals, a healthy way to use those planning skills would be to prepare for when you feel overwhelmed or encounter the unexpected in your plan. If there are times you have those emotional barriers, recognize it happening, and have a plan for how to deal with it. Try not to have an opinion on the negative feeling. You can simply notice, “I notice the feeling of loneliness.” Don’t beat yourself up about having an unpleasant feeling, or identify with the feeling like “I am lonely,” just acknowledge it. You can present yourself with rational facts to counter hyperbolized negative thoughts like “I never do anything right.” Of course that’s not true, and you can plan to have a list of several successes to counter that negative thought and prevent it from taking over. This technique can be used for negative self-image as well. Look in a mirror and find some things you like, do your hair, put on an outfit you like, and use that to counter your negative self-image.

You don’t need to plan for any negative thought that creeps in, you can question it. For example, the negative thought that everyone hates you could be questioned; has everyone said they hated me? Is it rational to believe that EVERYONE has such strong feelings about me? Can you think of ANYONE that doesn’t hate you, or even likes you? Question irrational self-talk.

Now that we’ve dealt with some of the things holding you back from being confident, let's work on boosting your confidence. Just about every goal is easier to achieve when you are taking care of yourself physically, mentally and spiritually. We can’t address everything here, but we will focus on some of the mental/emotional opportunities to improve confidence. I encourage you to physically write things, but if keeping a running list on your phone is easier, that’s alright too. Start some lists of your strengths and people supporting you, compliments you’ve received, and achievements, even if they happened a while ago. The idea of faking it until you make it is surprisingly effective in a lot of situations; more people feel like imposters than you’d probably realize- but when you’re first starting out, I’d suggest keeping it to small boasts. For many of us, bragging feels awkward, even if our audience is interested in hearing about our achievements. Start with changing some negative self-talk to positive self-talk; make those boasts to yourself!

Music can be surprisingly effective at changing your mindset. Have you ever had a song remind you of a person or event, perhaps one that makes you cry or that you can’t help but start dancing to? Just like an exercise mix that tells your brain it’s time to sweat and give it your all, you can develop a playlist to get you out of a funk, or pump you up before an interview or presentation. You may find some unexpected positives from this process- like improving communication with others or learning about yourself.

# Conflict Conversations

A big lie we tell ourselves is that it has to be either or, it’s hardly ever true! You have one idea of how something should be handled and someone else has another idea of how it should be handled. Really, you each have ideas of HOW to achieve something but when you break it down, the “how” is less important than the endpoint. Instead of insisting on one way to get there, try to talk out what the end goal is and then find a way to get there that covers the needs of each party. This kind of flies in the face of many negotiating strategies that involve giving up some and getting some- each party might even be deceptive about their wants so it seems like they are giving something up to the other side. When someone is getting on my nerves, I will say things out loud that I am saying to myself like “I am sure we can come up with a way to meet both of our needs.” I’m reminding myself not to get emotional and irrational but it sends a signal to the other party that I’m trying to think of ways to help them get what they want, rather than just thinking of myself. Sometimes I remind myself to be kind and to follow the golden rule. The person I disagree with is a human and has human dignity.

Some folks will not be especially receptive to a rational approach right away; they feel passionately about their position and might need a walk, or a few minutes break before coming back to the conversation. The same applies if you are emotional too. Delaying can’t lead to avoiding the conversation, that is not productive. A break can be a healthy part of a discussion if you make a plan to come back and discuss at a specific time or date.

When both parties are involved in making the plan, you have more buy-in and are more likely to have follow-through from them. If you have kids, you’ve probably seen this in real life! One of the areas where I might discourage this is negotiating money. When trying to get a raise, explaining why you need the money is not convincing to your company in most situations. Asking your boss what they think your raise should be would be a weird situation in most environments. You want to be a little more assertive in that situation and explain your value. Keeping track of accomplishments in a Brag Book and quantifying man-hours saved, revenue increased, decrease in accident claims, or whatever- that is your supporting evidence when making a case for a raise. Industry averages, or your performance compared to colleagues might be less convincing but is still legitimate information.

In order for discussions to be most productive the discussion must be open and honest. The information put into the collective knowledge needs to be true, and not a sugar-coated version of facts. Getting the information out can be a task in itself. If people are taking cheap shots like responding with sarcasm or insults it likely means they do not feel like the discussion is a safe place to be open and contribute to the collective knowledge. You may be the one who is getting aggravated and raising your voice. Ask yourself “does it propel my goal forward to piss this person off by yelling at them?” It may require taking a break, but if things aren’t overly emotional it can be helpful to state what you want or don’t want. An example might be “I want us to find a solution that meets my needs of (xxx) and your needs of (xxx).” Or you may state what you are and aren’t trying to do; “I’m not accusing anyone; I’m just trying to understand the timeline.” In An Introvert’s Guide to Extroverting, I present information about questioning goals and getting to the root of what you want. I also expand on influence in the Getting to Yes module. That information is useful in supplement to this module on conflict.

When discussing, it can be helpful to keep lines of communication open and be open to other points of view. One way to do that is with your vocabulary. While most of this course favors self-confidence, we will try to keep more neutral in high stakes conversations. Instead of speaking authoritatively, speak tentatively and keep it to the facts. Let’s identify parts of a sentence that are influencing how your audience perceives you and the safety of the discussion they are in. “Our agency’s budget is 15% over projections for this quarter” this is a fact. “…because marketing increased their spending by $30,000 from last year.” This might be a fact, but you are jumping to a conclusion. Marketing might be spending more, but that may have been planned. Perhaps an unforeseen expense came up, like PPE during a pandemic. There will be people who take facts as accusations, and you may have to circle back to trying to make them feel like the discussion is a safe place where they won’t be attacked for contributing to the collective knowledge. Blaming marketing is a bad place to start. Get the facts out first, before identifying the areas that need attention.

What I mean by speaking tentatively instead of authoritatively is that you should understand that your point of view isn’t the only one. It is the conclusion you came to with the information you had (which might not be all the information) but other people are bound to have different points of view. Compare different ways of speaking to your partner. Saying to your spouse “We need to talk about our financial plans, you’re spending too much on luxuries instead of saving” is authoritative and blames someone. You might say “I was looking at a retirement calculator and am worried we won’t be able to keep the lifestyle we currently have into retirement.” It isn’t bossy or blaming anyone. You can follow up with showing interest in the other person; “How do you picture our retirement?” Talking about money can be stressful or even traumatic for some people but it is also important. Showing your concern for the other person’s well-being helps them feel safer discussing a sensitive topic. Perhaps your spouse knows they are inheriting something, or expected to move in with the kids. Your spouse may be financially on track for the retirement *they* want. The other point of view may be based on more or different information.

If a conversation gets too emotional you can go back to stating what you want and don’t want from the conversation and explaining your goal simply. Help them get calm so you can have the necessary conversation. Note what you agree on. “We want to be able to live in our home as long as possible” or “We want to downsize before we can’t use the stairs anymore” or “We don’t want to work until we die.” Even if you don’t have an agreed upon plan to get to the goal, agreeing on the goal helps move the conversating forward. If people are emotional, it may be difficult for them to articulate their point of view so try to repeat back what you understand and ask them if it sounds like you are understanding them correctly.

Once people (that are relevant to decision making) feel safe and can give input, you are on your way. If you lose that comfort, you can come back to it and can restate the goals of the conversation if it gets off track. Keeping communication open is a requirement of moving forward in addressing the issue.

This is an extra intimidating part of communication for a lot of people. The potential for conflict really paralyzes some introverts. To practice you can set up a debate style interaction with someone who is helping you with your communication skills. Pick a topic and assign one person to one of two perspectives and discuss. Practice keeping calm, thinking while under stress, finding common ground, and remember the outcome is less important than the practice of becoming comfortable when someone disagrees.

# Getting to “Yes”

In other modules we touch on topics like dressing to feel confident and getting rid of emotional barriers. I’d like to outline some simple exercises to help you accomplish convincing yourself to be confident and convincing others you are confident too. I am not a practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming but I think several of the basic concepts are easy to use. This is not a replacement for putting in the work to make lasting change in mental health or therapy but they are tools that can help.

Have you ever heard someone talk about using a super hero pose to pump themselves up before a challenge? It really works! What we do physically affects our mind and emotions. One exercise I use before public speaking is called Anchoring. It starts by finding a memory of the feeling you want to engender. Confidence or happiness, or whatever- think of a memory and try to imagine all the details of the physical sensation. Maybe you were excited by winning something as an athlete; think of the smells, sounds, the team around you, bright lights etc. Make the memory as vivid as possible. Do that repeatedly for 30 seconds at a time. Practice several times a day at first, to really ingrain the sensation. At the same time, keep a physical object in your hand. It can be a coin or paperclip, whatever is lying around. Press the object between 2 fingers while you are recalling the positive memory. Once you associate the feeling in the memory with the sensation of the tiny object, you can use the object to recall the sensation when you need.

The next pair of techniques are Association and Dissociation. You may be familiar with the terms but I will discuss how to use them to help when your motivation or confidence is low. If you’ve already created your goal and self-evaluation document, Association will be easier. You need a clear idea of what success looks like. Imagine how you want to “look” after completing the communication and social skill lessons. See yourself with confidence walking into a room to make a presentation, asking for a raise, or talking to a stranger at the bus stop. Picture it with as much detail as possible and as many physical sensations as possible. Take notice of how good it feels.

Practice this whenever – but especially if you notice negative feelings creeping in. Self-doubt can be insidious when trying to change behaviors or form new habits. Similarly, you can dissociate too. If there is something specific that causes you anxiety like a memory or experience you can make it less powerful. This might not be the most effective technique to deal with trauma, it’s for minor nagging events or feelings. Maybe you think you can’t succeed at something, and you want to diminish the power of the limiting belief. Basically, you Associate in reverse. You remember the feeling or event, and then take away the details, make it black and white, not as bright or loud, imagine the picture smaller and smaller until it vanishes.

The next technique is useful when there is possible conflict or negotiation. Perceptual position is just a fancy way of saying “Put yourself in someone else’s shoes.” If there is a disagreement between you and another person, you will imagine sitting at a table across from the other person. You will hover above your body and imagine yourself floating to where the other person is seated. You can “see” from that position but you will also try to think the way that person is thinking to most accurately gain their point of view on the matter. How do they feel, what are they thinking, what do they think of you? Finally, you will float to a third position as an outsider looking in on the two of you gaining a third perspective.

You can gain an appreciation for the other person and why they think the way they do. It might change the language you use to talk to them if you understand how they experience the world.

In the Small-Talk module, we review Mirroring which is a nonverbal communication tool used to make someone feel an affinity with you. It is also a Neuro-Linguistic technique.

People like to align their beliefs with their actions. It is why door-to-door sales people will ask for a favor when they approach. Usually something simple like asking for a drink of water or a moment of your time. Once you say yes to a small thing you are more likely to say yes to progressively bigger “asks.” Likewise, if there is someone who is not a big fan of yours, ask them for a favor. Benjamin Franklin experienced this situation and asked to borrow a book. Once returned, he sent a note expressing gratitude and the two became friends. If someone did something nice for you (like lend a book) they will want to align their beliefs to match their actions. They begin to think of you in a positive light to legitimize their nice gesture. You can ask for small favors and you will likely be seen more positively.

Another technique to garner support is often used by people with political aspirations. Writing a goal can help you mentally solidify your commitment to that goal, but you can use writing to help other people commit to your “ask” as well. Signing a petition or writing a pledge increases commitment to the intended action. Even verbally changing from “Please call if you won’t be able to volunteer that day” to “Will you please call if you won’t be able to volunteer that day?” will increase their commitment to the action.

Everyone is doing it:

Lastly, drawing your audience’s attention to all the people who follow through with the action can persuade them to follow suit. The most notable examples are studies on compliance with environmental activities like not littering but it can be used in virtually any scenario. How often have you heard the phrase “Join the millions of people who...” for an advertisement? If not practical, at least don’t draw the attention to group of people who engage in undesirable behavior. Saying that only 2% of participants donate to the cause is not a motivator and will weaken the message you are sending.

# Coping Skills

We all have coping skills, but we don’t always remember to use them, or even know we have them. This exercise helps you identify your favorite coping skills and consciously use them to remove barriers to your goals. In An Introvert’s Guide to Extroverting, I go into more detail on using these tools.

My husband likes running to relieve stress, running would cause me stress. Not everyone’s coping skills will be the same. Even if you can’t put it in a category, come up with some ideas that help you get rid of negative self-talk.

Activities: Walking, gardening, birdwatching, exercising, dancing, calling a friend, listening to music, swimming, baking, journaling, helping others, cycling, using your strengths or complimenting others’, learning something new, using a hot tub, working on a car. For additional ideas, research “Anchoring” in Neurolinguistic Programming.

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| Thought Challenge  Recognizing unhelpful thoughts and disputing them | *Ex. Find evidence to disprove negative thought* |
| Releasing emotions  An outlet for emotions | *Ex. Running, Painting* |
| Self Love  Practicing compassion for yourself through activities that relax or invigorate | *Ex. Getting a massage, taking a hot bath* |
| Distracting  Engaging in activities that take your mind off negative thoughts | *Ex. Reading, Crafts, Coffee with friends* |
| Best-Self  Use your strengths and personal values to help others | *Ex. Volunteering* |
| Grounding  Focusing on the present, to counter the “what if” negative thoughts of things that aren’t happening | *Ex. Meditation, Prayer* |

# Small-Talk

As an introvert, I’ve developed different “masks” to wear in different situations, as many people do. The way you are relaxed and behave around people who love you is different than the professional mask at a job interview; the silly conversations with sorority sisters aren’t the same way you talk to your car mechanic. This is distinctly different from believing you are multiple people or are out of touch with reality in some way. It is not inauthentic to put on these different masks to serve the purpose of the situation. If you’re still reading, you probably need help developing your professional mask. It might be to gain visibility in the workplace or networking to change careers. Whatever the goal is, I want you to use the perspective that you are creating a brand for yourself. When there are barriers, especially emotional barriers, it can be easier to develop the mask as if it were a separate brand before actually using it as a mask.

Appearance is important in presenting yourself as a trustworthy, knowledgeable professional, especially to people who don’t know you very well. I won’t dwell on it for long, good hygiene, getting a cheap haircut, or some clothes at a thrift store is fine, it doesn’t need to be expensive. Aside from sending the message to other people that they can take you seriously as a professional, it can help your confidence in stressful situations if you feel like you “look the part.” Physical health also affects your appearance; if you aren’t getting enough sleep then it shows. Taking care of your mental and physical health can take a significant amount of effort and time. If you feel like you might need to improve these areas before you can put all your energy into a goal, then it’s a good idea to focus on making some improvements here before tackling professional goals.

It can be difficult to balance listening and talking. Listening is important to building relationships and creating a connection with someone. People like knowing you’re listening and not just waiting for your turn to talk, especially if there is a disagreement. Sometimes, if I’m anxious I talk too much- the balance is hard for me. As introverts, we tend to do less talking, and listening is often easier for us. Unless you are talking to a very self-absorbed person that won’t work. A discussion needs to be a back and forth, if the other person has to “carry the conversation,” it can be off-putting and not a good impression. An easy way to break the ice is to go with someone who already knows people and ask them to introduce you. You might even ask for ideas on topics like some of the people at this get-together are into crypto, or a company softball team, or listen to true crime podcasts. Then you will learn a little bit about a topic, and ask them about their interest. Look up some trending true crime podcasts, read some summaries, and mention “I listened to a podcast by so-and-so about such-and such-crime…” and give an opinion. You can say it was really interesting learning about forensics, or it was scary because it happened in a sleepy town, or it was too gruesome for you. Don’t come across as judgmental if you didn’t like it, but ask them what appeals to them about the topic, maybe they also like scary movies, or they think science is cool, or psychology is interesting.

You don’t need to control the conversation, but steering it a little, especially in the beginning will help you feel a little less scattered.

Asking questions is an easy way to move a conversation forward, and not just “Is it hot enough for you?”. When you’re starting out, avoid controversial topics like politics, and consider interesting things about yourself to start conversations. Perhaps you have family in a part of the country that just got 6 feet of snow and people are still digging out, or your alma mater made it to the Sweet-Sixteen for college basketball. I agree everyone loves animal memes, but spending 45 minutes showing off pictures of your adorable dog/cat/lizard/kid is not ideal. You can bring it up; it’s very relatable but sometimes people overdo it. These topics are for making personal connections, which can be very important for general connections, but you may need to show topical knowledge in an interview.

Small-talk can feel awkward and difficult for some people but it is an important skill for developing connections or can help when trying to build up to a bigger discussion. As a supervisor, you might show you care about an employer more than just being a “human resource” by engaging in small-talk about non-work topics. You can take a break from a stressful conversation and diffuse some tension by taking a side step in the conversation before trying to address the issue again. Maybe you feel uncomfortable on a first date and need something other than “nice weather we’re having” as a conversation starter. Whatever the situation, we can offer some pointers to get you going.

Small talk might seem unimportant but it can be a big deal in developing relationships. Usually, it avoids controversial topics and focuses on something the two people have in common; this is why weather or complaints about Mondays are often the go-to topics. If you know a bit about the person, you can be more specific like asking about last night’s episode of a reality TV show they watch, or how the last 5K went. If you know they have kids you might ask if they are in sports, summer camps, and so on, because a lot of people like talking about their kids and their successes like sports or grades. It’s a way to show an interest in them as a human being and people like feeling that dignity. Topics like entertainment (TV, Movies, books, games), travel, most hobbies, fashion (especially genuine compliments), sports teams, work-related topics, and food are good places to get some experience.

First meeting: You might ask someone in a professional environment if they found the place ok, found parking, have any questions, how they like your town/country, would they like some water or coffee/tea, where are they from, and what brings you here. Even a simple question like asking them about a drink could bring up how you love coffee/caffeine fix and go to a local place, or how you are trying to get your eight glasses of water a day as a health goal, and suddenly the ice is broken.

A few more in-depth questions could include; Do you know so-and-so, have you been to this restaurant, movie, town, state, country.You can bring up a hobby of your own and ask if they do it like grilling, sushi-making, brewing beer, skiing, gardening, or traveling.

First date /non-work questions: Show an interest in their interests like their favorite food or hobbies, pets, music, movies, and any entertainment and ask if they can recommend anything; people love it when you ask for their advice. You can ask what they do in their free time and what they do for work but most people don’t enjoy talking exclusively about work. You can also ask less concrete questions like what is their dream job or dream vacation, hidden talent, or something they might need to think about for a moment. Hopefully these questions lead to more in-depth conversations about what they want in a partner, their goals, career, family, and how they picture their future.

Show genuine interest, and listen when they answer. Don’t be overbearing or nosey if it’s a topic they don’t want to discuss. Don’t overshare or dominate the conversation, make sure it is a back-and-forth and you use appropriate follow-up questions.

HEFE stands for Hobbies entertainment food environment

FORD stands for family occupation recreation and dreams

Come up with some lists of these items and try to think of some interesting anecdotes from your life to associate with them. Silence can be very uncomfortable as you are trying to begin exercising your new extrovert skills and having a few topics prepared will help.

This is an easy area to practice with someone you know and is aware that you are working on these skills. You’re more interesting than you know, have confidence and go for it!

# Interviews

Preparing for interview discussions can involve a lot of different things depending on your industry. Having some anecdotal stories to relay a skill you learned or being able to recall your sales percentage increases are basic. The Brag-Book (referenced in An Introvert’s Guide to Extroverting) will be a living document you can review before interviews. I recommend trying to find out a little about the interviewers if you can. Don’t stalk anyone but LinkedIn is generally fair game, and if it’s internal you can probably see their title in the email signature. Some topics can be more delicate if recent legislation affects an industry. Rather than stating whether you agree or disagree with the new law, simply get a perspective of the potential impact on the specific customer. An example would be if you are interviewing for a job at a farm equipment manufacturer and recent legislation gave incentives to corn growers for ethanol used in producing fuel for cars. This may seem great for corn growers to increase their income but may negatively impact farmers growing livestock because feed for the animals will now be more expensive with corn going toward ethanol. You don’t need to say if it's good or bad, simply understand a little about the economic, social, or legal environment. It shows that you put some research in, and prepared for the interview. The Small-Talk module is a good resource to skim before an interview.

I review lists of potential interview questions before interviews, especially if I can find something specific to the company, but what the interview generally comes down to is, can you do the job, and how do we know? Unless it is a hire made because of a networking connection, ability to do the job is usually high on the list of reasons to hire. While preparing, worry less about specific questions, and focus more on making sure you take your answers as opportunities to highlight an important quality about yourself. Don’t get too off-topic, but you’re the one talking so you can steer! I jot keywords of the question onto a notepad so I can glance down if I feel like I’m getting off topic. The other significant thing to consider is what the interviewers want to hear. I’ll give an example.

I knew a lovely young lady who was eager to start her teaching career after finishing her degree. She was going to interviews and getting rejected despite a need for teachers in our area. She was passionate about teaching and had learned the latest info in her new degree and talked about her ideas during the interviews. I suspect they did not want to hear about new ideas. Yes, some environments would be more welcoming of new ideas but that was not the case here. The people who spent their careers climbing up and “paying their dues” were in leadership positions now. They had a chance to finally put into action *their* ideas. What they wanted was a teacher eager to gain experience and learn from more senior teachers, while supporting the initiatives of the people in leadership. This is a situation where considering what the interviewers were looking for was important. She may have had more job offers if she tempered her answers about new ideas, with an enthusiasm to learn.

The interview is just as much an opportunity to learn about the company and the team and why you would or wouldn’t want to work with them. To refer back to the teacher- if she were looking to work somewhere that was open to new ideas, then public schools might not be a great fit. I am not knocking public schools, I got a great education, but most things run by the government tend to be behind the times because they are slow to change. An organization with more agility like a private school might appreciate her eagerness to try the latest ideas. Nailing the interview is partially about going for a job where your skills are wanted.

If you stress about impressing people at an interview, taking the perspective that it’s an opportunity to “teach” people about your skills, experience, and personality might seem less daunting. Do everything you can to remove stress. If planning your breakfast, and trying on your outfit the night before help you feel like you have less to worry about, then do it. Eat and brush your teeth before you get dressed to avoid getting anything on your clothes, and bring water in case your mouth gets dry while talking so much. Give yourself a pep talk, listen to your music mix and have confidence!

# Beyond Words

Communication isn’t just about talking or writing. How we say things or other elements like body language affect the message other people receive from us. Have you tried to explain someone’s charisma? It can be difficult to pinpoint what their allure is. For some people engaging communication comes naturally, but if you’re reading this, it’s probably not you. It is easier to be intentional about persuasive elements of communication when we are aware of them so I will touch on some of them in general. Then we will dive in to specific examples of things you can implement and practice.

Paralanguage includes the elements of verbal communication that aren’t the words themselves. You may say something loudly to express urgency, or adjust intonation for sarcasm. Have you ever listened to someone with a monotone voice? It’s really hard not to lose interest, right? Just because you get the word out, doesn’t mean the other person received the message. Imagine someone with a monotone voice told you there’s a fire in the building and you need to leave. You might wonder if they are joking because their voice does not communicate urgency with its speed and volume despite saying the right words.

Aside from what you are saying and how you say it, we use body language. Some may gesticulate a lot and need to reel it in a bit for more formal situations. Some of you may not know what your face is saying even when you’re silent. Do you roll your eyes, or have you used a wink to communicate something? Perhaps in a loud room you touched someone’s shoulder to get their attention, or waived down a bartender or cab. If you are curious and want to learn more, you can look at micro-expressions, kinesics, haptics or proxemics.

Navigating the appropriate times to touch someone or how close is too close is very case by case, but we can review guidelines. If you are within 3 feet of someone and it isn’t a crowded room, you should be friends or family with them. I recommend being over 3 feet in most professional instances, except when you try to whisper something. I’ve been at award events and may ask the person next to me “who is that?” but I lean in so I don’t disrupt the event. If you are more than 10 feet away, you start to raise your voice to hear one another and it can be cumbersome and communicate the wrong thing.

Three focal points for introverts

Eye contact is difficult to convey in writing. It is also a common source of discomfort for us introverts so it must be addressed. In the United States, proper eye contact is a sign of confidence and interest in the person with whom you are conversing. Avoiding eye contact can make someone seem meek, uninterested or untrustworthy. Too much eye contact can be creepy. You can watch videos online but most of them are still artificially creating a scenario. They are useful to a point, but another way to gauge the right amount of eye contact is to be in a group and pay attention to others. Don’t stare, but if there is a person who you think is really good at showing confidence or making people feel at ease, observe how they make eye contact with others to start emulating them. It’s easier to start practicing when you are in a group of a few people, rather than a one-on-one conversation and you only have one person to make eye contact with.

Introverts commonly speak too softly, sometimes intentionally to avoid attention. It affects how we are perceived, especially at work, and it can suggest you aren’t confident or knowledgeable. Overcompensating is similarly unfortunate, but perhaps a bit easier to progress at work because you are more noticeable. Being too loud can be quite off-putting, but you may have noticed that a lot of people who are “the life if the party” tend to be louder than others. I have a loud laugh, and it comes across as much more genuine than trying to stifle it. If you’re unsure, trying to match others is the most reliable way to not stand out in an obnoxious way. People will be more engaged with someone who is authentic than someone monotonously maintaining their speech volume. People who have very good speaking skills can use low volume speech to force people to quiet down and try to listen. It’s also appropriate to use a lower volume if you are in a situation where someone is trying to aggravate you, and get you to lose your cool. Maintaining a normal speaking voice shows you are in control and they don’t get to choose your reaction.

The third topic we will focus on is appearance. I won’t delve into how you dress or do your hair because that is vastly different for each person. What makes you feel confident, and feel good about your appearance is a good place to start with that. Since 2020 many of us have gotten worse posture because we had to work in our home which may not have had a real desk and chair. Posture can communicate, confidence in yourself and help other people feel confidence in you, it can show a graceful person who seems like they can handle anything and is part of active listening. Having good posture, especially while seated can be something you make a habit so it communicates for you while you focus on other things. Active listening is showing someone you are listening without interrupting. You may use posture to face them or even lean in, perhaps you nod or make small comments, “I agree,” “I would have never thought of that.” A genuine smile opens a lot of doors, even when you are using silence in communication. Aside from being polite active listening helps you form a connection, which is the ultimate goal of a lot of communication. Of course, many things vary by culture or where you are geographically.

Excusing yourself from a conversation you don’t want to be in is difficult to teach, but there are guidelines that can help. Some people will feel uncomfortable saying “excuse me,” and leaving. Passing off the conversation to someone else can help take the attention off of you and make you feel less self-conscious about excusing yourself. For example, you are in a small group at a networking event, and you can pass off the conversation by mentioning that someone else at the table has that experience, or knowledge etc. “I know a lot about dogs, but Susan was a judge at the Westminster Dog Show.” If you don’t know other people personally, you can ask a question. “I know a lot about dogs, but I bet someone else knows more. Does anyone else have dogs?” Hopefully you find someone to bite. It’s kind of like acting humble about your knowledge. There are people who will take offense at being told you have to leave for another responsibility. They will start judging whether they think the other responsibility is more important than them. Keep excuses general if you excuse yourself. You can also mention you can only stay for a bit when you arrive. It would not be my go-to move, but if you really have trouble leaving, it’s softer than announcing your departure later. I make leaving a process. I make sure I start well before I have to leave in case I get caught in an extended goodbye while making rounds to make sure everyone gets a personal goodbye. People feel seen, you make a positive impression and a little more facetime with whomever you were meeting. Plus you don’t look like you’re rushing out because you don’t value their company.

**Exercises**

Sitting at a park, restaurant, or wherever is a low stress way to see other people interacting and learn from them. Eventually you will be able to tell a lot about the interaction without even hearing the conversation. I don’t suggest following people around, that could be creepy, but just passively watch gestures, how fast they are walking, moving their hands, their head nodding or their foot tapping. If public spaces are hard to come by, then movies can help you learn social skills. The right movies for this exercise are not horror, or documentaries. They are positive, uplifting movies that have a story of people coming together. Naturally, movies don’t perfectly reflect real life, but they are created to be relatable in a lot of ways.