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## How to Interact with Others

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If you're not accustomed to social interactions, it's hard not to be 'weird' or 'awkward' and people who experience social anxiety know exactly what we're talking about. Being able to effectively interact with others is not a 'piece of cake'. It takes time and practice to master the art of communication.

Most people learn the basics of communication over the first 15-20 years of their lives and we continue to learn until the end. People who suffer from social anxiety tend to avoid social contexts, which means that actually they're missing out of valuable lessons. In this article we're going to explore the 7 basic principles of effective communication. This is just the tip of the iceberg because social skills are much more complex than that. Nevertheless, these 7 principles will get you started. Read them, learn them and IMPLEMENT them. You can even convert each principle into a specific goal for your future exposure exercises.



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## A Friendly Smile

This is the best way to greet your friends, family, coworkers or business partners. A friendly smile opens the door for pleasant conversation. A smiley face is always more enjoyable because people feel less threatened, especially when you meet someone for the first time. Don't try to look for a reason, just smile!

## **Maintaining Eye Contact**

They say that the eyes are the windows to your soul. If you really want to establish a connection, try to maintain constant eye contact. Not only that it shows interest, but it's also a great way to express your emotions and transmit a certain 'vibe'. Last but not least, keep in mind that maintaining eye contact is different from staring obsessively and repeatedly into the person's eyes. Just to give you a reference point, try to maintain eye contact for approximately 4-5 seconds, then shift your gaze to something else for one second and repeat.

## **Body Language**

Sometimes, our bodies speak louder than our mouths. People who experience social anxiety have a specific body posture. They usually keep their hands crossed, downcast eyes and they're unable to remain still. All these signs are direct indicators of an internal struggle and you don't have to be an expert to notice that. First thing you need to do is keep your arms open. This shows availability and willingness to communicate. As for your downcast eyes, just maintain eye contact. Last but not least, your inability to remain still is generated by all those negative thoughts that create a 'buzzing' sensation in your head. As always, combat the negative effects of your ANTs by using the thoughts journal.

## **Making Small Talk**

People who struggle with social anxiety are usually described as 'uptight'. Sometimes, they don't see the purpose of making small talk. In fact, a significant portion of the population avoids making small talk because it seems 'pointless', 'meaningless' or 'aimless'. In reality, small talk is the first step towards lasting relationships. Use simple questions like: How are you? Where do you work? Do you come here often?

## **Having a Proper Conversation**

Now that you know how to engage in small talk, it's time to take it up a notch. A meaningful conversation revolves around the idea of genuine interest in a person's life. In order to have a meaningful conversation, use open-ended questions. These questions will encourage a meaningful and detailed answer. Here are some examples of open-ended questions: What do you like about this place? What do you do at work? What are your hobbies? Why did you choose to become a ...? In contrast, closed questions are those which can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" - try to avoid those.

## **Empathic Communication**

Communication relies mostly on listening. Unfortunately, many of us listen not to understand, but to come up with an answer when it's our time to speak. Empathic communication relies on your ability to 'tune in' to other people's emotions and truly understand what they feel. One easy way to do this is by rephrasing the content and reflecting the feeling. Here's a short example:

Matt: My boss gave me an impossible amount of tasks. I don't know what I'm gonna do.

Alice: That really sucks. You probably feel somewhat helpless (reflecting the feeling), knowing that you have so much work to do (rephrasing the content).

Empathy adds up to a true, meaningful communication.

## **Keeping Friendships Alive**

Keeping friendships alive is all about commitment and dedication. You can't expect someone to be friends with you just because you were classmates, co-workers or neighbors. You have to make an effort. Schedule regular face-to-face meetings with your friends. Don't just rely on phone calls and messages.

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