



Entrepreneurs

How To Say 'Hi'

[Melanie Lindner](#), 04.10.08, 6:00 PM ET



In Pictures: [Eight Tips For Making The First Move](#)

Dr. Mark Goulston thought himself a coward. At parties he would stand by the chip dip, never approaching people and rarely meeting anyone new. "My father was shy," says Goulston, "so I grew up thinking that 'assertive' meant 'pushy.' "

A psychiatrist in Santa Monica, Calif., Goulston knew all about social anxiety--and still he couldn't beat it. Then his first child came. "I wanted to be someone my daughter would grow to look up to, and I didn't feel at that moment that she would," he recalls. So at the next party he and his wife attended, Goulston set a goal for himself: "to meet three new people and have them be glad to have met me." Twenty-five years later, Goulston, 60, writes and lectures about overcoming anxiety and guides patients through the process.

Most people have some level of social anxiety, especially when it comes to meeting new people. We focus on the embarrassment and the rejection rather than the opportunity of a new business partner, sales prospect or friend. For some, making the first move can bring on everything from tense muscles to a slamming heart.

"Some of us are wired to enjoy making the first move in a social or professional setting, while others are more inhibited," says Byron Reeves, communications professor at Stanford University. "But it has nothing to do with intelligence or potential for success."

Don't look for patterns. Some people can call upon their suave selves in a professional setting but clam up at social functions; others can do their best George Clooney at a party but break out in hives at the thought of talking to new customers.

The good news is there are ways to cope. Dr. Goulston's strategy is something he calls the "FTD delivery." Hook strangers by asking how they *feel*, what they *think*, or what they have *done* or would *do* about a given topic. Focusing on them is a form of generosity--not off-putting aggression.

Beyond the ego-stroking, there is another benefit to making the conversation all about the other person: It takes the pressure off you. "When a person is focusing on themselves--wondering if

they are blushing, sweating or trembling--their anxiety level increases," says **Dr. Andrew Gottlieb, a clinical psychologist based in Palo Alto, Calif.**

In stressful encounters, self-induced head-fakes are powerful palliatives. Before approaching someone, look for physical characteristics that remind you of a close friend or relative, suggests Dr. David Barlow, founder and director emeritus of the Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders at Boston University. Maybe the person's hair is like your mother's; maybe he smiles like your best friend. Focus on the similarities, and you can convince yourself, if only for the moment, that you are comfortable with a complete stranger.

Another trick is to rehearse icebreakers with a friend before going to a meeting or party. Practicing in advance helps you brainstorm things to say and build courage, says John Baldoni, a corporate communications consultant in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Bottom line: Believe in yourself and leave the chip dip behind. Says Goulston: "The best thing you can do is be sincere, generous and helpful to people--and hope that they are kind enough to reciprocate."

In Pictures: Eight Tips On Making The First Move



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Listen First, Speak Later

Rather than jump-starting a new conversation, sometimes it's easier to jump into one that's already going on, says **Andrew Gottlieb, a clinical psychologist based in Palo Alto, Calif.** Be careful not to bulldoze your way in; instead, wait for a lull and have something relevant to say that pushes the conversation along. This tactic works well in business settings where everyone is gathered for ostensibly the same reason but still may not know each other. The first 10 or 20 seconds might feel awkward, but before you know it, you'll be shaking hands and exchanging names.



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Focus On Them

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Practice, Practice

Rehearsing icebreakers with a friend before going to a meeting or party can be very helpful, **says Gottlieb.** Practicing in advance not only helps you brainstorm things to say, it also helps to build courage. "Planning what you want to say, and considering in advance what you want someone to think of you, will give you confidence in that first interaction," says John Baldoni, a corporate communications consultant based in Ann Arbor, Mich.



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Make Eye Contact

Making the first move is all in the sell. Anxiousness and lack of confidence don't sell (unless you're Woody Allen). The best way to appear confident even if you aren't: Make eye contact, says David Barlow, founder and director emeritus of the Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders at Boston University. Marry that with a warm--but not obsequious--smile, and you'll be off to a good start.



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Picture Someone Familiar

In stressful times, self-induced head-fakes are powerful palliatives. Before approaching someone, look for physical characteristics that remind you of a close friend or relative. Maybe the person's hair is like your mother's; maybe he smiles like your best friend. Focus on the similarities, and you can convince yourself, if only for the moment, that you are comfortable with a complete stranger, says Barlow.



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Share a Common Experience

Executed with aplomb, this time-worn technique works in any setting--from business meeting to hotel bar. Don't recognize a familiar face? Lead with something that circumstances suggest you might have in common. Example: "The traffic was a nightmare!" Trite, perhaps, but a useful conversation starter.



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Be Generous

Many people get worked up about initiating a first interaction because they are afraid to seem aggressive, says Mark Goulston, a psychiatrist in Santa Monica, Calif. Pre-empt that reaction by offering your targets some sort of fig leaf: a question about themselves, a book recommendation, even a compliment. Cheesy as it sounds, something like "Excuse me, where did you find that great tie?" still works. Hey, people are self-centered--use it to your advantage



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Have Reasonable Expectations

Most people have some level of social anxiety, especially about meeting new people, says Dr. Barlow. George Clooney notwithstanding, the person you are trying to approach is probably nervous too. Take comfort: We're all pretty much in the same boat, so make a move.