

TALK

WORKBOOK

A companion to
*TALK: The Science of Conversation
and the Art of Being Ourselves*

BY ALISON WOOD BROOKS

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Learn more at alisonwoodbrooks.com.

A NOTE FROM ALISON

Hi! Welcome! I'm so glad you're here.

This workbook includes frameworks, topics, and exercises to put the lessons from *TALK: The Science of Conversation and the Art of Being Ourselves* into practice. Good conversation comes from knowing how good conversation works, but also from actually doing it—by experimenting with new approaches, practicing, seeing what works for you and what doesn't, seeking feedback, and reflecting about your conversation habits over time.

You can use this workbook to reflect and prepare for conversations on your own, to practice conversation together with a partner, or to kick-start conversations and workshops in your family, book club, group chat, and any other group or organization. Even the best communicators have room for improvement—we all do.

Are you ready to practice? Let's go.

“Conversation is the spark, not the more obvious kinds of love, that lights up the world.”

—ERVING GOFFMAN

THE TALK MAXIMS

The book introduces us to the TALK maxims, simple-yet-comprehensive reminders to help us master the surprisingly complex coordination game of conversation. These maxims guide our approach to making conversations more vibrant, productive, and rewarding. And they're more likely to stick in your memory if you revisit them again and again, because remembering things is hard, and repetition rules.

TOPICS:

Choose good topics and manage them well.

ASKING:

Ask more, and better, questions.

LEVITY:

Use humor and warmth to keep conversations fizzy and engaging.

KINDNESS:

Try to prioritize your partner's conversational needs.

REFLECT, ON YOUR OWN

The exercises in this section ask you to reflect privately about your conversational life. You can do these exercises on your own, or (of course) do them in tandem with others and then talk about your experiences together.

Plot your goals ahead of time. Before your next conversation, plot your goals on the conversational compass. You may have many, or only a couple. Remember, you always have at least one, even if it's simply to pass the time, be polite, or have fun.

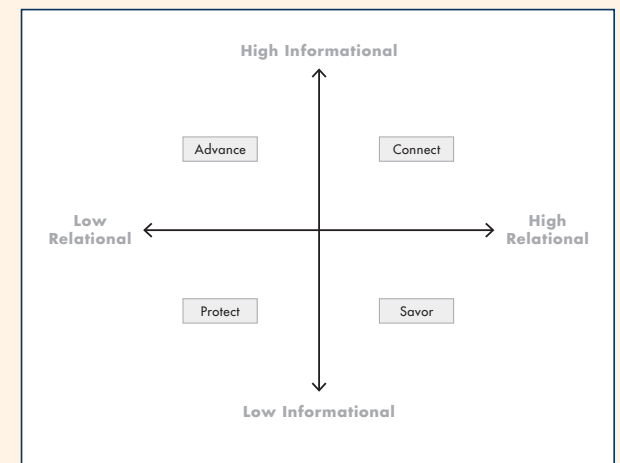
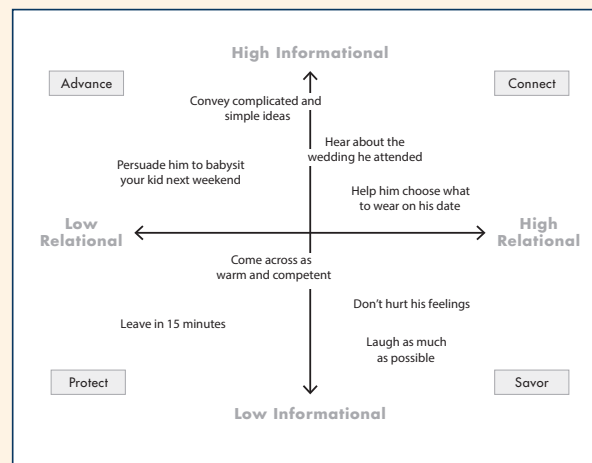
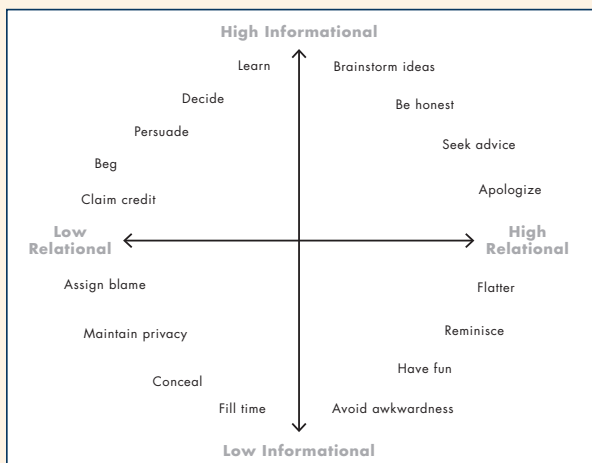
The conversational compass helps us organize our goals—what we want out of our conversations—along two simple dimensions: relational pursuits and informational pursuits. Unlike some two-axis models, you're not trying to move into the upper right quadrant of this compass. We don't always care about high-relational, high-informational things. Instead, the compass provides a place to plot all of your goals, and our goals should fall in *all four quadrants* of the compass. We live in all four quadrants!

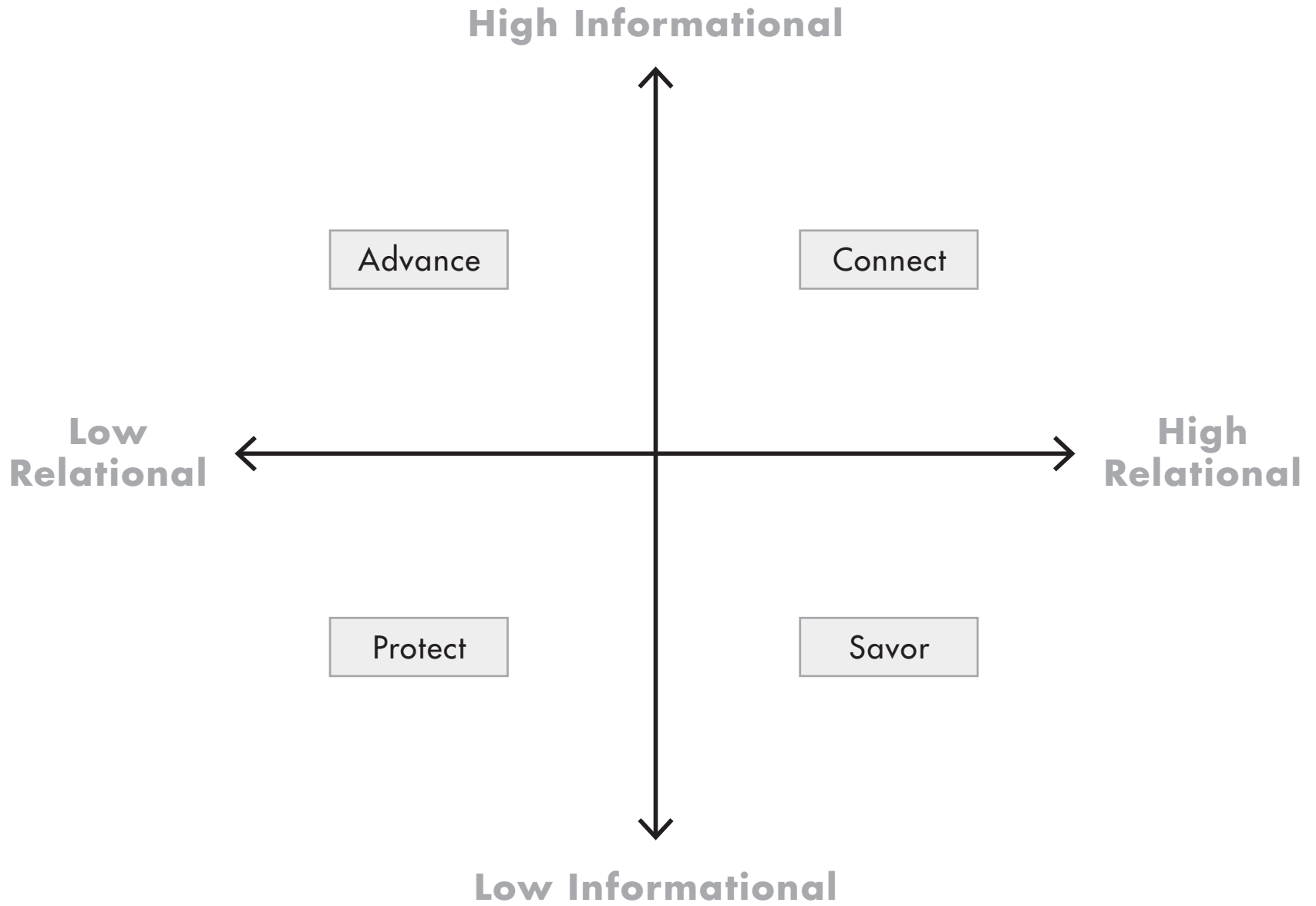
Every talker in every conversation always has at least one goal, even if it's just to have fun, fill time, or to be polite. And, usually, each talker has many more goals than just one. What do you want out of your next interaction? Be honest—no one is judging you if you just want someone to like you or to

agree with you or to say yes to babysitting your kid next weekend or if you just want to laugh.

Whatever you want out of the conversation, plot those goals on the conversational compass. Are your goals in service of your partner and your relationship, or in service of you? This will determine where they fall along the relational axis. Are your goals in service of accurate information exchange, or not? This will determine where they fall along the informational axis.

Now, create a new plot for your partner's goals. What do you think *they* want out of this conversation? What goals do you have in common? Which ones could conflict? You cannot have a perfect understanding of what others want, or even what *you* want, but a bit more awareness, clarity, and intentionality about what you want out of your conversations—and a bit more thought about what your partners want out of your conversations—can guide the choices you make as your conversation unfolds. The meaning of success in conversation depends on what we want to get out of it.





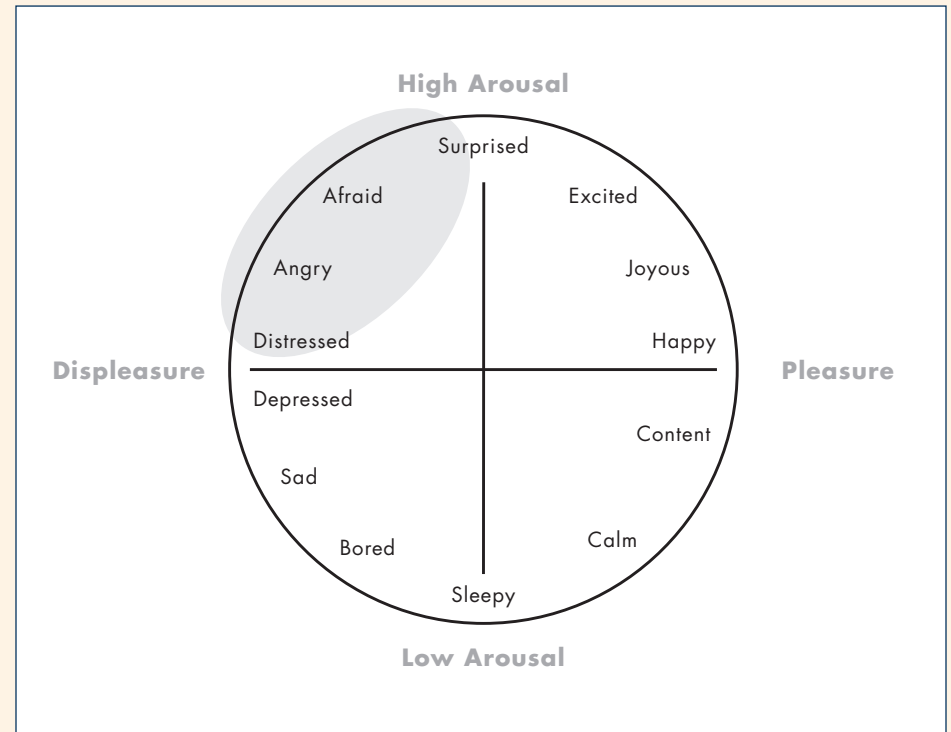
REFLECT, ON YOUR OWN

Plot your goals after. Think back to your last conversation, or one you had recently. What were you trying to achieve? What were your goals going into the conversation? What were your partner's goals? Are you sure? Did your goals shift as the conversation progressed? Ultimately, did you achieve what you wanted to achieve in that interaction? What could you have done better?

Your personal history of conversation. Just as the meaning of conversation has evolved over time and place, your personal view of conversation—and your habits—have evolved over the course of your life. Can you identify different phases of your development or important inflection points that changed how you thought about conversation? What events and/or people precipitated your personal conversational evolution? If you created a timeline of your conversational habits, when were some important moments, relationships, phases, or awakenings that shaped who you are and how you communicate?

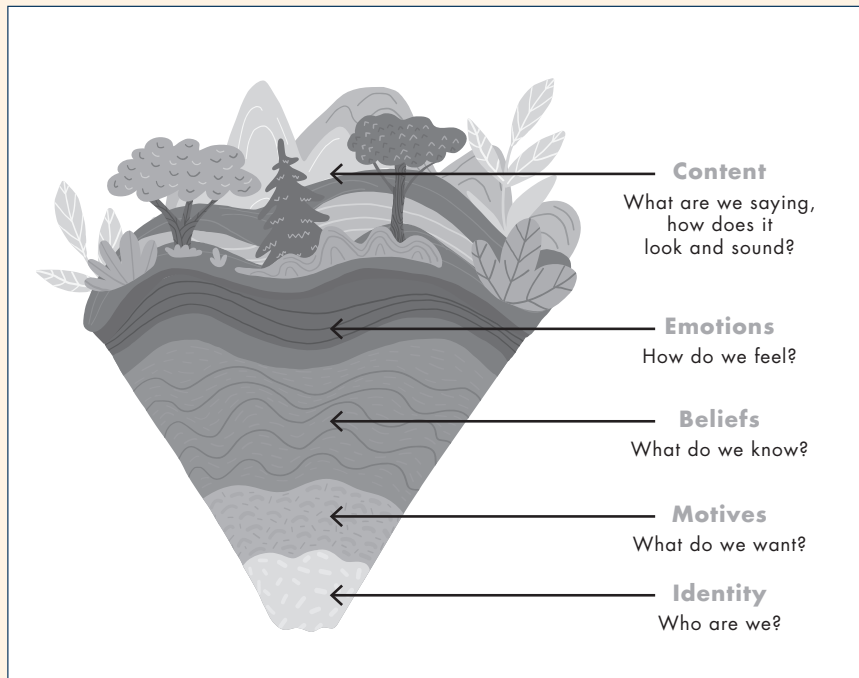
Coordination problems. Think back to a recent conversation. Did you and a partner fail to coordinate around shared understanding—a moment when it became obvious that you weren't understanding each other's beliefs, preferences, or knowledge? (The answer is almost certainly yes, in some way, at some layer of the earth). What went awry? And how do you know? What if you called that person now and tried to re-coordinate? Could you fix the crack in your shared reality?

Flouting Grice's maxims. Think back to a conversation you recently had. Were you and your partner perfectly truthful, concise, relevant, and clear (Grice's conversational maxims)? When? Why or why not? Do you think your rule-breaking was intentional or accidental? Was it good or bad?



Sources of difficulty. Think about your last difficult conversation, one that had at least some parts (or a single part) that made you feel confused, sad, mad, anxious, or frustrated—emotions in the upper-left quadrant of the “wheel of feelings.” What triggered those feelings? What was it about that interaction that was hard? Often the answer is that there was some difference, at some layer of the earth, between you and your partner. A difference in content, emotions, motives, beliefs, identities—or a combination. How did you behave then? How would you behave if you could do it again?

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Cooperative or competitive? Many conversational choices don't work the same way when we are agreeing or disagreeing—cooperating or competing. Flattery, sarcasm, topic changes, probing questions: What strategies have you noticed work well with close others during cooperative moments, but flop (or incite problems) during more difficult moments or with more difficult partners?

Identity map. Conversation is a place where the invisible parts of our identities can be surfaced (or remain hidden), and where seemingly unthreatening topics can touch sensitive parts of our identities at any moment. To reflect about the many aspects of who you are, it can help to create an “identity map.” First, write down your identities in the following categories: family, work, social/cultural/biological, schooling, hobbies, and other. (Mine would be mother, wife, daughter, twin, professor, behavioral

scientist, mentor, friend, singer, piano/oboe player, basketball player, Pilates devotee, chronic laughter, white, woman, Irish heritage, American, raised Catholic, etc.) Then plot those identities on a spectrum from unobservable to observable. What aspects of your life are invisible until you talk about them? To whom? Are those identities associated with different levels of power or status? Which ones make you feel the most defensive or guarded? How do they influence how you communicate?

Digital communication audit. Write down all the incoming and outgoing messages, across all modes of communication (text, email, phone, video conference, face to face, etc.), over the course of twenty to thirty busy talk minutes of your life. What surprised you about the amount and sequencing of the messages? Who did you respond to fastest? Who did you ignore? Why? What questions does this audit raise for you—about your own life, and about the world?

Your digital identity. Go ahead, Google yourself. Who are you, digitally? If a stranger trolled you on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, or Snapchat, or emailed or texted with you before meeting face to face, would they get to know who you really are? Why or why not? What aspects of you would surprise them if you met face to face? Is your face-to-face conversational style knowable through digital channels? Is it markedly different than your digital communication style? Are you setting people up for a disappointing letdown, a delightful surprise, or are you cultivating accurate expectations?

Your most meaningful conversations. What were some of the most meaningful conversations of your life? Can you make a list? Write them down? Describe them as stories? What details do you remember? What made them special or important? The next one might be right around the corner.

TALK, TOGETHER

These exercises allow you to practice your TALK skills in conversation with others. You can try them with anyone—over dinner with your partner, call a friend, bring an exercise to your book club, or design a workshop with your colleagues. Remember: Conversation is *co-created* and can't happen alone. Be grateful and have fun!

Pick a goal, any goal. Pick one very clear goal. Goals like the following might work well: *Learn as much as you can. Make it fun for them. Don't let your mind wander. Be radically honest (not even little white lies). Be as likable as possible. Make lots of jokes.* But you can choose anything. Now, have a conversation with only that goal in mind. You'll likely be surprised by how tough it is to keep your singular goal in mind without getting distracted or drifting into old habits, such as, in addition to learning as much as you can, profoundly caring that your partner likes you. You and your partner can pick the same goal (like “make each other laugh”), compatible but different goals (like “give advice and receive advice”), or conflicting goals (like “uncover a secret and keep a secret”). Of course, you can also try to focus on a singular goal during any conversation (with or without telling your conversation partner), to see how it goes.

Prep topics. Take thirty seconds to write down five possible topics for your next conversation. Then, just talk! When the conversation is underway, you don't have to have the topic list in front of you (although it can help)—simply writing them down now (or adding them to your digital calendar notes) will help you remember them on the fly. You don't have to raise any of these topics during the conversation, but enjoy the comfort and confidence of knowing that you can. It can be enlightening to compare your prepped-topic conversation with a conversation devoid of topic prep. What differences do you notice?

Be a topic follower. In an upcoming conversation, try to let your partner(s) take the lead. Give them space to raise topics. Let them decide when to switch to new topics or to stay on topics as the conversation unfolds. This

may be a challenging exercise in self-restraint, especially for chatty or dominant conversationalists who are unaccustomed to relinquishing topic control to their conversation partner(s).

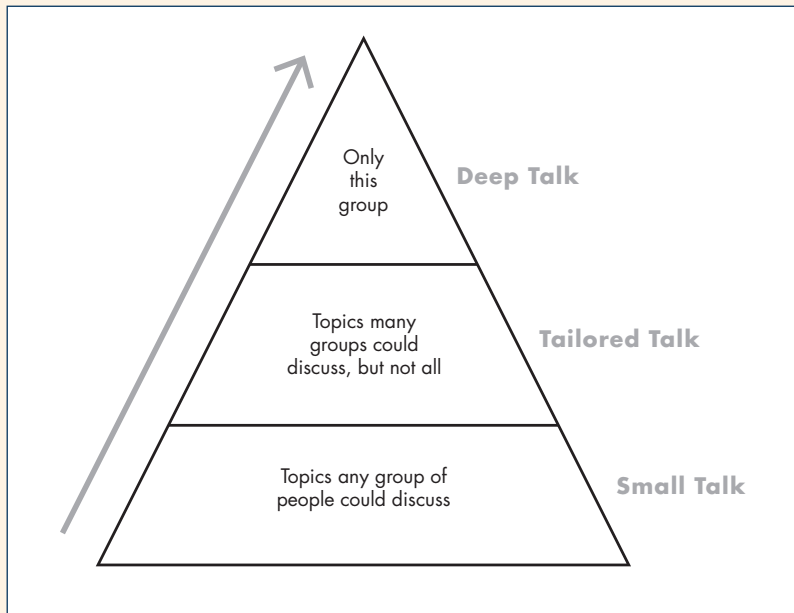
Be a topic leader. In an upcoming conversation, try to take the lead through assertive topic management. If a topic seems juicy (rich, fun), ask follow-up questions to stay on them. If the juice seems to be running dry (if you notice uncomfortable laughter, longer mutual pauses, or redundant statements), switch assertively to a new topic. You can always call back to topics that didn't seem to get enough airtime. This may be a challenging exercise, especially for quiet, hesitant, or polite conversationalists—or those in the habit of staying on topics for long stretches of time.

Stick with small talk. Try to have a conversation that stays entirely at the bottom of the topic pyramid—small talk ONLY. Nothing personal, nothing deep. What do you notice about this experience? Is it easy to do? Or hard? For a second round, now you can release the constraint. Try to start with the same topic as before, but this time you're allowed to climb the topic pyramid. Does this conversation feel better? Why?

Most people dread small talk. For many, it feels shallow, dutiful, and unrewarding. But small talk itself isn't the problem. In fact, small talk is an important and unavoidable social ritual. It's how most conversations begin, and we should use it as an opportunity to search for treasure—as a launch pad to more meaningful conversation. The mistake many of us make is that we stay on small-talk topics for too long. We should be looking for opportunities (often by asking follow-up questions) that help us climb the topic pyramid, away from small talk topics, moving into topics that feel more

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tailored to our needs and interests (tailored talk). Not every conversation is bound for deep talk, but when we land there, we should appreciate it. And fostering more awareness about how a conversation is moving up and down the topic pyramid can help ensure that you don't get stuck in small talk for too long.



Asking and answering hard questions. Make four lists of questions: (1) questions you'd be nervous to *answer* at a dinner party and (2) during a job interview, (3) questions you'd be nervous to *ask* at a dinner party and (4) during a job interview. Sit down with a trusted partner and role-play—practice asking and answering these questions with each other. Give each other feedback as you go. What answers work better than others? What variables or situations would make hard questions easier or more difficult to ask?

Never-ending follow-ups. During a conversation, try to ask follow-up questions until the conversation ends. You should respond to whatever your conversation partner says, and it's okay to switch topics, too, but you should always end each speaking turn by asking a follow-up question. Did your partner know what you were up to? Did they notice? How did it go? Though it seems extreme, many people find this to be a surprisingly easy way to learn a lot about someone and ascend the topic pyramid. If your partner is in on it, you can take turns being the never-ending follow-up asker and answerer.

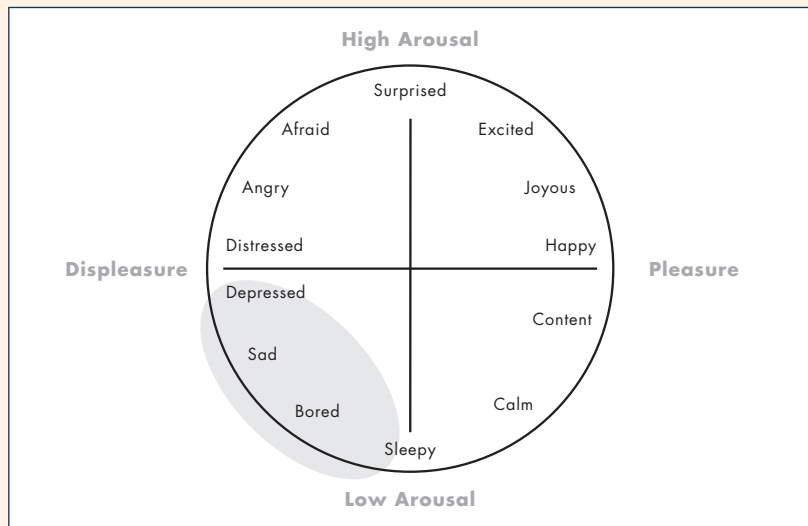
Be a journalist. In an upcoming conversation, channel your inner Oprah (or Rachel Maddow, or Anderson Cooper). Try to learn as much as you can about your conversation partner *without making any assumptions* about them. Try to avoid interjecting your own views or stories. Practice balancing follow-up questions and topic-switching questions. How did it go? How did you and your partner feel? Are you a good journalist? A good subject? In what ways?

Escalate. The next time you notice that someone seems quiet, sad, or low energy, focus your energy on improving their mood, maybe even on making them smile, with an injection of humor or warmth. Boredom is a quiet killer of conversation. If you spot it, try to fix it! Levity helps us move away from the lower-left quadrant of the "wheel of feelings." Did your efforts succeed? What happened after this moment of levity in the rest of the conversation?

De-escalate. The next time you witness or are engaged in a heated debate or moment of tension, shift your motives to focus 100 percent on de-escalation. Give up on being right and persuading your partner to see things your way, and instead focus on learning (or at least focus on making things right, mood-wise). Try to use the receptiveness recipe: acknowledge, affirm, validate their feelings, hedge your claims, avoid explanatory words like "because" and "therefore," use positive framing, divide yourself into

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multiple disagreeing parts. What happened when you shifted your mindset from persuasion to learning? Receptiveness can help us move away from the upper-left quadrant of the “wheel of feelings,” and, ultimately (and ironically), tends to make us more persuasive.



Levity reframe. Take a few minutes to tell your partner about a difficult experience in your life, recounting as many details as possible. They should engage with you conversationally, asking questions and interjecting naturally. After this first conversation, circle back and tell the story again. But this time, try to convey it with as much humor and mirth as you can muster. Can you do it? Can you make your partner laugh? What did you notice about the two different versions? Another version of this exercise: Ask someone about their work, then ask them what they’re passionate about or love doing. Notice how their energy changes.

Give a compliment. Make a point to give the next person you see a sincere compliment—something you like or admire about them. It will light up their world more than you think.

Battle of the nice guys. Sit down with someone you know and take turns giving each other compliments. Focus on complimenting concrete behaviors and traits that you truly admire about them. How did this conversation go? Why don’t we do this more often?

Validation challenge. At the beginning of each statement, every time you talk, start by affirming what your partner just said: “I love how you said that,” “Oh, how interesting,” “What a great perspective,” “Thank you for asking—how great,” “It’s so interesting that you said . . .” “It makes sense that you feel that way.” Try to focus on validating their feelings first, even if you go on to disagree with their opinion or belief.

Practice paraphrasing. In a group conversation, try paraphrasing what has been previously said by one, two, or three conversation partners. Can you tie what they’ve said together in a logical way? Can you summarize across multiple people? Are they agreeing or disagreeing? Can you draw a pithy distinction between what one person has said versus another? You might start with the phrase “What I’m hearing here is . . .” or “Am I understanding correctly that . . .” or “Just to make sure we’re on the same page, I think what you’re saying is . . .” Did others feel that you summarized their thoughts well? Did they find your paraphrasing helpful? What happened after you paraphrased—did you switch to a new topic?

Sequential validation. In a group of three or more people, go around one at a time and share one of your favorite songs, books, TV shows, etc. The conversation should move quickly from one person to the next, and everyone should share a new tidbit about themselves as it goes around and around. Here’s the important part, before you share your own “favorite,” you have to validate what the person before you said. “It’s so great that you love the song ‘Yesterday’ by the Beatles because you used to sing it with your mom. That’s so sweet and special. One of my favorite songs is a Beatles tune, too: ‘Blackbird.’” And so on. How does this exercise make you feel? What holds us back from affirming others in this way in normal conversation?

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Limited listening. During your next one-on-one video call, spend some time with your video turned on, and some time with the video turned off. How do you convey that you're listening when the camera is on? What about when the camera's off? How does your behavior change? Or in your next face-to-face conversation, try having everyone close their eyes. How does your listening change? Are you able to coordinate turn-taking? In what ways are you listening more or less attentively?

The power of gaze. Look into someone's eyes for four minutes without talking. This is said to bring people closer together, even if they don't speak the same language. Can you do it? Did you laugh? Cry? How did it feel?

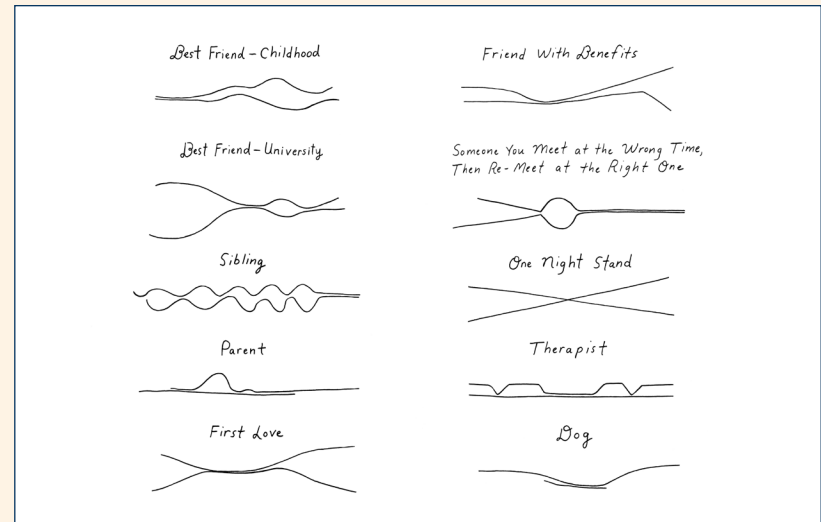
Companionable silence. Do you have people in your life with whom you can enjoy companionable silence? Who are they? How long have you known them? Are there people with whom shared silence would probably be okay, but you haven't tried it yet? In your next encounter with those folks, give it a try. Shared silence can bring you closer, quickly.

Vipassana (silence retreat). I know it sounds crazy (really, I thought it was crazy), but how long can you do a silence retreat (i.e., stay silent in the presence of others)? Can you make it through a whole conversation? A whole day? What about a week? What do you notice?

Feedback challenge. Seek constructive feedback (that you know you need) from two people you trust to give it. You should seek feedback on things that will help you in your work and life. Encourage them to be direct and honest, especially on things you might be able to improve. If you start to feel defensive, they are likely touching on a real area of opportunity. Remember, feedback is a gift, especially constructive feedback.

Relationship reboot. The trajectories of our relationships vary tremendously from one relationship to the next. Remember Olivia de Recat's illustration of *Closeness Lines*? Think of someone you care about whom you've lost touch with or have a relationship with that's hurting (your close-

ness lines feel like they're moving apart). Reach out to them to reconnect and/or reboot your relationship. Use your TALK skills to learn from them, entertain them, listen to them, and seek to understand their perspective.



Apologize. Leverage your apology skills to apologize, sincerely, to someone you care about. Say you're sorry, promise to change, and then follow through on your promises. Most likely, your partner and you will be very glad you did.

Teach TALK to others. Engage people in a conversation about what you've learned in the book. Can you recount the main learnings about Topics, Asking, Levity, and Kindness? What about Difficult Moments, Groups, and Apologies? Can you describe how conversation is a coordination game? Teaching others is a terrific test of your learning and helps to cement new information. (Of course, you can cover other topics during those conversations as well. Good conversations don't linger too long on topics that have grown stale!)

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Conversation masters. Who do you regard as particularly good at conversation? Schedule a coffee date or give them a call—see what you notice about their conversational skills after reading this book. Ask them what they think about before, during, and after their conversations. What do they think their strengths are? Brownie points if you can give them compliments about what you think they do well.

Words to live by. What’s your favorite quote about communication? Is there a famous phrase or saying that captures your conversational values well? Did anything in the book remind you of that quote? Quotes are appealing because they can help us summarize our understanding and beliefs. Here are some of my favorite communication-related quotes:

“Jazz is a conversation, but a nuanced, swift, and complicated one.”

—WYNTON MARSALIS

“You’ve got to learn your instrument, then, you practice, practice, practice. And then, when you finally get up there on the bandstand, forget all that and just wail.”

—CHARLIE PARKER

“A lack of seriousness has led to all sorts of wonderful insights.”

—KURT VONNEGUT

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning.”

—FRED ROGERS

“When true silence falls, we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.”

—HAROLD PINTER

“We were each other’s ideal audience; nothing, not the slightest innuendo or the subtlest shade of meaning, was lost between us. A joke which, if I had been speaking to a stranger, would have taken five minutes to lead up to and elaborate and explain, could be conveyed by the faintest hint. . . . Our conversation would have been hardly intelligible to anyone who had happened to overhear it; it was a rigamarole of private slang, deliberate misquotations, bad puns, bits of parody, and preparatory school smut.”

—W. H. AUDEN AND CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

“A high school student wrote to ask, ‘What was the greatest event in American history?’ I can’t say. However, I suspect that like so many ‘great’ events, it was something very simple and very quiet with little or no fanfare (such as someone forgiving someone else for a deep hurt that eventually changed the course of history). The *really* important ‘great’ things are never center stage of life’s dramas; they’re always in the wings.”

—FRED ROGERS

“Every difficult conversation starts with a sentence.”

—SELINA MEYER, *VEEP*

TOPICS TO TRY

Good conversationalists choose good topics, but they also work to make *any topic good*. Here are some topics that are referenced in the book. Technically, these are “bottom of the pyramid” topics because you could raise them with anyone, even strangers. But many of them are launch pads that can get good (exciting, interesting, meaningful, personal) quickly. None of these topics is *guaranteed* to go well, of course, but they can spark great conversation.

These are the “36 questions that lead to love” from Arthur Aron’s research. These are questions you could ask anyone, including strangers. Aron’s research suggests that people who work through these questions (in order, in three sets of twelve questions) tend to feel much closer by the end of their conversation.

1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?
2. Would you like to be famous? In what way?
3. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
4. What would constitute a “perfect” day for you?
5. When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?
6. If you were able to live to the age of ninety and retain either the mind or body of a thirty-year-old for the last sixty years of your life, which would you want?
7. Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
8. Name three things you and your partner appear to have in common.
9. For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
10. If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
11. Take four minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible.
12. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?
13. If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future or anything else, what would you want to know?
14. Is there something that you’ve dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven’t you done it?
15. What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?
16. What do you value most in a friendship?
17. What is your most treasured memory?
18. What is your most terrible memory?
19. If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living? Why?
20. What does friendship mean to you?
21. What roles do love and affection play in your life?

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22. Alternate sharing something you consider a positive characteristic of your partner. Share a total of five items.
23. How close and warm is your family? Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people's?
24. How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?
25. Make three true "we" statements each. For instance, "We are both in this room feeling..."
26. Complete this sentence: "I wish I had someone with whom I could share..."
27. If you were going to become a close friend with your partner, please share what would be important for him or her to know.
28. Tell your partner what you like about them; be very honest this time, saying things that you might not say to someone you've just met.
29. Share with your partner an embarrassing moment in your life.
30. When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
31. Tell your partner something that you like about them already.
32. What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?
33. If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?
34. Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be? Why?
35. Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?
36. Share a personal problem and ask your partner's advice on how he or she might handle it. Also, ask your partner to reflect back to you how you seem to be feeling about the problem you have chosen.

The following list covers fifty topics that you could raise with anyone (including strangers). They are drawn from research by Alison and her research collaborator, Mike Yeomans. Some of these topics overlap with the "36 Questions that lead to love" above, and some are unique.

1. What do you do for work? What do you like about it?
2. What do you enjoy doing in your free time?
3. Did you do any sports or clubs in high school?
4. Why do you participate in online studies?
5. Do you have any plans for the weekend?
6. What's something random about you?
7. Have you read anything interesting recently?
8. Have you tried anything new recently that was particularly fun?

TOPICS TO TRY

9. Are you a religious person? Why?
10. What games have you played in the past that are most memorable?
11. What is your favorite kind of music?
12. How do you most enjoy spending time with your family?
13. Do you have any fruit trees, plants, or a garden?
14. What's your favorite movie?
15. Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?
16. Do you like where you live or do you want to move?
17. Do you travel much?
18. What do you enjoy doing when the weather is beautiful?
19. Do you have a favorite type of food?
20. For what in your life do you feel most grateful? Why?
21. What was an embarrassing moment in your life?
22. What's the strangest thing about where you grew up?
23. Who is the luckiest person you know? Why?
24. If you could teleport by blinking your eyes, where would you go right now?
25. What is the last professional sports game or match you watched?
26. What is the last concert you attended? Why?
27. If you had to perform music in front of a crowd, what would you do?
28. What TV show have you watched lately?
29. What is the cutest thing you've seen a baby or child do?
30. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?
31. Would you like to be famous? In what way?
32. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
33. What would constitute a "perfect" day for you?
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35. If you were able to live to age ninety and retain either the mind or the body of a thirty-year-old for the last sixty years of your life, which would you want?
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40. What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?
41. What do you value most in a friendship?
42. If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living? Why?

TOPICS TO TRY

43. What does friendship mean to you?
44. How close and warm is your family? Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people's?
45. How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?
46. When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
47. What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?
48. If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?
49. Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item, what would it be? Why?
50. Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?

Here are ten more topics you can raise with anyone. These are personal recommendations from Alison—topics she likes to use in her conversations:

1. What are you excited about lately?
2. What is something you're good at, but don't like doing?
3. What's something you're bad at, but love to do?
4. Is there something you'd like to learn more about—or learn how to do?
5. How can we make this rewarding for you? (Or: What do you need?)
6. What can we celebrate about you?
7. Has someone made you laugh recently? What happened?
8. What is something cute your [kid/friend/pet/partner] has been doing recently?
9. Did you grow up in a city?
10. Have you fallen in love with any new [music/books/movies/shows] lately?

QUIZ: IDENTIFY YOUR CONVERSATION TYPE(S)

When you review this list, which do you identify as your predominant conversational habit (type) from each list—positive and negative? Some of these types overlap in some ways, but each has an intuitive distinction. After you’ve chosen one (or two) positive types, and one (or two) negative types, send these lists to someone you trust (a friend, classmate, coworker, etc.) and, without revealing your own selected types, ask that person for some candid feedback: “Which type(s) do you think I am? And can you provide any examples for me?”

Ultimately, we all do all of these things in conversation, and our behavior shifts from one moment to the next, but knowing your positive and negative tendencies can help you lean into your good habits and away from the not-so-good ones. (This quiz was developed by professional matchmaker Rachel Greenwald, in collaboration with Dr. Alison Wood Brooks, based on Rachel’s interviews of thousands of daters after successful and unsuccessful first dates).

13 NEGATIVE CONVERSATION TYPES

1. **The One-Upper** always tops your story, even if your story is a tale of woe. Their celebrity sighting was more exciting than yours; their case of the flu was worse than yours. They don’t listen attentively: They’re busy recalling something better, worse, or more dramatic in comparison to what you’re saying. It’s like a contest. You feel minimized.
2. **The Humblebragger** brags about their accomplishments or name-drops by masking their self-promotion as humility or complaining. They think their attempt to impress you, get you to like them, or to elicit your empathy is subtle. “I got so seasick when I was on my friend’s yacht near St. Barts last week, it was awful.” You feel annoyed, lesser-than, and maybe competitive with them.
3. **The Blahs** are perfectly nice/pleasant. Comments are bland, generic, safe. They’re polite, listen to you, but reveal almost nothing personal or intriguing about themselves. Not unique, easily forgettable. You feel bored.
4. **The Debbie Downer** is a complainer and often has a negative lens. They do not project a happy or energetic vibe. They may even think their cynicism reflects discerning taste or high standards. Body language may include crossed arms or slumping posture. You feel deflated around them.
5. **The Mirror** is just waiting their turn politely until you stop speaking so they can reflect on their own relatable experience. Whatever you say, they have a similar story to mirror back at you (“Wow, that same thing happened to me!”). This can tend to halt conversation or make it feel choppy. The exchange seems superficial, and you don’t feel heard.
6. **The One-Way Street** takes the spotlight and monopolizes the conversation. It’s all about them: their stories, opinions, agenda. You can barely get in a word, unless it’s to react affirmatively to what they’re saying. They might be arrogant or self-absorbed, or perhaps they are a charismatic storyteller. But you **feel** invisible or unimportant.
7. **The Arguer** disagrees constantly with you. They challenge what you say, even if it’s just an opinion. They have to prove their point and “win” the discussion. You **feel** frustrated, agitated, or exhausted.
8. **The Expert** knows more than you do. In fact, they know everything. They silence you with their confidence in their opinions and they are (or believe they are) always right. You feel frustrated, uneducated, naïve, or even a little dumb.

QUIZ: IDENTIFY YOUR CONVERSATION TYPE(S)

- The Adviser** offers unsolicited and emphatic advice to your problems, even when you don't want solutions. They think they know you and what's best for you. They might expect you to thank them for their knowledge. Maybe you just wanted empathy or compassion. You may feel tense, confused, or conflicted.
- The Interrupter** interrupts impatiently before you can finish your sentence. They might try to finish your sentence for you (they're sure they already know what you're going to say or are too excited to wait). You feel annoyed, frustrated, or not heard.
- The Comedian** is funny with jokes, sarcasm, quick wit, self-deprecation. At first it can be fun! But soon you crave a deeper connection. Their humor is a shield you can't penetrate, which is frustrating. You're the audience who's kept at a distance. And like crashing after a sugar high, you may feel tired, empty, or unsatisfied afterwards.
- The Chatterbox** rambles on about everything and nothing. They might seem nervous or jittery. Their stories are too long and contain irrelevant details. They seem unaware that their comments aren't engaging. You feel bored, antsy.
- The Distractor** has distracting body language or verbal tics (e.g., fidgeting, touching hair, gazing elsewhere, tugging clothes), overusing a word/phrase (e.g., um, like, you know, just to say it), or other repetitive behaviors such as throat clearing. It's hard to respect what they're really saying. You feel disconcerted or inattentive.

13 POSITIVE CONVERSATION TYPES

- The Empathizer** is always listening attentively to your story and is able to easily identify and understand your thoughts and emotions. They are sensitive to what you are choosing to reveal to them and do not insert themselves into your story, unless they are offering words of encouragement or sympathy. You feel supported.
- The Cheerleader** is actively building you up, acknowledging your accomplishments, and supporting your endeavors. They are able to incorporate your strengths into the conversation, especially when you may feel lesser-than. It feels like they are invested in you as a person. You feel empowered and motivated.
- The Energizer** is vivacious and ready to have a conversation. Their comments are thoughtful and often delivered in an animated way. They tend to be prepared to lead the conversation if they notice their partner(s) are not bringing the same type of energy to the table. They can impart their vitality and spirit onto others just by injecting energy into the conversation. You feel inspired.
- The Optimist** often has and shares a positive lens with others. They project a happy and energetic vibe and are almost always looking for the bright side. They tend to be hopeful and confident about the future. Body language may include open gestures, nodding, and smiling. You feel elevated around them.
- The Connector** is interested in making a genuine connection. They may share a similar story to you once in a while, but it is meant sincerely. The conversation feels like it flows seamlessly, and you sometimes may know immediately that you would like to maintain a relationship with this person. Especially in larger group settings, this person may also take it upon themselves to introduce and connect you with others as well. The exchange often feels genuine and helpful.

QUIZ: IDENTIFY YOUR CONVERSATION TYPE(S)

6. **The Planner** rarely forgets to follow up with you on important events or people in your life and often proactively plans to have regular conversations with you. It may often feel like they take the time to prepare for their conversations with you, as they refer back to the stories that you have discussed with them in the past. They tend to be thoughtful and supportive. You feel significant and noteworthy.
7. **The Soother** may disagree with you on a certain topic, but they maintain an easy disposition that allows for an open and productive conversation. The fact that you disagree with one another does not hinder the conversation and it does not feel like they are trying to “win” the discussion or change your opinion. They are receptive to your points. You feel safe, respected, or understood.
8. **The Learner** may be a believer in the growth mindset. They are almost always trying to learn more and tend to be inquisitive about how they can understand something further. They are not afraid to admit that they do not know everything and are interested to hear your thoughts and point of view. You may feel helpful, informed, or may even be inspired to learn more yourself.
9. **The Teacher** does not offer unsolicited advice to your problems but makes it clear to you that they are available to help you whenever you might need. If and when you do ask them for help, they are generous and courteous with their knowledge. They may enjoy being useful to you, and they often do not expect you to thank them. They might be a person that comes to mind for you when you feel uncertain about a certain situation. You feel comforted or supported.
10. **The Listener** is especially skilled at actively listening to you. They are receptive, thoughtful, and can often be empathetic. They rarely interrupt you—and when they do interrupt, it is so that they can make sure they understand what you are saying. They tend to give you nonverbal cues (e.g., nodding, smiling, laughing at the appropriate times) and verbal cues (e.g., repeating back a portion of what you are saying, asking appropriate follow-up questions). They devote their full attention to your thoughts and contributions. You feel heard, appreciated, or valued.
11. **The Jokester** often finds the right time to insert humor into a conversation. They may be especially skilled at telling jokes, injecting sarcasm, quick wit, or self-deprecating gags, but the crucial element is they know the appropriate time to reveal these with you. They are still capable of having a serious conversation with you, as they will only use their humor if it is suitable. You may feel amused, delighted, or gladdened.
12. **The Storyteller** is especially talented at talking with you about stories that are engaging or compelling to you. Their stories are clear, absorbing, and you rarely think that they are rambling on or that they are including irrelevant details. They can sometimes be interactive with the story to make sure that they are keeping your attention. You feel entertained, immersed, or involved.
13. **The Curious Cat** is not afraid to ask questions. They are genuinely curious to hear more about the situation at hand. Their questions tend to be thought-provoking, interesting, and thorough. Their queries are not meant to divert attention away from you or distract you, but rather to add more clarity and context to what you are telling them. You feel acknowledged, interesting, or recognized.

“Now that you don’t
have to be perfect,
you can be good.”

—JOHN STEINBECK