

Getting socializing down to a science

Too shy at parties? Schmoozing class might stir things up
[Chicagoland Edition]

Chicago Tribune - Chicago, Ill.
Author: Kayce T Ataiyero
Date: Jul 23, 2007
Section: News
Document Types: News
Text Word Count: 998

Document Text

The scene: a mock cocktail party for Harper College's centennial. The cast: students in one of the college's most popular and unusual courses, a laboratory in the science of schmoozing.

The student-partygoers mingled outside their classroom, filling the hallway with a rousing chatter that gave the faux festivities a real feel, a bit too real for Helen Sebastian.

After excusing herself to go to the restroom, Sebastian returned to the party to find everyone engrossed in conversation, leaving no easy way to join in. In a scenario that has played out many times in her real life, she stood nervously on the sidelines, fretting about how to approach the group.

"You walk up and people give you the look like, 'Who are you?'" said Sebastian, 41, of Palatine, as instructor Marianne Rowe-Dimas walked over to coach her on how to dive in. "You rescued me. But we don't have you out there."

For the socially apprehensive, it can be scary out there in the real world, really scary. After all, summer is the season of socializing, of barbecues and wedding receptions, high school reunions and company picnics, of fun -- and fear. While many navigate this social landscape with a natural ease, others often are plagued by awkward introductions, clumsy conversations and fumbled first impressions.

Whether due to anxiety, introversion or shyness, discomfort in new situations and lack of social skills are all hurdles to successful socializing, experts say. Any one of those conditions can cause a person to fade into the background of a social situation or to avoid it altogether. The class at Harper -- "How to Schmooze" -- aims to yank these could-be social butterflies out of their cocoons.

Although it's unlikely an introverted person would become fully extroverted, it's possible to help them become more outgoing, said Brent Roberts, professor of personality development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Adults between ages 20 and 40 typically experience a natural change in personality, and courses such as the one at Harper could help facilitate that, he said.

"If you are setting the goal to change your personality, you should make it a very long-term goal," he said. "If you are going to take a class, take a few and build on them."

A crash course on socializing, How to Schmooze is designed to arm students with tools to tackle their social fears. Rowe-Dimas, a communication specialist, walks participants through the basics, covering everything from handshakes and eye contact to how to initiate, maintain and exit a conversation with grace.

She also serves as wingman during a series of exercises that simulate real-world social settings, giving students guidance and encouragement in overcoming social hang-ups.

The one-day, \$39 course, which Rowe-Dimas began at Harper two years ago, is so popular there's a waiting list. The school is planning to offer additional sessions in coming months. The class, which typically has between 16 and 25 students, attracts participants from all stages of life, from young adults facing their first year of college to retirees looking to kick their social lives into high gear.

Rowe-Dimas said she often has students who say their spouses made them sign up so they would be better company at parties.

On a recent evening, she went around the room, asking people why they were there. Called on to respond, one woman buried her face in her shirt and said, "I hate being around people."

Offering reassurance, Rowe-Dimas said, "Sometimes, the thing we hate we could really enjoy if we stepped outside our comfort zone."

Over the next 2 1/2 hours, she gently nudged students over that threshold by offering them her Schmooze Rules for social success.

There are the do's: Look friendly by smiling and giving eye contact; make introductions short and sweet; have something interesting to say.

And the don'ts: Don't talk about personal problems or complain; don't fidget or stand with hands in pockets or arms folded across the chest; don't keep talking if someone looks bored.

There was special emphasis on preparation, making sure you go to the party with a snappy introduction and interesting conversational topics in tow. And there was plenty of practice in joining, maintaining and ending conversations, a continuum that Rowe-Dimas said poses a challenge for most people.

During a break, Karen Kuzniar of Arlington Heights said she picked up some helpful hints -- such as focusing on the bridge of a person's nose to mimic eye contact -- but she conceded she still had a way to go.

"It's not a cure-all but it's good first step to addressing some things," she said.

Experts agree. Larina Kase, a Philadelphia-based psychologist specializing in social anxiety, said preparing in advance for a social situation can be helpful, but she cautioned not to get too caught up on scripting the scene.

Kase is co-author of "The Confident Speaker: Beat Your Nerves and Communicate at Your Best in Any Situation." It's best, she said, just to be yourself, get out of your own head and into the other person, which will help reduce self-consciousness.

"One of the positive things in that is that everybody realizes that they already know these things and they just need affirmation," she said.

James Vasquez, 35, of Mt. Prospect plans to do just that. A computer programmer who has worked from his home for the last 10 years, Vasquez said he hasn't had that much experience socializing.

Now that he's gotten some tips from the class, he plans to join a couple of social clubs to try out his new schmooze moves.

"I have the tools so I need the experience. It doesn't mean anything until I go out there," he said. "I am taking those steps. They might be small but at least I am trying."

kataiyero@tribune.com

[Illustration]

Caption: Photo: Students work on their conversation skills during an exercise last week in Harper College's "How to Schmooze" class. Tribune photo by Candice C. Cusic

Credit: By Kayce T. Ataiyero, Tribune staff reporter

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

"You walk up and people give you the look like, 'Who are you?'" said [Helen Sebastian], 41, of Palatine, as instructor Marianne Rowe-Dimas walked over to coach her on how to dive in. "You rescued me. But we don't have you out there."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.