

## **Mingling at Business Functions**

By Jill Evans Kryston, Etiquette Consultant

**Q: My new job requires me to attend frequent business functions, but I panic just thinking about entering a crowded room full of people I don't know. Can you offer any strategies to help overcome my anxiety and be more successful with small talk?**

A: Research has shown the number one skill in business is the ability to mingle with other people, yet 90% of Americans have “minglephobia.” The thought of spending time with strangers can leave you stressed and wanting to stay home to watch *Dancing with the Stars* instead.

One goal for success is to focus on the needs and comforts of others. If you arrive at an event with the genuine intent of making others feel special, it will go a long way with helping to improve your own comfort level.

Learning the art of “small talk” in conversation begins with a set of tools. Though some things about you can't be changed, your voice, facial expressions and body language can easily be altered. Most people will have a positive response to a pleasant voice, a warm smile, good posture, and attractive clothes.

The most effective first impression is to greet people with a friendly, “Hello, I don't think we've met before,” or “I hope you don't mind my joining you,” and clearly state your name. Follow with a firm web-to-web handshake using the right hand while making eye contact. Don't stare a person down or look around the room to see whom you might want to meet next. Learn to make proper introductions by introducing persons of lower authority to persons of higher authority.

Everyone enjoys hearing another person say their name. When you're meeting someone for the first time, repeat their name and that will also help you remember it. Occasionally, we all forget a name. Don't feel embarrassed if you have to ask for help while struggling to remember.

Most people like to talk about themselves, so ask questions. Be careful to avoid invasive questions that would reveal people's social, economic and educational status. Instead, ask what they like to do or how they spend their time.

In order to have an interesting conversational repertoire, it is helpful to have a general knowledge of news and current events as well as information about books, movies and other popular topics. While a good conversationalist adds to what the other person is saying, you should never dominate a conversation, brag or “one-up” the other person. Avoid discussing politics, health and religion. Remember too, the best conversationalist is also a good listener.

Social events are a place to establish relationships for the future. Set a goal of how many people you'd like to meet while working a room. Pay attention to conversations and think of ways in which you can benefit others with personal references, resources or referrals.

You are now ready to make an entrance and engage in conversation. Find a group and begin with a compliment, “This looks like a lively group,” or use subjects such as weather, food, music or environment to “fade in” to a conversation while standing close by. Always excuse yourself before entering and exiting conversations. Finally, reap the rewards of positive social interaction by finding reasons to follow-up with your new acquaintances after the event.