

Here is a CBC article about the benefits of meeting new people.

By Catherine Zhu

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Jax Irwin is a Toronto-based broadcaster who calls strangers from the East Coast of Canada on the phone.

When Jax Irwin felt lonely and homesick after moving to Toronto from Dartmouth, N.S., she started calling random strangers on the East Coast of Canada using phone numbers she found through Whitepages, an online phone directory.

“Sometimes, right off the bat, they say, ‘Who is this?’ And I always identify myself. I don’t want to trick anybody, but more folks than not will just keep gabbing and it’s wild, they’re just looking to have a conversation,” Irwin told *The Current*’s host Matt Galloway.

Now, Irwin, an independent broadcaster, has gone viral on social media for posting clips of those calls.

The conversations, she says, are often simple and spontaneous, touching on the weather, dinner plans or how the person on the other end of the line is doing.

Gillian Sandstrom says striking up a conversation with a stranger can benefit both the person who initiates it and the person on the receiving end because those “tiny interactions” can provide a sense of connection at a time when many people are experiencing loneliness.

Sandstrom is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Sussex in England who studies the benefits of talking to strangers and the author of *Once Upon a Stranger: The Science of How ‘Small’ Talk Can Add Up to a Big Life*.

Where did all the strangers go?

We live in a time, says Sandstrom, when many everyday interactions with strangers have simply disappeared.

Tasks that once required face-to-face interaction, like going to the bank and speaking with a teller, can now be done with just a few taps on a phone.

While that convenience has obvious benefits, she says, there's a cost to having fewer opportunities to practise talking to people we don't know.

"Like, where do friends ... or your network of people at work that can give you recommendations on a job or help mentor you come from?"

"Where did these things come from if you don't first talk to a stranger?"

One of Irwin's most memorable calls over the past two years was with a woman who immediately told her she was excited to see her son, who was home from Korea.

The woman was so eager to share the news with someone that her excitement quickly rubbed off on Irwin, making her feel almost like part of the family, she says.

"Happiness was dripping from her and I was excited for her," said Irwin. "I was like, 'Everybody's home!'"

"I don't even know these people, and she knows that she doesn't know me, and she's just excited to tell anybody."

Experts say talking to people we don't know can offer unique benefits, from fostering connection to exposing us to new perspectives.

Though deep, close relationships are also essential to our well-being, Sandstrom says conversations with strangers can offer something particularly valuable: "a source of information and novelty."

People we know well, she says, tend to share some of our interests, values and routines, while someone unfamiliar can expose us to perspectives and ideas we might not otherwise encounter.

“There's that element of surprise ... that we don't get very often with the people that we're close to.”

For Sandstrom, conversations with strangers have introduced her to people with jobs she never knew existed and given her a different perspective on the world — from a pyrotechnician who sets off New Year's Eve fireworks to a sperm bank manager, a theatrical wig maker and someone who provides first aid to bats.

It can also help ease some of the fear we may have about strangers.

“I can talk to pretty much anybody and I'll probably have a pleasant conversation, which changes how I look at the world and how I walk through the world,” said Sandstrom.

“I feel safer, I feel more trusting of other people, despite all the stuff we see in the news.”

Why are we so afraid to talk?

Despite the potential benefits, people are often naturally hesitant to talk to strangers.

When Sandstrom began studying these interactions, she initially thought she could identify people's biggest fears and find ways to address them.

Instead, she discovered there was no simple list. People worry about many things: talking too much and being disliked, running out of things to say, facing an awkward silence, or being rejected — the fear that a stranger simply won't want to talk.

But her research suggests those fears are often “completely out of proportion to reality.”

In social psychology, says Sandstrom, the “liking gap” describes the disparity between how much we think another person likes us and how they actually feel about us.

When people talk to strangers, they often do not only discover the conversation went better than expected, but that “people like you more than you think”.

This type of fear, she says, comes from the “fundamental need to belong”.

“So, it’s really, really important that we don’t get rejected, right?”

Knowing that these fears are something we all experience can be “comforting,” said Sandstrom.

“It’s not just you — most people are a little bit anxious about whether they have the social skills they need.”

The more you practise, the easier it gets

So why do we still feel the same trepidation when we encounter another stranger, even after having a positive interaction before?

Part of the reason, says Sandstrom, is that we tend to give other people the credit when an interaction goes well, while blaming ourselves when it goes badly. And because every stranger is different, we don’t necessarily generalize a good experience to the next person.

Sandstrom recommends starting small — including changing routines to create more opportunities for interaction, and choosing situations where conversation comes naturally.

Service workers, such as coffee shop baristas, can be easy to approach because they’re trained to be friendly and the interaction has a natural time limit, she says.

People walking their dogs are often used to others stopping to chat, while travelling creates opportunities to strike up a conversation by asking strangers for advice or help.

And talking to strangers isn’t just for extroverts, says Sandstrom. As an introvert herself, she says these interactions can work well for more reserved people because they offer a degree of control: you can choose who to approach, find a comfortable situation and walk away if the conversation doesn’t go anywhere.

In a disconnected world, Sandstrom says talking to strangers is also “an act of kindness.”

“It really means something to someone for you to show that you see them as a fellow human,” she said. For Irwin, talking to strangers does exactly that.

“I have no other choice but to see the best in the world when I make these calls, and it's a really, really good excuse to do that.” “It makes me a little bit more hopeful.”

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