

How to Talk to Strangers

by Kio Stark

Julia Rothman

Kio Stark has always talked to strangers — she believes these fleeting moments give us new ways to fall in love with the world. She shares five ways to spark a meaningful interaction with someone you've never met before.

What does it take to say a simple hello to a stranger you pass on the street? How might that interaction continue? What are the places in which you are more likely to interact with people you don't know? How do you get out of a conversation? These sound like easy questions. They are not.

Each of the following expeditions provides a structure and a contrivance to help you explore the world of people you don't know. Each gives you a method or a reason for talking to a stranger, a mechanical problem to solve.

You can do them alone or with a partner. In pairs, you each go on separate expeditions and report back. Take notes with your mind as you go along, and write them down when you get back. Share your notes, on your blog, your social networks, anywhere you write about your experiences. You can enlighten your friends and readers with your observations. Documenting experiences is a special way of processing them for yourself. You can do them all in one day or spaced out over months. You might enjoy one of them and do it over and over. You might try this and find it's not for you. Anything is possible.

The guiding principle of these expeditions is respect for others, and every explorer should pay careful attention to their own conduct. If you are male or have a male appearance, be especially respectful when speaking to women and people who have a female appearance, since by default you could be seen as threatening or intrusive. Be polite, keep a bit of extra physical distance, and if people aren't giving you signals that they're open to interaction, don't push it.

Remember the tremendous cultural differences in expectations of eye contact and street behavior. Remember that context matters. These expeditions may not all make sense in the place where you are. So for these same reasons, I recommend against doing them in cultures you're not steeped in or native to (apart from the last one; see below).

The expeditions are presented in order of increasing challenge — increased complexity, increased emotional risk, increased potential for depth of interaction. The first expedition is a warm-up to help you slow down your pace and sharpen your awareness, hone your skills at observing public behavior, and get you in the right frame of mind. I highly recommend you do this once no matter which other expeditions you might choose.

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1. Watch and learn

You'll need a notebook for this. Spend one hour in a public place where you are not likely to encounter people you know. Try a park, a café, or a public plaza, a tourist destination, a bus or train. Anywhere you can linger and watch people who are not moving rapidly is perfect. Choose a good place to sit so you'll be able to see a variety of people at a relatively close distance. Sit still. Turn off your devices; get off the grid. I really mean OFF. It's only an hour — you can do it! Part of the challenge here is full presence.

Start looking around you. First, describe the setting. Where are you? What are the most interesting features of the place? What is it for? What do people do there that it isn't designed for? What kinds of people are there? Take notes on what they look like, how they are dressed, what they do and don't do, how they interact with one another. If there is a big crowd, you can focus on just a few people if you want. If you are inspired to invent backstories for any of them, make sure to specify the details about them that inform your narrative. So, for example, if you conclude that someone is confident or rich, homeless or shy, a tourist or lives in the neighborhood, what told you that? Their posture, their skin, their clothing? Slow down your mind and understand where your assumptions come from.

2. Say hello

Take a walk in a populous place like a park with paths or along a city sidewalk. Define a territory for yourself: Are you going to walk around the block? From the oak tree to the far bench? Give yourself a reasonable territory to traverse, something that will take at least five to ten minutes. Choose a place that has a reasonable density of pedestrians but not a packed pathway. Walk slowly. Your mission is to say hello to every person you pass by. All of them. Try to look them in the eye, but don't worry if they don't hear you or ignore you. You're just getting warmed up. Now try it again and mix in phatic observations — the kind that mean little overtly but speak of social acknowledgment — in place of greetings, things like "Cute dog," "I like your hat," or "Cold out today!" These acts of noticing pierce the veil of anonymity and create momentary social space.

Keep a keen awareness of the dynamics of each of these micro-interactions. You're behaving a little strangely in public, so pay attention to how people respond. You might make a few people uncomfortable, but since you're doing it with everyone and you're not stopping, the discomfort should be minimal. So what's happening when you greet people? Do they smile? Do they laugh? Are they startled? Do they seem uneasy? Do they talk to their companions about what's happening? If you're nervous about your comfort, you can take a friend along. The friend doesn't have to say anything to anyone; they're just there to make you feel safe.

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3. Get lost

This expedition is a sequence of requests that get successively more involved as you

progress — if you are able to — through each stage. Have some paper and a pen handy and keep your smartphone tucked away. The first step is to ask someone for directions. If they stop and give you directions, you ask them to draw you a map. If they draw you the map, you ask for their phone number so you can call if you get lost. If they give you their phone number, you call it. A surprising number of people give out their phone number. Over the years that I used this exercise in my classes, only one student ever actually made the call. “I was surprised by how terrifying that last step was,” she told me. “How much space we give one another in this crowded city.” I encourage you to be brave here.

Take care in choosing a starting place and destination — you may have to try this a few times to find a pair that works well. It can’t be too simple to get to, or the map won’t seem necessary. But it shouldn’t be so complicated that it’s too hard to explain. I created this exercise almost a decade ago, and it’s been made a little harder to pull off with the ubiquity of smartphones. You need to appear plausibly unable to navigate without a handdrawn map or list of directions. Taking the time to draw or write directions is a slight incursion, and this exercise is about incrementally escalating incursions.

This expedition also requires you to lie. Pay attention to how that feels.

4. Ask a question

People talk if you give them the chance to. They talk when you listen. This expedition calls for asking a stranger a disarmingly intimate question and then simply listening to what they say. By “disarmingly intimate” I mean a question that’s unexpectedly real and personal. It’s a question that goes to the center of a person’s self. It should also be a question that doesn’t require an act of remembering. You want something that people can tap into in an immediate, visceral way. My favorite is “What are you afraid of?” A few people say things like spiders and mice and avoid the emotional invitation, but the majority of people go straight to their hearts and tell you about their fears of death, failure, loneliness and loss — and the things they say are amazing to hear, amazing to have them shared with you. You can come up with your own questions too, and try out more than one.

The structure works like this. It relies on using video or audio recording equipment (you can use your smartphone) to help legitimate the intrusion and give it some logic. The camera is both a contrivance to permit the question and a little bit of mediation that allows people to open up. You approach someone who is not in a hurry and ask them if you can ask them a question on camera. Some people may be willing to answer you but not on camera — that’s fine! The point is the conversation, not the recording. Start recording before you pose your question. Then be quiet. If they ask you to clarify, go ahead, but don’t give them any examples of answers. Your job is to listen. If the person seems comfortable talking, you can ask follow-up questions, but don’t be too hasty. Give people a chance to fill their own silences. That’s often when the magic really happens.

5. Don’t belong

This final expedition takes you into deeper, more complex territory. It’s the most emotionally risky. Choose a place you don’t fit in, where you are in the minority in some way. If you are someone who spends the majority of your time in the minority, this experience may be as common as rain to you, and you may want to skip it. You should be noticeably out of place — perhaps by race, gender, ethnicity, age, ability, membership, appearance or other categories of difference. The goal here is simply to observe: What are people doing? How are they responding to your presence? You can try engaging and

see how that goes. Be aware, be observant, see if you can understand the micro-local assumptions about public behavior and cleave to them.

Obviously, don't put yourself in any danger, don't choose a place where you'd expect to be met with aggression. You may have a wonderful, eye-opening experience. But also prepare yourself: It's possible you'll feel really awful after this expedition. If that happens, you'll have experienced something essential to empathy: what it feels like to be treated as invisible or unwelcome. I do not wish these things for you, but if you feel them, I hope they will change the way you see the world.

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