NEWS LESSON

Why Do We Avoid Talking to Strangers?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What makes it easy to start talking to someone you do not know?
2. Would you enjoy a journey more if a stranger spoke to you?
3. Where does a short conversation feel welcome?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**retreats**	☐	A	the accepted rules for polite behaviour
2	**scarcely**	☐	B	ways of seeing or thinking about something
3	**ordinariness**	☐	C	the quality of being normal and not special
4	**etiquette**	☐	D	almost not at all
5	**reinforced**	☐	E	slowly become weaker and disappear
6	**perspectives**	☐	F	made stronger
7	**wither**	☐	G	moves away from other people to a quieter place
8	**anonymity**	☐	H	the state of not being known by name to others

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Two imagined passengers share a train for an hour without speaking. A February 2026 Guardian feature asked whether small, unplanned conversations are being lost.

1 Imagine two passengers sharing a train carriage for an hour, scarcely acknowledging each other's existence. One disappears into a stream of messages; the other retreats behind headphones. Neither is behaving badly, and both may have perfectly legitimate reasons for wanting privacy. Still, the scene is a familiar one. A Guardian feature in February 2026 asked whether we are losing small, unplanned conversations like these. It explored the concern rather than measuring a decline in everyone's daily life.

2 The writer described encounters that had proved unexpectedly rewarding, including a conversation with an older woman on a train and an exchange with someone working in hospitality. These were not life-changing friendships or dramatic revelations. Their significance lay in their ordinariness. For a few minutes, two people stepped outside their established social circles and recognised each other as individuals rather than background characters in a busy public space. Such moments can be fleeting, but they may leave an impression out of proportion to their length.

3 Modern technology offers obvious explanations for their scarcity. Our phones fill almost every empty interval, while headphones signal that we would prefer not to be disturbed. There are less visible barriers too: social anxiety, uncertainty about etiquette and the fear of making an unwanted approach. The pandemic may have reinforced habits of keeping our distance. Moreover, any appeal for more spontaneous interaction must acknowledge unequal experiences of safety. A conversation that feels harmless to one person may feel intrusive or threatening to another, particularly when boundaries are ignored.

4 Yet research into social interaction suggests that we may systematically underestimate the pleasure of talking to unfamiliar people. The anticipation can be awkward, while the conversation itself turns out to be warmer than expected. A remark about a delayed train, a shared laugh or a question about a dog can provide a low-pressure opening. The important skill is not relentless confidence, but sensitivity: noticing whether someone seems receptive, listening carefully and knowing when to back off. Genuine connection cannot be forced without defeating its purpose.

5 There are wider consequences to consider. When our social worlds are increasingly organised around existing friends, algorithms and shared interests, we lose some opportunities to encounter perspectives that differ from our own. Brief conversations are hardly a cure for loneliness, but they can make a city feel less anonymous and remind us that strangers have complicated lives. They may also soften the tendency to treat people outside our group as a faceless crowd. A society can be highly connected digitally while allowing everyday curiosity about other people to wither.

6 The solution is not a campaign to make every commuter talkative. Silence can be restorative, and nobody owes strangers their attention. But we could leave room for the occasional unplanned exchange instead of automatically shutting ourselves away. Looking up from a screen, offering a genuine compliment or asking a simple question can be enough. Sometimes nothing comes of it. On other days, a conversation breaks through the anonymity and changes the mood of an entire journey.

Sources: The Guardian. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The article suggests that people tend to expect a conversation to be worse than it proves to be. (T) (F) (NG)
2. The writer thinks that passengers who stay silent on a train are behaving badly. (T) (F) (NG)
3. Researchers have measured how long the average unplanned conversation lasts. (T) (F) (NG)
4. The writer accepts that a call for more conversation may affect people differently depending on how safe they feel. (T) (F) (NG)
5. The writer expects talking to strangers to cure loneliness. (T) (F) (NG)

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

assertive	faceless	hesitant	legitimate	receptive	relentless	restorative	spontaneous

1. Her employer accepted that she had a _____ reason for being late, as the trains had been cancelled.
2. The committee was _____ to new ideas, so the proposal was approved without much argument.
3. Despite the _____ pressure from the press, the minister refused to comment.
4. The best moments of the trip were _____ : we simply stopped at a village market because it looked interesting.
5. Critics describe the agency as a _____ bureaucracy in which nobody knows who is responsible.
6. After a week of back-to-back meetings, a quiet weekend in the country proved genuinely _____ .

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Her _____ to answer personal questions made the interviewer cautious. **(RELUCTANT)**
2. The _____ of smartphones has changed how commuters spend their journeys. **(PREVALENT)**
3. Her remarks were _____ taken as a criticism, although none was intended. **(MISTAKE)**
4. Years of silence led to growing _____ between the neighbours. **(ESTRANGE)**
5. Silence on a train should not be mistaken for _____ . **(HOSTILE)**

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level the preposition is part of a fixed adjective phrase. Learn the whole chunk, such as fraught with, not the adjective alone.

by for from of on to with

1. Silence can be conducive _____ reflection, but it can also isolate people.
2. Any campaign for friendlier trains is contingent _____ people's sense of safety.
3. Approaching a stranger can be fraught _____ awkwardness.
4. Constant scrolling may be symptomatic _____ a wider reluctance to engage.
5. No passenger should be held accountable _____ a stranger's discomfort.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. How can someone invite a conversation without making the other person feel trapped?
2. Would a place feel friendlier if more people said hello?
3. Which matters more for a good conversation: having something in common or being curious?

9 Role-play: a quiet journey

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the chatty colleague

You and your colleague take the same train to work every morning. You find the journey boring in silence. Ask your colleague to talk more, and explain why it matters to you.

Student B · the quiet colleague

You like to read or listen to music on the train, and you need a quiet start to the day. Explain what you need, but try to agree a plan that is fair for both of you.

Useful phrases

Do you mind if we chat for a bit?

I'd rather keep the journey quiet, if that's okay.

I find the trip boring when we don't talk.

How about we talk on the way home instead?

That's fair, I didn't realise you felt that way.

Let's try it for a week and see how it goes.

Afterwards, tell the class: what plan did you agree, and was it fair for both people?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 G · 2 D · 3 C · 4 A · 5 F · 6 B · 7 E · 8 H

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 legitimate · 2 receptive · 3 relentless · 4 spontaneous · 5 faceless · 6 restorative

6 Word forms

1 reluctance · 2 prevalence · 3 mistakenly · 4 estrangement · 5 hostility

7 Language focus

1 to · 2 on · 3 with · 4 of · 5 for

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