

Is it good or bad to talk to strangers?

Background

Interpersonal social interactions and relationships are among the most important determinants of our personal and collective health and happiness (Saphire-Bernstein, [2013](#); Wang et al., [2023](#)). In fact, studies suggest that social disconnection is as harmful to one's health as many of the other leading risk factors for premature death, including smoking, obesity, elevated blood pressure, and high cholesterol (Pantell et al., [2013](#)).

While many recognize the value of close relationships with friends and family, everyday social interactions with acquaintances and strangers are also common and individuals might wonder whether these interactions are good or bad. This question is particularly salient in light of decades of social messaging about the dangers of strangers. Furthermore, with increasing recognition of the need to promote healthy social behaviours, the role of these casual social interactions needs to be understood (Regan et al., [2022](#)).

Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to synthesize empirical evidence related to the importance of social interactions with strangers. In doing so, we focus on the casual, everyday, unstructured conversations and interpersonal exchanges between casual or unfamiliar contacts that might routinely take place in safe public environments (e.g., cafes, parks, bus stops, waiting rooms) throughout the natural course of one's day.

Evidence from Existing Studies

Research related to interpersonal interactions with strangers and casual acquaintances is persistently neglected when compared to that focusing on more intimate social connections (Perlman, [2010](#); Sprecher, [2022](#); Granovetter, [1973](#)). Despite this shortfall, the available literature highlights that most interactions with strangers are not only safe (Dadkova et al., [2015](#); Wang et al., [2016](#)), but also enhance well-being (Sandstrom et al., [2014](#); Van Lange & Columbis, [2021](#)). Indeed, researchers have clearly demonstrated that talking to strangers reduces loneliness (Itzchakov et al., [2022](#)), increases happiness (Sandstrom & Dunn, [2014](#)), and exposes us to new ideas, perspectives, and information (Atir et al., [2022](#); Mannucci & Perry-Smoth, [2022](#); Nguyen et al., [2015](#); Tribble, [2021](#)). The more time individuals spend talking with others, particularly on topics of genuine depth and interest, the better off people are (Mehl et al., [2010](#); Kardas et al., [2021](#)). As Diener & Seligman ([2002](#)) showed, very happy people talk to strangers. Strangers have also been identified as important sources of support and aid (Deri et al., [2019](#)), meaning that our ability to engage them can be critical, especially in times of crisis. In addition to these individual-level benefits, interactions between diverse individuals can also help break down social divides and promote a sense of community safety.

and cohesion (Wojcieszak & Warner, [2020](#); Pettigrew & Tropp, [2006](#)). This suggests that there may be widespread societal benefits for increased social interactions between strangers.

Yet, despite the clear empirical benefits of social interactions with strangers, it is apparent that we underestimate the value of social interactions with strangers, overestimate the costs, and even fear such interactions (Epley & Schroeder, [2014](#); Savitsky et al., [2001](#); Zegans et al., [1972](#)). For example, Sandstrom et al. ([2020](#)) showed individuals tend to avoid interactions with strangers because they mistakenly fear they won't enjoy the conversation, won't like or be liked by the other person, feel they lack conversational skills. These roadblocks are possibly the by-product of miscalibrated evolutionary cognition that pits "us" against "them" (Batter et al., [1979](#); Belfer-Cohen & Hovers, [2020](#); Zeeb et al., [2020](#)). Moreover, with each generation, observational evidence suggests the discomfort of social interactions with strangers is increasing (Kuehl et al., [2017](#)), just as our trust in others is decreasing (Smith et al., [2010](#)). As such, many individuals reframe from engaging with strangers (Jeste et al., [2020](#)), causing them to miss out on these positive benefits (Toumishay, [1989](#); Kumar & Epley, [2022](#)). For example, Epley & Schroeder ([2014](#)) showed through a series of five experiments on trains and in waiting rooms that while individuals typically believe that they prefer solitude over social interactions with strangers, in reality their experiences are more positive when they interact than when they keep to themselves. Furthermore, they found that these positive benefits are experienced by both participants involved in the social exchange. Other observational and experimental studies have replicated these findings (Schroeder et al., [2021](#)) and further demonstrated that even very minimal interactions (e.g., saying hello, making eye contact, expressing thanks, offering a compliment) contribute to greater life satisfaction and positive emotions (Boothby et al., [2020](#); Gunaydin et al., [2021](#); Sandstrom et al., [2014](#)). Additionally, studies show that simple exchanges, such as asking a question, sharing something about yourself, or interjecting your perspective, provide powerful opportunities for making and deepening relationships (Sprecher et al., [2013](#); Huang et al., [2017](#); Hirschi et al., [2022](#)) – meaning that informal casual interactions with strangers can provide opportunities to expand one's social network or practice social skills (Bornstein et al., [1989](#)). This is true even for more introverted individuals who can benefit from engaging in extraverted interactions (Margolis et al., [2020](#)).

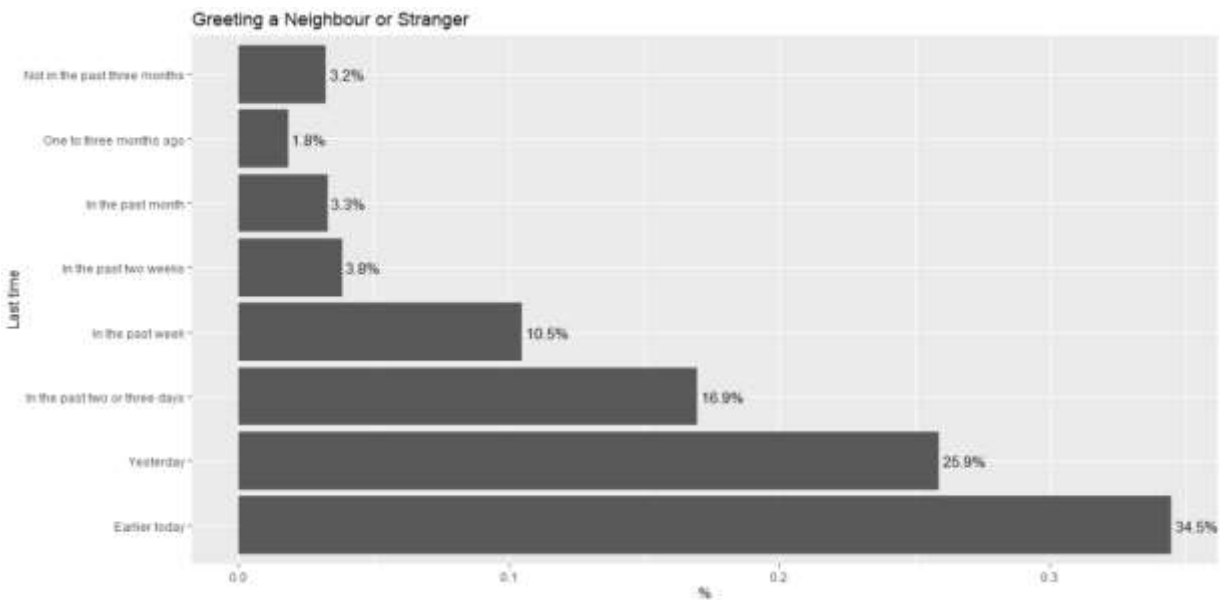
Nevertheless, some individuals might feel that they can derive as much if not more benefit from interactions with family members or close friends (Farzan et al., [2014](#)). However, studies actually show that interacting solely with close relationships is less beneficial than interacting with a mix of strong and weak ties (Card et al., [2022](#)). In fact, the more diverse our social interactions are (in terms of interacting with different types of social contacts), the higher our wellbeing (Collins et al., [2022](#)). For example, Cohen et al. ([1997](#)) famously showed that individuals with more diverse social networks were less susceptible to infectious diseases – a finding that may have particular salience in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. Similar, Pan et al., ([2019](#)) showed that contact with peripheral edges of one's social network is important for protecting cognitive function in older adults – perhaps because of the particular stimulation these social interactions provide. Furthermore, in some situations, individuals may actually benefit more from support and interactions with more distal social ties (Moreton et al., [2023](#)) – perhaps because the risks and conflicts of interest are less palpable in these more casual relationships. As such, while individuals should invest most of their social time in close relationships (Hall et al., [2020](#)), they should not neglect connections with others.



In summary, strangers are an important, though under-appreciated source of social interaction, stimulation, information, support, and aid (Bohns, [2011](#)). To help individuals optimize their social engagements with strangers, interventions are needed to educate us of the importance of social interaction with strangers, help individuals set goals to connect with strangers, develop the skills and competence for interaction with strangers (e.g., knowing how to initiate and end a conversation; Yeomans et al., [2022](#); Mastroianni et al., [2021](#)), and facilitate opportunities for these exchanges by normalizing talking to strangers (Atir et al., [2023](#); Kobayashi et al., [2008](#); Irish, [2004](#)). Such interventions can effectively help individuals build the self-efficacy to enjoy and undertake interactions with strangers (Sandstrom et al., [2022](#)).

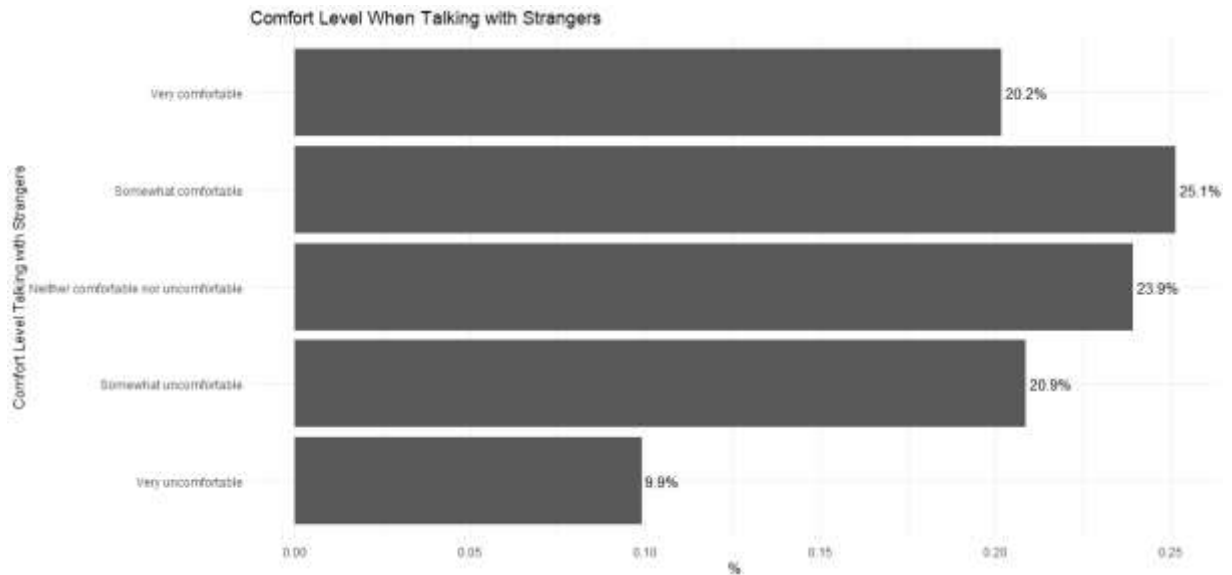
Analyses from the Canadian Social Connection Survey

Using data from the 2022 Canadian Social Connection Survey (n = 4,179), we examined participant’s experiences interacting with strangers. First, we observed that the majority of participants had greeted a neighbour or stranger in the past 3 months, and most had done so in the past few days.



However, the majority of participants reported that they spent zero (55%) or only one hour (18%) talking with strangers in the past week. Similarly, nearly half (49%) that they had not socialized for at least five minutes with any strangers, 13% reported they socialized with one stranger, 10% reported that they socialized with two strangers, and 7% reported that they socialized with only 3 strangers – meaning that less than one in five participants spoke with 4 or more strangers in the past seven days. The amount of time participants spent socializing with strangers was strongly related to how much they reported wanting to spend with strangers ($p < 0.0001$), however, 56 % of participants reported wanting to spend at least one hour per week socializing with strangers. Additionally, the time spent talking with strangers was also correlated with participant’s level of comfort talking to strangers ($p = 0.039$) and less than half of participants reported that they felt at least somewhat or very comfortable talking with strangers.





Discussion

In contemporary society, social interactions are declining and there is need for urgent interventions to promote prosociality (Putnam, [2000](#), U.S. Surgeon General, [2023](#)). Based on the research reviewed above, most people spend little effort connecting with strangers, perhaps due to miscalibrated expectations regarding the value of these interactions. Encouraging casual conversations with strangers appears to be a viable intervention strategy for promoting greater levels of social connection across society. Indeed, existing evidence supports the positive impact of social interactions with strangers and contradicts the common perception that strangers are dangerous. However, it's important to note that factors such as inaccurate social perception, social anxieties, and restrictive social norms serve as significant obstacles and must be accounted for in interventions aiming to optimize individual-level social behaviour. Continued research is therefore essential to understand these benefits more fully and identify specific strategies to facilitate social interactions. Concurrently, public health initiatives and awareness campaigns should be developed to inform the public about these advantages and begin integrating casual conversations with strangers into our social fabric.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence reviewed above, we conclude that talking to strangers is beneficial and generally safe. Public health efforts should seek to empower individuals to talk to strangers. Doing so likely has potential benefits not only for individuals, but also for the whole of society.

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