

# Talk much?

[ **SELF** ] Ever get the sneaking suspicion that despite your brilliant banter, you might be dominating the conversation ever so slightly? Journalist Temma Ehrenfeld does...

The only time I call my brother is on his birthday. Last time, he talked about the weather where he lives in Texas for 40 minutes. But I know how to behave. I only ask questions, although even then he might still say, calmly and forcefully, 'Let me finish.' If I get it wrong, again he'll snap: 'Don't interrupt me!' I was so good this time that he even asked about me: 'So what's with you and that guy?' I replied: 'He broke up with me. I'm pretty sad about it.'

'Well, we won't talk about that then!' he continued. 'It's slim pickings around here, I'll tell you. But I'm OK; if there's anything I want to do, I can drive to Austin in 96 minutes or Dallas in 105. It's two hours and 50 minutes to Houston – more of a trip. I just sit back and relax and enjoy the journey...'

Ten years ago, I tackled the problem head on. 'I feel like I don't get a chance to say anything with you,' I said. His response was: 'That's *exactly* how I feel about you.'

Nowadays – other than birthdays – we text each other. It works.

## Centre of attention

My brother and I were both indulged by our adoring mother, and, sadly, he

tends to tune out unless he's the centre of attention. I tune out less, but I will admit I expect plenty of time in the centre, too.

Maybe making up for all the time she spent adoring us, my mother, once she got started talking herself, couldn't stop. And this got worse, over time. After one of her conversational benders, I begged a boyfriend for reassurance. 'I'm not that bad, am I?' I asked. 'You're more interesting,' he answered, poking me unpleasantly in the ribs.

I got the message – talk only when interesting. And it's not enough that *I'm* riveted by my anecdote or chuckling at my joke. I must be interesting to you, too. I must continuously monitor

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your response, honour it and if you are fidgeting, stop, even mid-word.

Other rules: I (nearly) always say, 'How are you?' and try to follow up with another question, especially with people I don't know very well. When I hear a pause, instead of giving my reaction, I ask a question. If I catch myself rambling, I ask: 'Am I making sense?' Sometimes I even apologise. I slow down, shift my attention to the food, the room, the view – then back to the human being I've been rambling on to.

I've been working on this for a couple of years now, and think I'm much improved. But, like a former smoker who sniffs at the very sight of cigarette ash, my resentment of other overtalkers has intensified, especially if they also happen to be boring. On occasion, I've gone disciplinarian, most recently at a friend's birthday dinner, where she was chattering away. After 10 minutes, I calmly and forcefully made sure that everybody else got a turn. Afterwards, she complained. 'Someone had to run the conversation,' I defended.

'Why?' she asked me. 'It was my birthday!'

True. Why shouldn't she get to hold court on her birthday? So what if I was a bit bored? I had put myself in the



centre all over again, this time as the conversation leader.

## Anything for a quiet life

Self-awareness can be exhausting. I much prefer quiet people these days. It's easier. I appreciate shared silences and true communication, however it comes. And my brother and I are closer than we've ever been. When our dad chose to tell me what we'd each be likely to inherit, I texted my brother the numbers. A rapid-fire 15-minute exchange followed, and it was both efficient and, in its own way, intimate. He didn't call.

I was so grateful that I almost called to thank him.

## ARE YOU AN OVERTALKER?

- 1 Someone (usually another chatterbox) tells you that you talk too much. They're fighting you for conversational space.
- 2 You've been called 'narcissistic' or 'self-absorbed' at some point. Untrue! So why did you come across that way?
- 3 You've been talking on the phone, then ask a question. You hear silence. Or you're still chatting away and hear the sound of a flush...
- 4 When you ask if it's a good time to talk and hear 'No,' you say: 'Let me just tell you this one thing, then I'll let you go.'
- 5 Silence makes you uncomfortable.
- 6 You're detail-oriented or ramble on and think that you might be a bore at times.
- 7 You love to analyse your emotions, express ideas, or think aloud with almost anyone.
- 8 Listening tires you. You're just waiting for your turn to talk.
- 9 When people go blank, fidget or interrupt, you hate them!
- 10 Recalling a chat later, you only remember what *you* said.