

Time to dial that special someone? Try these tips to nix nervousness, avoid awkward silences, and pave the way to a great face-to-face meeting.

By Nina Malkin

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Despite society's text message and MySpace obsession, nothing has really replaced the old-fashioned telephone call as a way to explore someone you're interested in. Nothing has supplanted how nerve-wracking these initial conversations can be, either. So check out this advice from relationship experts and real daters—then, get busy dialing that person who makes your heart beat a little faster.

Put your nerves on hold

"Nothing wrong with a few dry runs in front of the bathroom mirror," says Miami-based life coach Joshua Estrin, author of *Shut Up! And Listen to Yourself*. "You don't want to sound rehearsed, but having a few topics ready to go can help the conversation get off to a friendly, interesting start."

Be kind, remind

"In our age of telemarketers, identify yourself right away," says April Masini, author of *Date Out of Your League*. Not that you'd say "Hey—it's me," at this stage of the game, but early on, offer more than your name, mentioning where and how you met. He/she may know more than one Jane/John, after all.

State your purpose

Let the person know why you're calling (even if your ultimate aim is to set up a date, hopefully that won't be the first thing to pop out of your mouth). "I'm just calling to chat, if you have a few minutes free" is good. If you need an excuse, tell him/her about something you read or saw on the news that prompted your call.

Time it right

"Weekend daytime is good; Saturday night is not. Lunchtime is good; dinner time is not," says Masini. "Don't call at eight on Sunday morning or after 10 any night." Whenever you ring, make sure the person is free to talk by asking, "Is this a good time?"

Inquire, don't interrogate

"Ask general questions," suggests communications expert Suzanne Bates, author of *Speak Like a CEO: Secrets For Commanding Attention and Getting Results*. "Not serious questions, but questions that are easy to answer, such as, 'What did you do today?' You can get a sense of the other person's tone and enthusiasm, and just from details about someone's day, you can get a good picture of who the person is and what they enjoy." Adds Estrin: "Remember, you just met—no highly personal questions. Keep it light. Reserve politics, religion and world peace for later."

Maintain a volley

"To keep things flowing, make the conversation like a tennis match," says Bates. "Listen carefully to the other person for something that intrigues you, then offer something interesting about yourself that might relate to his/her answer." For instance, if he says he's out to get some new skis this weekend. ask where he skis. whether he's into downhill

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Amongst these dating infractions, which one's most likely to make you stop seeing someone?

- Lying
- Bad manners (being late, taking calls at dinner, dressing poorly)
- Refusing to be exclusive
- None of these are a big deal

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or cross-country, or — if you're not a skier — ask what sports he's into during the warmer months, perhaps mentioning your volleyball skills in the process.

Focus

Even without a video conference camera hooked up, the other party can tell if you're distracted. "Don't make a relationship call while you're cooking, driving, shaving or checking your emails," says Masini. "Try not to multitask for once!" And try this tip from Denise Dorman, 42, from Geneva, IL: "Smile! The listener can't see it, but he or she can hear a smile in the tone of your voice."

Take a stand

"If the person on the other end of the line makes you nervous, simply stand up while you're talking," says Dorman. "It's amazing what a psychological lift it will give you to be above the phone." But keep in mind: Jitters early on are understandable, but if the person you're talking to continues to intimidate you after a call or two, he/she may not be the best dating material.

Understand silences

Not every second must be chock-full of chatter. "We often feel interrogated when questions come at us rapid-fire," says Estrin. "Give the other person time to think about

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an answer." If an awkward silence occurs, simply acknowledge it after a second or two with humor or change the subject. "Sometimes I'll start talking about what I was watching on TV before the person called; sounds lame, but usually *Family Guy* or *Seinfeld* or something, and everyone my age loves these shows," says Emily Hendricks, 24, from Astoria, New York. "That

usually leads to talking about other shows we like or silly shows from our childhood, and the conversation just seems to flow from there."

Keep topics handy

Since conversational lulls can be unnerving, jot a couple of conversation-starters down on a Post-it before you make the call. "'So tell me, where did you grow up?' and 'How long have you lived here?' are great icebreakers," says Bates. "Most people like to talk about their history." Unless you know someone is in the midst of a career crisis, work questions are also good—not too personal or threatening.

Avoid running amok at the mouth

Some people, when nervous, blab. "It's not bad, per se, to run off at the mouth," says Estrin, "but you can't talk and listen at the same time." To ensure it's a dialogue, not a monologue, listen to yourself. "If you haven't heard the other person speak in five minutes, you're talking too much," says Masini. Can't quit blathering? At least avoid a verbal torrent about yourself! If you do find yourself dominating the conversation, try some self-deprecating humor, if that feels comfortable—"Hey, I guess I should pause, take a breath and let you get a word in, right? Sorry, I tend to talk too much when I'm excited to meet someone new."

Encourage a clam

Other people, when nervous, clam up. If the person who's on the line is answering you with one-syllable words, deploy some open-ended questions—the ones that start with what, when, why, where or how. Think: "How did you get interested in being a physical therapist?" or "So why did you move all the way north from Florida?" "These require more elaboration than if you asked a closed question beginning with 'have you?' or 'would you?'" says Bates. But the real key is to simply develop an inquisitive nature. If you're genuinely curious, you'll be more apt to ask the right questions in a way that will make someone want to respond.

Be brief

We sometimes hear friends crow, "We talked for three hours!" when describing early conversations, but Bates believes that's too long: "Save something for the face-to-face. You want to hang up and have the other person think, 'Wow, I really want to get together and talk more!'" So wrap things up before you run out of things to say and wind up in dead-air land.

End on a high note

Close the conversation in a sincere, warm, polite way—telling the person how much you enjoyed chatting. Then, if you want to set up a date, you have a perfect segue into asking him/her out. "I'd like to continue this conversation—are you free for coffee some time this coming week?" should work just fine.

Remember one thing!

Get a head start on your next chat—and work your way into his/her heart! "Every time you talk, remember one thing about the last conversation—something the person was going to do, for instance; then ask how it went," says Sally Murdoch, 37, from Portland, OR. "This creates an ongoing conversation and shows that you're considerate. Pretty

soon, you'll be on this person's mind more and more."

Nina Malkin is the author of 6X: Loud, Fast and Out of Control.

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