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Study: Small Talk Sharpens Your Mind

Oct 27, 2010 - 3:40 PM

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Katie Drummond

(Oct. 27) -- Warm, friendly conversations with pals can yield a valuable cognitive boost. On the flip side, though, chats laced with a competitive streak don't offer any mental perks.

Researchers at the University of Michigan are behind the conclusion, which follows up on earlier studies that have shown similar results.

The team tracked social interactions and investigated how they affected one key cognitive capacity called executive function. It's responsible for the integral components of solid decision-making, such as "working memory, self-monitoring and the ability to suppress external and internal distractions."

A group of 192 university students was asked to engage in specific kinds of 10-minute social interactions. After reviewing subsequent test results, the researchers determined that friendly chatter -- like the kind of small talk you'd make getting acquainted with someone -- led to improved performance on a series of cognitive exams.

"We believe that performance boosts come about because some social interactions induce people to try to read others' minds and take their perspectives on things," Oscar Ybarra, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, [said in a statement](#).

Previous research by Ybarra concluded that a few minutes of conversation could significantly boost one's memory and test performance, even in those as old as 96.

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But amicable discourse can't solve all your problems: In this study, neither speed of test-taking nor general knowledge was ameliorated by social chit-chat.

How to apply the findings in the real world? Consider some light chat with a friend, colleague or classmate before a major presentation or test.

And, of course, don't be mean -- and take note of those who are. The research suggests that a cold, competitive work environment might dampen your own talents.



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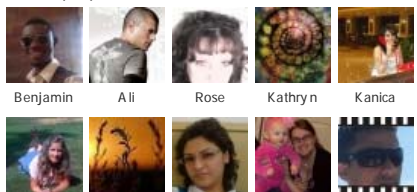
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