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Don't Talk to Strangers

I recently attended an industry conference with 11,000 other individuals. Most people go to conferences with two goals: to further their education and to network.

At a concurrent session facilitated by a blind presenter, I laughed out loud when he described the pattern the seating had likely taken in the room. When we enter a room, we first look for someone we know to sit with. Locating no familiar faces, most of us choose to sit alone (usually along the aisle to allow for a quick exit or at least one seat away from the next person). If that is not an option in a crowded room, we look for someone like us (same gender, age, skin colour) to sit next to.

He was right. A quick glance around the room by the sighted people revealed that exact pattern. People sitting with colleagues or friends, the seats along the aisles completely filled and the center sections dotted with individuals seated one, two or three seats apart.

Don't talk to strangers! This phrase is a common refrain parents and teachers preach to children. Deeply engrained, it becomes our behaviour. The result – it helps keep children safe from predators seeking to harm them by offering candy, pretending to locate a lost pet, or showing false kindness.

As we mature into adulthood, the part of our brain responsible for judgment also matures. We gain the capability to discern which strangers to avoid and which ones we should get to know.

Or do we?

The imprinting in early childhood is so deep that we tend to carry it throughout our lifetimes. As a result, 76% of adults suffer from some level of social anxiety – the stress that prevents us from forging new relationships with strangers who might be valuable additions to our professional networks and social circles.

The age of social media has dawned along with the illusion that we are creating large networks. While technology allows quick access to information and facilitates speedy communication with people we know, it is a poor substitute for the face-to-face interactions that lead to building new relationships.

Challenge yourself to leave your comfort zone. Go to a networking function alone and introduce yourself to a stranger. Sit next to someone you don't know at a conference and strike up a conversation. Attend a workshop to begin conquering your fear of strangers and learn the skills of rapport building that will help to reprogram the voice in your head telling you "don't talk to strangers".

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