

I Talked to Strangers for a Week, and It Did Not Go Well

September 09, 2014

New York Magazine:

Recently, Matthew Hutson argued in a Science of Us piece that New Yorkers might be happier if we engaged in a little more small talk. That story cited a new study in which some Chicago commuters were told to strike up a conversation with the person sitting next to them on the train; they later reported enjoying their commute more than the people who'd been told to sit in silence for the ride.

It's a nice idea, I thought while reading the post — a very nice idea. At the same time: Who would actually *do* that?

...

I'm not usually an overly shy person or anything, but this whole thing has me overthinking things a little. At work, I email Nicholas Epley, the University of Chicago psychologist who led the small-talk study I am meaning to emulate. I tell him about my project, and in desperation ask him if he provided his subjects with any go-to icebreakers.

"We didn't give anyone any instructions about this," he wrote back. "I wouldn't bother trying to plan an opening line. When you sit down next to someone, the mood will strike you and something worth commenting on will not be as hard to find, I predict, as you imagine. They'll be reading a book. You can ask them if they like it. They'll be on the train with you. You can ask them if they've been riding it for long. They'll yawn, and you can make a little joke about having a rough night, too.

"Above all, just be nice."

Well. I can do *that*.

Read the whole story: [*New York Magazine*](#)