



ADHD

ADHD and navigating the 'small talk' with your colleagues at work

"Be yourself; everyone else is already taken."

Oscar Wilde

For many people with ADHD, small talk can feel surprisingly difficult. Conversations that are unstructured, repetitive, or low in meaning can quickly drain mental energy. Your brain may struggle to stay engaged, track social cues, or filter distractions in busy environments such as offices or work events.

For myself, one of the critical issues is the tension between wanting to be authentic and feeling pressure to perform socially, which can lead to overwhelm, masking, or avoidance. Understanding that this response is neurological rather than a personal shortcoming is an important first step in managing it with self-compassion.

It is helpful to remember that small talk is not an end in itself, but a social bridge. In many workplaces, it functions as a way to signal approachability, build trust, and create psychological safety before moving into more meaningful or task-focused conversations. Knowing this can make small talk feel more purposeful and therefore easier to tolerate. When networking or relationship-building is required, it can help to set a clear intention in advance, such as making brief contact with a manager, checking in with one colleague, or staying for a defined period of time. Having an exit plan, such as needing to return to work or step outside for air, or get back to an 'important' email; can reduce anticipatory stress.

There are also times when small talk is not necessary, and it is reasonable to opt out. Short, polite acknowledgements are often enough to maintain professionalism without prolonged conversation.

Simple phrases such as a friendly greeting followed by a clear transition to work can signal engagement without inviting extended dialogue.

Choosing quieter spaces, arriving slightly early or later to events, or positioning yourself near an activity or task can also naturally limit small talk while still showing presence.

Protecting your energy in this way is not avoidance; it is effective self-management.

When small talk is needed, structure can make a significant difference. Preparing a small set of neutral, work-appropriate topics in advance reduces cognitive load in the moment.



Open-ended but simple prompts allow the other person to carry more of the conversational weight, which can ease pressure. For example, asking about current projects, upcoming plans, or shared workplace experiences keeps conversation predictable and relevant.

Show an interest in what the other person is doing at work / talking about - asking them questions about what they are saying will both show your engagement with what they are talking about as well as allowing them to do more of the talking. Focusing on listening rather than performing can also help, as many people value being heard more than being entertained.

If there is something that the person has done that you are impressed with, give praise and compliments as long as they are genuine.

Finally, it can be useful to gently guide conversations toward areas of genuine interest or substance when possible. Many people with ADHD thrive in deeper, more meaningful discussions, and small talk can often evolve into this if given a direction. If attention starts to drop or overstimulation builds, it is appropriate to close the conversation kindly and move on. Over time, developing a few personalised strategies can make workplace interactions feel more manageable and less draining, allowing professional relationships to grow without compromising wellbeing.

Remember you are allowed to live your authentic life, don't be overly constrained by social expectations. Treat everyone with the same kindness that you would hope to receive and by doing that, you are already succeeding in your social interactions.

"To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

With love,
Melissa xx