




# WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE NEW



How to Be Comfortable, Confident,  
and Successful in New Situations

**KEITH ROLLAG**

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HOW TO BE COMFORTABLE, CONFIDENT, *and* SUCCESSFUL IN NEW SITUATIONS

**KEITH ROLLAG**

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AMERICAN MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

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## *Part 1*

# WHY NEW SITUATIONS MAKE US NERVOUS

In this section we'll explore how this book can help you become a more confident, comfortable, and successful newcomer. We'll discuss five key behaviors for newcomer success—introducing yourself, remembering names, asking questions, starting relationships, and performing new things in front of unfamiliar people—and see how they are fundamental activities in almost every new situation. You'll also learn how evolution, culture, and our early childhood experiences predispose us to be nervous in new situations and, more important, how to overcome these anxieties through mindful reflection and practice.



# SUCCESS STARTS WITH BEING NEW

*To achieve almost anything* in life you have to put yourself into new situations. To have a successful career, you often need to change jobs and join new organizations. You get promoted into new teams. Sometimes you're transferred to unfamiliar cities and countries. Outside of work, you're new every time you go back to school for more education or join a new health club to get in shape. You're often a newcomer every time you take up a new hobby, go on a vacation overseas, or check one more thing off your "bucket list."

In fact, it's nearly impossible to accomplish anything meaningful and important in life without at some point having to meet new people, learn new things, and take on new roles. And as a newcomer, how you think and act in those first few seconds, minutes, hours, and days matters. What you do when you're new often determines whether you will find the success, satisfaction, and happiness that drove you to be a newcomer in the first place.

The goal of this book is to help you become a more successful newcomer—across all kinds of new situations. We'll explore the science of newcomer success and give you a set of strategies, techniques, and exercises to become:

- More productive and confident in your new role
- Better connected to new co-workers, classmates, group members, and neighbors
- Less anxious and awkward around strangers
- More willing to seek out those new experiences that make life interesting, rewarding, and fun

## NEWCOMER SUCCESS: FIVE KEY SKILLS

I've been studying newcomer success for over twenty years. In the workplace, I have interviewed hundreds of new employees in a variety of roles, levels, and industries. I have observed newcomers while they work, and have talked to their managers. I've also asked newcomers to keep journals about their first few weeks on the job and have conducted newcomer surveys across many organizations.

Outside of the workplace, I've interviewed newcomers joining schools, churches, neighborhood theater groups, health clubs, and even rock bands. I've interviewed college students moving into residence halls, and senior citizens moving into retirement communities. I've talked with people taking classes on everything from swimming, guitar, yoga, and skiing to beekeeping. Through these interviews I've been trying to understand what successful newcomers do that allows them to have such positive, rewarding experiences. How do they get up to speed quickly? How do they integrate themselves into their new group? How do they get the information and advice they need to be productive in their new role?

I've discovered that the secret to newcomer success is no secret at all. It mostly comes down to our willingness and ability to do five key things:

1. Introduce ourselves to strangers.

2. Learn and remember names.
  3. Ask questions.
  4. Seek out and start new relationships.
  5. Perform new things in front of others.
- 

For most of us, these five skills are both the key to newcomer success and our greatest source of anxiety in new situations. For example, although we know that introductions are critical to getting connected, we are reluctant to approach and introduce ourselves to new people. We realize that remembering names creates a great “second” impression, but we discover we’re unable to recall names when we meet people again.

We know that asking questions is often the only way to get the information we need, but we hesitate to bother busy, important people. We understand that all work gets done through relationships, but we are reluctant to start and build new ones. Finally, we find ourselves anxious about performing our new role in front of unfamiliar people, even though we know that newcomers are expected to start out slow and make a few mistakes.

## **The Networking Event that Wasn’t**

Does any of the following seem familiar?

You know you’re supposed to network, and this event is the perfect opportunity to build new connections. But as you walk into the room, you are overwhelmed by the unfamiliar crowd, and you desperately search the sea of strangers for a few friendly faces. Finding some, you go say hi, and spend the rest of the event huddled and chatting with those you already know, never really meeting anyone new.

Or you don’t see a friendly face, and nobody approaches you to introduce themselves, so you end up on the sidelines staring at your smartphone. You pretend that you’ve got urgent email or text messages that you just have to respond to. That way you can justify why you’re standing in the corner by yourself for most of the event.

Either way, as you leave, you decide that the meeting wasn’t a good networking opportunity after all.

If you’ve had this experience, you’re not alone. Columbia University researchers Paul Ingram and Michael Morris once organized a networking mixer for a group of executives. Over 95 percent of the attendees said that a primary reason for coming to the mixer was to meet and develop relationships with new people. Prior to the event, they asked each executive to identify which people on the invitation list they already knew.

As the executives arrived, each one was given a special electronic nametag, which allowed Ingram and Morris to track the movements and conversations of each executive over the course of the 80-minute event.

They found that, despite the executives’ intentions to meet new people, most of them spent the event with people they already knew. They rarely approached and introduced themselves to strangers, and those who did meet new people were introduced by someone familiar to both. What was Ingram and Morris’s advice for those looking to meet new people at networking events? Don’t bring your friends along.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the key to successful networking often is overcoming your reluctance to approach and introduce yourself to new people—a fundamental newcomer skill. This book can help. In Chapter 5, we'll dissect and analyze the social dynamics surrounding introductions, and we'll explore why causes so much anxiety. We'll also review specific strategies and exercises to help you:

- Approach strangers with less anxiety
- Confidently introduce yourself
- Make a good first impression
- Engage in small talk that helps establish a positive relationship
- Leave the introduction with permission to approach people later for help, advice, and fun

## **What's Her Name Again?**

While newcomer success often starts with the ability to proactively introduce yourself, how you think and act the second time you meet someone matters, too. Has the following ever happened to you?

You see her all the time. Maybe it's a co-worker, a classmate, or a mother standing on the sidelines at your kid's soccer game. The first time you met her you exchanged names and had a really nice conversation, and it's clear that she is someone you'd like to know better. But the next time you meet she calls you by name, and you panic because you can't remember hers. You reply with an enthusiastic but somewhat lame greeting like "Hey, how are you doing?" and try to pretend you know her name.

You continue to meet from time to time and have friendly interactions, but you become more and more uncomfortable because you still can't recall her name. Admitting it now would really be awkward. The crazy thing is that you can remember almost everything else about her except her name. Your greatest fear is that someday you'll run into her while you're with another person, and you'll be expected to introduce them to each other.

You'd like to get to know her better, but the whole "name thing" makes you reluctant to take things further. So you stick to quick pleasantries, avoid her when you are with another person, and hope she doesn't notice.

If this sounds familiar, it's hardly unique. Approximately 80 percent of the people I've interviewed say they are bad at remembering names. Many can point to newcomer situations in which they've been anxious and reluctant to interact with people they've recently met because they can't recall their names.

Most people fear the embarrassment of blanking on someone's name. The British gaming company Ladbrokes conducted a survey of 2,000 people and found that the respondents' number one most embarrassing moment was forgetting the name of someone they were introducing. Their number three most embarrassing moment was getting someone's name wrong.<sup>2</sup>

But there is hope. In Chapter 6 we explore why most of us are bad at recalling names, and what you can do about it. We'll examine the neuroscience of memory and learn why the way we process and store peoples' names can cause problems with recall. We'll also look at the social dynamics of introductions, which often prevent us from even hearing, learning, and memorizing a person's name in the first place. More important, you'll find a variety of techniques you can use before, during, and after introductions that will help you:

- Learn and memorize the names of new people.
  - Confidently recall their names when you meet them again.
  - Avoid embarrassment when you don't remember a name.
- 

## **Time Flies and It Seems Too Late**

Many people I've interviewed say the newcomer success they care most about is being successful in a new job. Thinking back to the last time you joined a new organization, does any of the following ring a bell?

You're a few weeks into your new position, but you still don't know everyone. Your boss gave you a whirlwind tour the first day, but the introductions were so fast you barely got to know anybody. You'd like to ask certain key people for help and advice, but you're reluctant to approach them. Either you were never introduced to them in the first place or they always seem busy, and you don't want to impose or interrupt their work. Besides, now that several weeks have gone by, you feel you should already know the answers to some of your questions.

You thought by now you'd have made a few new friends at work, but so far it's been mostly minor chit chat with random people. Lunch is still uncomfortable—sometimes you are invited to join the “lunch bunch,” but often they leave without you. Looking back, you wish you had asked more questions and worked harder to make new friends, but it seems too late and awkward to do it now.

I've heard variations of this story from dozens of newcomers. Some of the underlying frustration and regret was caused by managers who didn't take the time to properly introduce the newcomers to others in the office. Some of it was caused by co-workers who weren't welcoming and accepting of new people. But some of it was the result of the newcomers' reluctance to ask questions and develop new relationships.

When I've asked newcomers “If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?” by far the most common answer I've received has been “Ask more questions.” In Chapter 7 we'll explore why we're reluctant to ask questions of relative strangers, especially busy, influential people. We'll analyze the social dynamics surrounding question-asking and review several techniques you can use to:

- Be more strategic and proactive in asking questions.
- Approach and ask questions with less anxiety.
- Ask questions in ways that create or maintain a positive impression.

Newcomer success also happens through relationships. We need them to learn new roles, acquire information and advice, be accepted by the new group, and build the influence we need to achieve our goals.

Relationships are also the key to newcomer satisfaction. The Gallup Organization has conducted thousands of company surveys with millions of employees. They found that one of the strongest predictors of job satisfaction is how strongly an employee agrees with the statement “I have a friend at work.”<sup>3</sup>

Though we make friends throughout our lives, only a few people I've interviewed consid

themselves extremely good at developing relationships. In Chapter 8, we'll do the following:

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- Explore why we're reluctant and awkward about starting new relationships.
- Investigate the science of relationship development (from acquaintances to friendships).
- Discover several strategies that will help you move beyond the initial introduction and develop meaningful relationships.
- Find ways to practice and get better at starting relationships and "fitting in."

## **The Reluctant Participant**

Finally, here's one more situation common to newcomers:

You've walked, driven by, or seen an advertisement for classes or lessons in something you'd really like to learn or do. Maybe it's public speaking, sales strategies, cooking, or aerobics. Maybe it's photography, dance, yoga, or a foreign language. You really want to take the class, but you're reluctant to go.

You know it'll be awkward to meet the instructors and other participants, but you're mostly worried about performing in front of other people, many of whom are probably more experienced and skilled than you are. You'll be embarrassed when they find out what a total beginner you are. You tell yourself you should have started doing this long ago, when you were younger. Instead of taking the class, you stay away, convincing yourself that you really didn't want to learn that skill, sport, or hobby anyway.

This is a common story, and all of them seem to result from the teller's reluctance to be seen by others as an awkward, mistake-making, less-than-perfect newcomer. At work it can keep you from taking on new roles, developing new skills, or presenting your best ideas. Outside of work, it can simply keep you from trying new things—so you lose out on all the good things that come with new experiences.

In Chapter 9, we'll explore the science of newcomer performance to:

- Understand why we are anxious and reluctant to perform in new groups.
- Develop strategies to move from a focus on "being good" to a focus on "getting better."
- See the value and benefits of approaching new situations with a "beginner's mind."

Of course, there are other things you need to do to be a successful newcomer. You need to establish credibility and build trust. You need to negotiate responsibilities and role expectations. You need to attend orientations and training sessions. If you're a new leader, you have to create a shared purpose and generate early wins to create momentum for change.<sup>4</sup>

In this book, I focus on these five newcomer skills because I believe they are the fundamental skills required for newcomer success. The more confident, comfortable, and willing you are to perform these five basic skills, the more successful you can be as new leaders, team members, students, neighbors, volunteers, parishioners, tourists, and any other newcomer role you decide to take on.

Think of these skills as equivalent to catching, throwing, and hitting in baseball, or scoring and passing in soccer. They are the foundational skills that make all other newcomer and new leader success strategies possible. For example, you often can't establish credibility and trust without fir

introducing yourself. You can't build networks without being able to start and nurture new relationships. You can't hit the ground running without asking questions and learning to perform your new role. And it's hard to get people to follow you if you can't remember their names.

Most managers (and writers of newcomer books) assume you're already good at these five key newcomer skills, and therefore tend to ignore them. They expect that because you've grown up, gone to school, and interacted with hundreds of people over the years, you're already a master at making introductions, remembering names, asking questions, and so on.

My interviews with newcomers tell a different story. Most of us don't consider ourselves exceptionally good, or even good, at these critical behaviors. Our reluctance or lack of confidence in one or more of these skills is often at the heart of why we don't put ourselves out there and create the newcomer success we desire.

Unfortunately, these five newcomer skills also are not things you typically learn in school, or even in training classes at work. Think about it. Have you ever taken a course on making introductions? Been taught how to consistently remember names? Received coaching on how to confidently ask questions? Been taught how to start relationships and make friends? Or "learned how to learn" to perform new roles and tasks?

We value people who can quickly get up to speed, but organizations rarely spend any time actually teaching their employees how to make introductions, remember names, ask questions, develop relationships, or perform new tasks. Usually you have to figure these skills out on your own.

## **NEWCOMER ANXIETY IS NORMAL**

As we will see in Chapter 3, being a little nervous in new situations is completely normal. Much of our anxiety surrounding these five key newcomer skills comes from two sources. First, we're genetically hard-wired to be nervous around strangers. Second, we learn at an early age to fear and avoid unfamiliar people.

From a genetic standpoint, newcomer anxiety is the evolutionary outcome of having distant ancestors who lived in a prehistoric world where meeting strangers was often a rare and dangerous event. It was also a world where getting excluded by one's group and sent out into the wilderness alone was practically a death sentence. As a result, we've evolved to have a natural fear of both strangers and social rejection.

However, our prehistoric brains don't work so well in a modern world where we constantly find ourselves surrounded by unfamiliar people. Scientists estimate that for much of history, humans were newcomers only a few times in their entire life, and probably met or were aware of only a few hundred people. Today we move in and out of newcomer situations all the time, and meet hundreds and perhaps thousands of new people every year. But we still carry our inherited fears into everyday newcomer situations that are significantly less dangerous and life-threatening than they were thousands of years ago.

When we were very young we also learned to be nervous around new people. Some of us observed, copied, and internalized our parents' anxieties and assumptions about strangers. Some of us came to associate the presence of strangers with abandonment, especially when our parents left us with unfamiliar babysitters and daycare providers. Some of us probably had some less-than-positive early experiences meeting new kids and adults that reinforced our natural fear of strangers.

But most of us were also taught to fear and avoid unknown people. From an early age we're told "Don't talk to strangers." Many are taught to yell "No!" and run away from unfamiliar adults.

especially those who approach us when we're alone or without "safe" adults present.

However, when we grow up and become adults ourselves we're suddenly encouraged to put ourselves out there, meet new people, and try new things. Ironically, this requires us to approach and interact with the same kinds of adult strangers we were supposed to avoid our entire childhood.

## **GETTING BETTER THROUGH REFLECTION AND PRACTICE**

Despite what nature and nurture has taught us, we can overcome our anxieties and become more confident, comfortable, and successful newcomers, but it takes reflection and practice. In Chapter 2 we'll learn that one way to do this is to recalibrate our prehistoric brains by reflecting upon our fears and anxieties in new situations and compare what we worry might happen with what actually does happen. Throughout this book I provide exercises and thought-provoking questions to help you stop overestimating social risk and become more comfortable introducing yourselves, asking questions, and so on.

The other way to reduce our anxiety and reluctance is to improve our performance, and that only happens through deliberate, mindful practice. Have you ever wondered why over the course of our lives we can introduce ourselves to thousands of people, remember hundreds of names, ask countless questions, make tons of friends, and yet still be awkward and reluctant each time we perform the basic newcomer skills? The reason is that we mostly do these things mindlessly and never take the time to pay careful attention to our performance, figure out how we can improve, and experiment with new approaches.

For each of the five newcomer skills, I provide a set of techniques and exercises to help you deliberately, mindfully analyze and improve your performance through practice. Most of these techniques, exercises, and games can be added to your regular daily routine. Because you see and interact with strangers almost every day, you'll find countless opportunities to practice, observe, and refine your skills. Many of these opportunities offer you a relatively safe and low-risk way to practice, so you can become confident and better prepared for the newcomer situations you most care about. All it takes is a sincere, personal commitment to improve.

## **HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK**

After this introductory chapter, in Chapter 2 we'll see how frequently we move in and out of newcomer situations and understand why getting better at being new can be such a benefit. In Chapter 3 we'll examine how evolution and social learning has set us up to be nervous in new situations; and in Chapter 4, you'll see how self-reflection and practice are the keys to getting better at the five newcomer skills.

Then, over the next five chapters, we will systematically focus on each of the newcomer skills:

1. Introducing yourself (Chapter 5)
2. Remembering names (Chapter 6)
3. Asking questions (Chapter 7)
4. Starting new relationships (Chapter 8)
5. Performing in new situations (Chapter 9)

In each chapter, we'll examine:

- Why the skill is important to your success
  - Why it causes so much stress and anxiety
  - How to get better and more comfortable doing it
  - How to find or create opportunities to practice
- 

I suggest that you first read through each skills chapter to get the big picture. Then, ask yourself whether you find that specific skill a challenge or a major source of anxiety when you find yourself in new situations. Over the next few days, mindfully observe and reflect upon both your performance and the associated emotions you experience in new situations. Based on what you discover, you may decide to tackle a particular skill first. Or, you might decide to start with the chapter and skill that is most important to you:

- Think will give you the biggest “bang for the buck” in terms of overall improvement.
- Feel the most comfortable thinking about and practicing right away.
- See the most opportunities for practice in the next few weeks.

Of course, you may decide to tackle them in the order presented. It doesn't really matter where you begin.

Finally, in Chapter 10, we will explore ways to “give back” and help others become more successful newcomers. We'll round out the book in Chapter 11 with some final words of advice and a few success stories to motivate you to “get out there” and become a better, more confident newcomer.

In addition, please check out the book website at [www.whenyounew.com](http://www.whenyounew.com) for more newcomer resources and practice tips.

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Ultimately, the key to becoming a better newcomer is to stop seeing “being new” as something you must fear and endure, but as an interesting challenge you can learn to improve through reflection and practice.



## ALWAYS A NEWCOMER

*Over the course of your life* you will likely find yourself in newcomer situations thousands of times. And in almost every new situation you will have to introduce yourself, remember names, ask questions, start relationships (no matter how temporary), and perform new things in front of people you don't know.

A little bit of anxiety about doing these things is actually a good thing. When you're nervous your brain releases a tiny bit of adrenaline that flows through your body and helps keep you focused and alert. But too much anxiety can cause you to:

- Perform poorly.
- Not enjoy the experience.
- Avoid subsequent new situations.

If you feel that you're more anxious in new situations than you want, do you really wish to experience that excessive nervousness thousands of more times in your life?

## WE ALL START AS NEWCOMERS

If you think about it, the first thing we ever do as a member of the human race is be the newcomer. As soon as we get pushed and pulled down that long tube and emerge into the light, we're surrounded by strangers. First, we're new to our family and begin life-long relationships with our parents and siblings. Soon, we're newcomers at daycare facilities, pediatrician's offices, and playgrounds, as well as to family, friends, relatives, and other children—in fact, wherever our parents take us.

### Lessons from Childhood

Eventually, we enter elementary school, and for the next twelve years we progress through an endless series of new classrooms, new classmates, and new teachers, as well as new after-school and outside activities, teams, bands, theater groups, clubs, summer camps, and scout troops.<sup>1</sup> We also may take on part-time jobs where we are confronted with co-workers and tasks that are new to us.

Through all these early experiences we start building our ability and confidence in the five newcomer skills. Of course, there are precocious four-year-olds who boldly and confidently introduce themselves to everyone—neighborhood kids, teachers, doctors, parking lot attendants, even the homeless. But for most of us, learning to introduce ourselves starts out as a relatively stressful experience, and we never completely lose our awkwardness each time we do it. Still, we quickly discover that introducing ourselves is a critical first step toward making friends and being accepted by new groups. How we come to terms with introducing ourselves as children shapes how we think and feel about introducing ourselves for the rest of our lives.

The same thing goes for all the other newcomer skills. When we're young, we can blissfully interact without caring whether we remember other kids' names, but it becomes increasingly

embarrassing to forget a name as we get older. From pre-school onward, we're taught how to ask questions (raise your hand!), but we soon discover this strategy isn't really appropriate outside the classroom. We never take a class on making friends, but through trial and error we reach varying degrees of comfort and confidence in starting relationships with kids our own age.

Finally, school is all about having to perform new, potentially embarrassing things—music and art classes, spelling bees, and those ubiquitous front-of-the-class book reports—before unfamiliar teachers and classmates. But all of these pale in comparison to the times we're forced to dress up as a flower, a letter, or historical figure, herded on stage in front of strange grownups, and then made to sing or say something cute while the parent paparazzi blind us with camera flashes. None of these would ever cause us to become nervous in new situations, would it?

### **Lessons from Adolescence**

Once we hit puberty and discover romance and sexual attraction, “newcomer” takes on a whole new meaning and level of risk. We struggle to ask intelligent questions on dates, and we fear saying the wrong thing. And, of course, high school comes with its own set of newcomer problems: new students to meet, new teachers, new subjects, and new activities.

### **Lessons from Young Adulthood**

If we head off to college, we face new professors, classmates, and dorm mates, as well as fraternities, sororities, sports teams, and student clubs. We may study and travel abroad, take summer jobs, or intern in new organizations. By the time we graduate from college we've experienced hundreds, if not thousands, of newcomer situations; and once we take our first full-time job, we're destined for thousands more.

## **THE BIG CHALLENGE: NEW AT WORK**

If you are a typical American worker, you will be a newcomer to at least eleven different organizations by the time you are forty-eight years old, and several more before you retire.<sup>2</sup> We're often new with every restructuring, merger, acquisition, and downsizing. In fact, it's safe to say that even if we don't change jobs, we will likely be new dozens of times over the course of our work career. And this doesn't even include all the committees, task forces, and other ad hoc work groups we might participate in, or events like internal conferences, training programs, and company parties that temporarily put us in new social situations. Each time we're new we have to introduce ourselves to coworkers, remember names, ask questions, start relationships, and perform our new group role in front of relative strangers.

### **New to Customers, Clients, and Suppliers**

But that's not all. If you're currently working, how many times in the past few months have you visited a new customer, client, supplier, or governmental agency? Consultants and independent contractors are often moving in and out of new client organizations every few months. Travelling salespeople are making visits to new or potential customers every week. Commercial plumbers, electricians, and others in the “trades” are often temporary newcomers to workplaces every day.

Now granted, these kinds of newcomer situations have a very different feel and significance

compared to joining a new company. We're not starting a new job, or getting a new boss, or settling into a new cubicle. But in each of these situations we still have to make introductions, remember names, ask questions, start relationships (even if very temporary), and do our job in front of new people. More importantly, how well we perform when we're new in these situations often has a huge impact on our overall performance. Could we ever make a sale, please a client, or secure a new supplier without performing these five newcomer skills?

## **Being New and the All-Important Job Search**

Finally, in between all of your jobs you are a newcomer every time you attend networking events and career fairs, as well as every time you interview for a new job. Who usually gets hired? The candidate who can:

1. Confidently introduce themselves and remember the names of recruiters, interviewers, and potential co-workers.
2. Ask thoughtful questions.
3. Establish rapport and build positive relationships with everyone they meet.
4. Demonstrate in interviews and skill tests that they can perform the job.

I hope it's clear by now that regardless of what you do at work you will likely find yourself new at the time, and how well (and confidently) you perform as a newcomer has a big impact on your ultimate performance and job satisfaction.

## **SOCIAL CHALLENGES: NEW PEOPLE, NEW PLACES, NEW EXPERIENCES**

The Census Bureau estimates that the average person in the United States moves every four years, and can expect to move over eleven times during his or her lifetime.<sup>3</sup> Every time we move we are newcomers to neighborhoods, apartment buildings, and condo associations. We join new churches, health clubs, and civic organizations, and send our kids to new schools. We seek out and are new to grocery stores, restaurants, dry cleaners, and every other store and service we use in our busy lives. We have to find and build relationships with new doctors, dentists, landscapers, and plumbers.

The simple act of moving generates dozens of newcomer situations. If you don't introduce yourself to your new neighbors in the first few days or weeks, it becomes increasingly awkward to do it later. You're flooded with new names and struggle to keep them all straight. You have to ask lots of questions to reestablish access to all the daily goods and services you took for granted. And when you've performed all these daily life activities at your previous locations, every new encounter holds the potential for embarrassment if you unknowingly break the rules and perform differently from the "natives" around you.

Relationships with spouses and partners trigger a whole new set of newcomer experiences. Regardless of whether you get married or not, you become a newcomer to someone else's parents, siblings, and step-families, as well as to their extended network of uncles, aunts, and cousins. Your ability to be a good newcomer with the "in-laws" can pay huge dividends. And if things don't work out and you end up in another relationship, you're new all over again.

If you become a parent, you're new to obstetricians, birthing classes, baby stores, and delivery

rooms. Then you're also new to pediatricians, daycare centers, playgrounds, schools, and parent teacher organizations. You become a spectator to an endless parade of games, practices, recitals, and programs. Through your child's activities you meet and start new relationships with other parents and families, and your network of friends quickly shifts from the mostly-single to the mostly-married-with-kids. The more children you have, the more newcomer situations you'll find yourself in. Once again, all these newcomer skills come into play as you become a connected, informed, and engaged parent.

According to Pew Internet Research, 75 percent of all adult Americans are active members of groups outside of work, and the average person spends more than six hours a week across an average of 3.5 organizations.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 40 percent of us are involved in churches or other religious organizations, and the rest of our participation is spread across groups such as sports and recreation leagues, charitable and volunteer organizations, community groups, neighborhood associations, support groups and political parties.<sup>5</sup> As our interests, opportunities, and locations change, we move in and out of dozens of these outside groups. With each one our newcomer skills help determine how well we become an integrated, engaged member, and how much satisfaction and fun we get out of the groups' activities.

New hobbies and pursuits are another source of newcomer experiences. If we take classes, we're new to instructors and our fellow students. Hobbies like painting, gardening, quilting, and photography all have their own social world of enthusiasts and a bewildering set of new technologies and techniques.

Sports also have their rules, equipment, techniques, and learning paths from beginner to expert. For example, if we decide to learn how to ski, we are typically new to ski resorts, rental shops, ski classes, ski lifts, and other skiers. How we think and act as a newcomer in these situations matters. Sadly, the National Ski Areas Association estimates that over 85 percent of all first-time skiers never return, and I suspect for many it's because the anxiety that came with being a new skier overwhelmed any fun they got from being on the slopes.<sup>6</sup>

Vacation and travel is also a time when we find ourselves newcomers in a variety of ways. Travelling itself can make us new to unfamiliar cities, roads, and transit systems, and make us newcomers to temporary groups of fellow passengers and tourists. And once again the five newcomer skills come into play. For example, if you go on a cruise for the first time, you will likely introduce yourself to a few of the passengers and cruise staff, and there will be some limited social expectations that you'll remember the names of those people you interact with most frequently. You'll likely have many questions about where to go and what to do during the cruise. Though you might avoid lots of socializing on the ship, most people on cruises do enjoy getting to know a few passengers or staff members during their stay. Finally, there are routines like port calls and buffet lines that one must learn and perform. While taking a cruise may not have the high stakes associated with being new to work, there are still plenty of situations associated with the five skills that can cause anxiety and discomfort.

## **GET BETTER NOW, AVOID REGRETS LATER**

Like it or not, the fact is that for the rest of your life you'll be moving in and out of countless newcomer situations. Some will be temporary and relatively inconsequential, like joining strangers on an elevator or standing in line at a new deli. Some will involve familiar tasks but unfamiliar people, such as eating at a McDonald's in an unfamiliar city. Other situations will involve familiar people but

unfamiliar activities, such as joining your family on a river-rafting trip.

~~Granted, you usually do not need to perform all five newcomer skills in every new situation.~~ In a new and unfamiliar store, you may need to introduce yourself to sales clerks and ask questions, but there may be little expectation you'll remember their names or build much of a relationship with the cashier.

At a sporting event or orchestra concert you may be surrounded by strangers, but there is little expectation that you will introduce yourself or remember their names if you do. Still, you may need to ask a few questions, and there is still an expectation that you will perform the role of fan or concertgoer in an acceptable way.

Think about the newcomer experiences you've had in the past few months. How many times did you introduce yourself to a stranger? Try to memorize or recall a name? Ask a stranger a question? Strike up a conversation with someone you had just met? Try to perform something new?

As I've said before, none of these newcomer skills are things we typically learn in school, or are emphasized in training classes at work. We value people who can quickly get up to speed, but most organizations rarely spend any time actually teaching people how to make introductions, remember names, ask questions, develop relationships, and learn how to perform new things. Usually we have to figure these out on our own. But hopefully it's now clear that making a commitment to improve the five skills discussed in this book can make all your future newcomer situations more productive and less stressful.

Over the course of our lives we all accumulate regrets. Some are for things we did, but often we regret things we didn't do, such as opportunities we didn't pursue or relationships we never developed. When these moments of choice come along, how many do you let pass by because you feel awkward introducing yourself to strangers, asking questions, starting up relationships, or admitting that you are a beginner? More important, how many of those regrets do you want to continue accumulating?

The good news is that many of these future newcomer situations (both the ones you suddenly find yourself in and the ones you proactively seek out) provide ideal opportunities to practice and improve your ability to perform in front of strangers. In some of these situations, especially those with long-term consequences like new jobs, schools, and organizations, you'll really care about performing well. In other, less consequential temporary situations, you'll likely never see the people again, and you can practice the skills you will learn from this book, knowing that any mistakes and failures will have little impact beyond the embarrassment of the moment.

But before we dive into the five newcomer skills and learn how to get better and more comfortable with each of them, we first need to understand why new situations cause us so much anxiety. Read on

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## NATURE AND NURTURE

### The Science of Newcomer Anxiety

*In this chapter* we will explore why new situations often make us nervous and uncomfortable. In particular, we'll examine:

- How humans evolved to be anxious around strangers
- How children learn to fear and avoid unfamiliar people
- Why these anxieties are often counterproductive in today's world, where interacting with strangers is commonplace and rarely dangerous

Ultimately, my goal in this chapter is to convince you that being a *little* anxious in new situations is normal and helpful (in future chapters we'll figure out what to do about excessive anxiety.)

## COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: OUR EXPERIENCE VERSUS OUR FEAR OF THE NEW

We spend our entire lives being new. Every time we change jobs, move to new neighborhoods, take new classes, or join new clubs, we find ourselves surrounded by strangers and unfamiliar social situations. Most of us have had hundreds or thousands of these newcomer experiences in our lifetime and thousands more to go. According to the people I've interviewed, the vast majority of these newcomer experiences go well. Occasionally we might truly embarrass ourselves, or find ourselves snubbed by strangers. Once or twice in our lives we might find ourselves in real danger. But most of the time we have a relatively good newcomer experience. Sometimes these experiences are incredibly rewarding and even life-changing. Often they are uneventful, even forgettable. Usually they go reasonably well and we rarely regret putting ourselves into new situations.

With all these mostly positive experiences, you would think that we would already have learned to be comfortable and confident in new situations. Instead, most people I've interviewed still feel some level of anxiety when they're new, even in those situations where past experience would suggest there is *little reason* for being nervous.

Why is there a disconnect between what we've experienced in past newcomer situations and what we fear will happen in the next one? More specifically, why are we still reluctant to:

- Approach and introduce ourselves to unfamiliar people, when almost everyone we've met in our lives has greeted us warmly?
- Ask a stranger a question, when most people we've approached have been happy to help us out?
- Perform new things in front of new people, when our performance (and other's reactions to it) almost always goes much better than we think it will?

Many people I've interviewed have wondered why they continue to be anxious in new situations.

For example, one MBA student described her reluctance to approach and introduce herself to strangers:

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“When I don’t know someone it’s really hard for me to approach them and start asking questions. I usually wait until they start to ask me questions.”

When I asked what she was afraid of, she said:

“I really don’t know. I’ve asked the same thing of myself. I’m extremely uncomfortable to take that first step and talk to someone, and when I do I keep replaying the conversation in my head and always find something I said that was wrong.”

## HOW BEING NEW AFFECTS CREATIVITY

Not only do we seem to automatically become anxious in new situations, but researchers have found that just the thought of being new makes us nervous. Social psychologist Richard Moreland and his colleagues demonstrated this in a clever experiment. They put together groups of five strangers. Before the groups met for the first time, the researchers randomly lied to two of the five people in each group, telling them that the rest of the group had been meeting for several weeks, and they were the newcomers in the group.

Just the simple act of telling these two people they were new changed their outlook. They were much more nervous about the upcoming meeting and less confident about their ability to contribute to the group (compared to the other three people in the group who assumed they *all* were new.<sup>1</sup>)

Other researchers have found that when we actually join a group and start interacting, being new can also affect our performance. Anthropologists Dennison Nash and Alvin Wolfe put groups of five strangers together and had them brainstorm creative interpretations of Rorschach-like inkblot pictures. After a few minutes and a few pictures, they randomly transferred one person in each group to another group. Even though everyone had the *same* amount of experience interpreting inkblots, the people who were transferred to a new group suddenly started making fewer creative interpretations. After several minutes, the researchers returned the individuals back to their original groups, and their creative output went back to normal.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, there was something about being new to a group that inhibited an individual’s creativity and performance. Even for something as simple as interpreting inkblots, and when everyone in the group had the same amount of experience with the task. And even when newcomers knew they were joining a group that had been formed *only a few minutes earlier*.

Why do we automatically get anxious in new situations, even when our past experience suggests there is little reason to do so? Why does just the *thought* of being the newcomer cause us to be less comfortable and confident in our abilities? How can being new make us less creative, even if we know our relative newness is measured in minutes? In the rest of the chapter we’ll explore a variety of reasons, most which revolve around both our inherited and learned fears of strangers, social rejection, and loss of social status.

## THE ROLE OF BIOLOGY AND CULTURE: WHY WE FEAR WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

Human beings are a product of two kinds of evolution: biological evolution that has shaped our brains and bodies, and cultural evolution that has taught us how to perceive, think about, and interact with others. For much of human history, being anxious and alert around strangers was beneficial. It helped us survive long enough to reproduce, and over time we've evolved to be nervous around unfamiliar people. For similar reasons, we've also evolved to fear rejection and the loss of social status in groups.

But there also was a survival advantage for early human groups who adopted "stranger danger" as a cultural norm. As a result, our *cultures* evolved to reinforce this natural fear of strangers. Even today, we're often *taught* at an early age to be anxious around unfamiliar people.

These early strategies were effective when meeting strangers and being new was rare. Prehistoric humans rarely met strangers, or found themselves starting and maintaining relationships with lots of people. Our ancestors were *very familiar* with the thirty to fifty members of their hunter-gatherer group, and perhaps a few dozen others in neighboring groups.<sup>3</sup> But outside of those individuals they probably interacted with few other people most days.<sup>4</sup> Since it took over a square mile of natural land to feed a single person, these hunter-gatherer groups were normally spaced many miles apart.<sup>5</sup>

Evolutionary biologist Robin Dunbar has compared the brain size of early humans with the brains and social networks of our primate cousins. Based on his research, he estimates that the average person in prehistoric times probably was aware of and had a loose connection with only about 15 people.<sup>6</sup> Extrapolated across a lifetime, that means that our ancestors probably encountered fewer than 300 to 400 strangers throughout *their entire lives*. Today, many of us encounter that many strangers every morning as we commute to work.

Early humans were rarely newcomers. Many of our ancestors grew up and lived their entire lives in a single hunter-gatherer clan, and *never* found themselves in a completely unfamiliar group. Others only became newcomers when they reached reproductive age, and either:

- Left on their own to find or join a mate (due to an instinctive desire *not* to mate with siblings and close relatives), or
- Were pushed out of their original group by rivals, or
- Were stolen, captured, or lured away by other groups looking for desirable mates.

As a result, there has been little evolutionary incentive for us to become really comfortable and confident meeting strangers and being new. Compared to other survival skills like hunting, fighting, and food-gathering, newcomer skills such as introducing ourselves and starting relationships were rarely used and surely didn't keep us alive on a daily basis. Historically, there has been a great survival and reproductive advantage to fear strangers and avoid new situations than there has been to proactively seek out and join new groups.

## **YOUR CHALLENGE: OUT WITH OLD DEFENSES, IN WITH NEW STRATEGIES**

All that has changed, and the problem for us is obvious. Our natural and learned stranger anxiety was mostly beneficial in a primitive world where encountering strangers was rare and often dangerous. But it's often counterproductive in a modern world where we're surrounded by strangers all the time and we find we need to interact with unfamiliar people in order to gain the success and happiness we desire.

### **Hardwired by Genetic Evolution**



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