

The risk of being boring

The underconfident person is terrified of being boring – but at the same time, they have a painfully inaccurate understanding of what other people might be interested in about them.

What do you suspect makes someone interesting?

Marks out of 10 (10 being most interesting)

They know about politics.

They have advanced views on the economy.

They have read many prize-winning novels.

They are high up in an important company.

They once met the King of England.

They have a PhD.

They understand Nietzsche's ideas.

They have three houses.

They have a lot of friends, some of whom are famous.

However, the things that truly make someone interesting and appealing are very different and for some, unexpected.

Some of what actually makes someone interesting

They are honest about their pain.

They know how to be vulnerable.

They don't pretend everything is OK.

They have a wry, bleakly comic take on the human predicament.

They don't follow the polite, media-led script on issues.

They say what everyone already thinks but doesn't dare to say.

The good news, and a fundamental truth too, is that no one is ever truly boring. They are only in danger of coming across as such when they either fail to understand their deeper selves or don't dare (or know how) to communicate them to others.

There is simply no such thing as an inherently boring person. The human animal witnessed in its essence, with honesty and without artifice, is always interesting. When we call a person boring, we are just pointing to someone who has not had the courage or concentration to tell us what it is like to be them. By contrast, we invariably prove compelling when we succeed in saying how and what we truly desire, envy, regret, mourn and dream. Anyone who faithfully compiles the real data on what it is like to exist is guaranteed to have material with which to captivate others. The interesting person isn't someone to whom obviously and outwardly interesting things have happened, someone who has travelled the world, met important dignitaries or been present at large geopolitical events. Nor are they someone who speaks in learned terms about the weighty themes of culture, history or science. They are someone who has grown into an attentive, self-aware listener and a reliable, honest correspondent of the tremors of their own mind and heart, and who can thereby give us faithful accounts of the pathos, drama and strangeness of being alive.

What, then, are some of the elements that get in the way of us being as interesting as we in fact are?

Firstly, and most crucially, we bore others when we lose faith that our feelings could really stand the best chance of interesting others. Out of modesty and habit, we push some of our most interesting perceptions

to one side in order to follow respectable but dead conventions of what might impress. When we tell anecdotes, we throw the emphasis on the outward details – who was there, when we went, what the temperature was like – rather than maintaining our nerve to report on the feelings beneath the facts: the moment of guilt, the sudden sexual attraction, the career crisis, the strange euphoria at 3 a.m.

Our neglect of our native feelings isn't just an oversight; it can be a deliberate strategy to keep our minds away from realisations that threaten our ideas of dignity and normality. We babble inconsequentially to the world because we lack the nerve to look more closely and unflinchingly within.

It feels significant that most 5-year-olds are far less boring than most 45-year-olds. What makes these children gripping is not so much that they have more interesting feelings than anyone else (far from it), but that they are especially uncensored correspondents of those feelings. Their inexperience of the world means they are still instinctively loyal to themselves, and so they will candidly tell us what they really think about Granny and their little brother, what their plans for reforming the planet are and what they believe everyone should do with their bogeys. We are rendered boring not by nature so much as by a fateful will – that begins its malevolent reign over us in adolescence – to appear normal.

Yet even when we are honest about our feelings, we may still prove boring because we don't know them as well as we should, and so we get stuck at the level of insisting on an emotion rather than explaining it. We'll assert that a situation was extremely 'exciting', 'awful' or 'beautiful' but not be able to provide those around us with any of the related details that would help them viscerally understand why. We can end up being boring not because we don't want to share our lives, but because we don't know them well enough to do so.

Fortunately, the gift of being interesting is neither exclusive nor reliant on exceptional talent; it requires only direction, honesty and focus. The person we call interesting is in essence someone who is alive to what we all deeply want from social intercourse: an uncensored glimpse of what the brief waking dream called life looks like through the eyes of another person, and reassurance that we are not entirely alone in all that feels most bewildering, peculiar and intense within us.

Some topics to cover when we next meet people

Below each question, write down a few thoughts to share:

What are you currently worried about?

What do you most regret?

How is your sexuality confusing and difficult?

What do you lament in your emotional life?

What is a big mistake you have made in your career?

What do you hate about your appearance?

What are a couple of recent incidents when you made a total fool of yourself?
