The Benefits of Talking to Strangers

Casual connections with people we encounter in the course of daily life can give us the sense of belonging to a community.

I’m a lifelong extrovert who readily establishes and relishes casual contacts with people I encounter during daily life: while walking my dog, shopping for groceries, working out at the Y, even sweeping my sidewalk. These ephemeral connections add variety to my life, are a source of useful information and often provide needed emotional and physical support. Equally important, they nearly always leave me with a smile on my face (although now hidden under a mask!).

In recent months, under stay-at-home orders because of the coronavirus pandemic, many people lost such daily encounters. I, on the other hand, have done my best to maintain as many of them as possible while striving to remain safe. With in-person time with family and close friends now limited by a mutual desire to avoid exposure to Covid-19, the brief socially distant contacts with people in my neighborhood, both those I’ve known casually for years and others I just met, have been crucial to my emotional and practical well-being and maybe even my health.

The benefits I associate with my casual connections were reinforced recently by a fortuitous find. During a Covid-inspired cleanup I stumbled upon a book in my library called “Consequential Strangers: The Power of People Who Don’t Seem to Matter … But Really Do.” Published 11 years ago, this enlightening tome was written by Melinda Blau, a science writer, and Karen L. Fingerman, currently a professor of psychology at the University of Texas, Austin, who studies the nature and effects of so-called weak ties that people have with others in their lives: the barista who fetches their coffee, the person who cuts their hair, the proprietor of the local market, the folks they see often at the gym or train station.

In an interview, Dr. Fingerman noted that casual connections with people encountered in the course of daily life can give people a feeling that they belong to a community, which she described as “a basic human need.”

As she and Ms. Blau wrote in their book, consequential strangers “are as vital to our well-being, growth, and day-to-day existence as family and close friends. Consequential strangers anchor us in the world and give us a sense of being plugged into something larger. They also enhance and enrich our lives and offer us opportunities for novel experiences and information that is beyond the purview of our inner circles. They are vital social connections — people who help you get through the day and make life more interesting.”

My tendency to “chat up” total strangers I meet in the course of just living has resulted in a slew of acquaintances who have filled my days with pleasantries, advice, information, needed assistance and, most important of all during this time of enforced semi-isolation, a valuable sense of connections to people who share my environment.

Covid-19 lockdowns have reminded so many of us of how important our relationships are to our quality of life — not only relationships with the friends and family members we love and know well and who know us well, but also with more casual ones that help us maintain a positive outlook during dark and distressing times.

Dr. Fingerman’s research has also shown that people who are more socially integrated are also more active physically. “Being sedentary kills you,” she said. “You have to get up and move to be with the people you run into when exercising.” Consequential strangers also help your brain, she said, because “conversations are more stimulating than with people you know well.”

A fellow researcher in the field, Katherine L. Fiori, chairwoman of undergraduate psychology at Adelphi University who studies social networks of older adults, has found that activities that foster "weaker ties" than are formed with family and close friends foster greater life satisfaction and better emotional and physical health.
“The greater the number of weaker ties, the stronger the association with positive feelings and fewer depressed feelings,” Dr. Fiori said in an interview. “It’s clearly not the case that close ties are all that older adults need.”

And not just older adults, all adults. Dr. Fingerman said research has shown that, in general, “people do better when they have a more diverse group of people in their lives.” But as Dr. Fiori observed, “Unfortunately, Covid has severely curtailed our ability to maintain weaker ties. It can take a lot more effort to do this online.”

When Covid-19 descended with a fury on New York City, many people I knew who had second homes “escaped” the city in hopes of avoiding the virus. I, on the other hand, chose to stay in my Brooklyn neighborhood where everyday I encountered people I knew casually as well as others in my extended network of friends and acquaintances I’d made at the Y, in local stores and when walking and cycling in Prospect Park.

In my country house, especially during the dark cold days of early spring, I would have been far more isolated. Yes, I could walk my dog and ride my bike without having to wear a mask because I would have met almost no one else on route. But I would also have been deprived of conversations with the many “consequential strangers” I encountered daily during my outdoor excursions in Brooklyn, including the 7 p.m. “shout-out” in support of our essential workers.

To counter the loneliness and maintain her many casual connections, one of my Y buddies started a group email that not only filled in for the daily conversations she was missing but also gave her an ongoing support system when faced with an injury and struggling with doom-and-gloom isolation.

In their book, Ms. Blau and Dr. Fingerman emphasize the importance of creating and being in environments that foster relationships with consequential strangers. Decades ago when The New York Times erected cubicles for its writers and editors, it destroyed an environment that was conducive to sharing information and fostering camaraderie, prompting me to work from home most days and save the time and effort needed to dress for work and commute. I suspect that when Covid limitations are finally lifted, many more office workers will do the same and sacrifice casual work-based relationships.

As the authors wrote, “Where we live, work, shop, and mingle has everything to do with the weak ties we cultivate, and therefore our quality of life.” As they described a central theme of their book, “Casual acquaintances inspire us to venture beyond our comfort zones.” And until we do, we’ll never know what we might gain from relationships with “people who don’t seem to matter.”

Questions for Discussion:
1. When was the last time you had a conversation with a stranger?
2. Where might you have an opportunity to talk with a stranger (e.g. while walking your dog)?
3. Why do Japanese people tend not to talk with strangers?
4. What kind of people do you avoid talking to?
5. What are some safe topics to discuss in this kind of situation?