

Do lots of chats with strangers or a few deep conversations with friends make you happier?

[Jenny Anderson](#) September 30, 2019



Reuters/Adrees Latif

Better together.

There's a lot of evidence that [social interaction](#) matters to human happiness. Solitude and quiet may be en vogue amid the madness of modern life, but research [consistently shows](#) that people report feeling happier when they interact more with people than when they don't.

But does social interaction make people happier, or do happier people have more social interactions? More importantly, does the quality of interaction matter? Logically, it would seem the mere presence of humans isn't what matters, [but what happens when people get together](#).

"There's a clear difference between a deep conversation and small talk, between arguing and having a sympathetic and caring conversation with someone," says Jessie Sun, a PhD student at UC Davis who will [publish her research on the subject](#) in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Testing this is tricky, for two reasons. First, almost all of the research on social interactions is based on self-reporting. People who are happy may well report that their relationships are great, even if they are not. Second, the research tends to focus on the quantity, not quality, of interactions. Simply

research tends to focus on the quantity, not quality, of interactions. Simply logging conversations doesn't reveal if these were deep conversations or shallow chats.

So does opening up and revealing more about ourselves pay off? Sun says that it does. "People do feel more socially connected when they are having self-disclosing or deeper conversations," she said. Overall, her research suggests "the quality of social interaction matters."

Psychology IRL

Sun and her team ran tests by—get this—observing people in real life. Sun said that it is so rare in psychological research to observe behavior this way that researchers have to highlight it in their papers when they do, with disclosures like, "we measured *actual* behavior."

The researchers put EAR, or electronically-activated recorders (iPod touches), on 256 college students and recoded 30-second audio snippets every nine and a half minutes for a week. This generated thousands of hours of audio files which were each then deconstructed and coded by six outside research assistants—a total of 145—who rated the clips on whether the participants self-disclosed a lot or a little, and how deep the conversations were. Participants complemented the work with self-reporting, submitted four times a day, reflecting their opinions on the quality of the interactions and whether they made them feel happy and more socially connected. The data took three years to code.

The research found some interesting things. First, it confirmed the more-is-better theory: Every participant reported feeling happier when they were interacting more with people. "This effect is well established and very robust: everybody benefits from social interactions," Sun said.

Then, the researchers looked at two different things: first, whether people were happier and more socially connected when they were having deeper or more self-disclosing conversations; and second, whether people who had deeper and more self-disclosing conversations reported just being happier in general.

Participants reported feeling more socially connected when observed having more self-disclosing and deep conversations. The happiness effect was less robust; Sun said that's probably because happiness is affected by a lot of things beyond being socially connected. As to whether people who have more deep and self-disclosing conversations are on average happier, the results were mixed. People who *reported* having deeper and more self-

disclosing conversations on average said, on average, they felt happier and more socially connected. But that didn't hold for the observer ratings.

Sun's research adds to what is a mixed body of research on what exactly it is about human connection that makes us feel good. For example, some studies show that "weak ties," or simple interactions with strangers or distant associates, can have surprisingly strong effects: One showed that having a pleasant conversation [with a barista](#) led to greater feelings of belonging and happiness. (Calling [Brene Brown](#)!) Sun says this doesn't contradict the idea that stronger ties are better for us; it just shows that even weak ties can give people a boost.

One previous study that [focused on quality not quantity](#), which also used EAR devices and observer ratings, showed that among a small group of 79 college students, participants with higher well-being tended to spend less time alone, more time interacting with others, more time having substantive conversations, and less time engaged in small talk. But when researchers [tried to replicate those results](#) (pdf), deep conversations were associated with life satisfaction, but whether people engaged in more or less small talk was not. More research is clearly needed, including studies using people who are not college students, since their lives are designed for social interaction

The take away from all this, it seems, is simple: To improve your chances of happiness, be nice to baristas and chat with other strangers, but also invest in deep and revealing relationships. Every conversation matters.

Correction: *A previous version of this story said six research assistants coded participants' audio files. Six research assistants coded each participant, so the project involved a team of 145 research assistants.*