INTROVERTS guide to NETWORKING

☘ Have plenty of downtime beforehand
☘ Invite a friend
☘ Gather intel beforehand
☘ Dress comfortably
☘ Have business cards close to hand
☘ Get there early
☘ Eschew formal introductions
☘ Have a list of questions prepared
☘ Have a list of answers prepared
☘ Be as present as possible
☘ Take regular breaks
☘ Have an escape plan
☘ Plan something restorative for afterwards
☘ Follow up in a way that feels comfortable
☘ Go easy on yourself
Have plenty of downtime beforehand

Engage in something relaxing and enjoyable to get that tank topped up. If it’s not possible (maybe you’re heading straight to an after-work event with colleagues), then still try to snatch as many minutes of alone time as you can. Bathroom breaks, a trip to your locker to collect your bag, dropping into a quiet shop under the pretence that you need to pick something up, making a phone call (even if it’s not real)... All these are perfect opportunities to grab a quick breather.

Invite a friend

I realise that this advice will probably divide opinion because many will argue that you’ll use them as a crutch and, as a result, will miss out on talking to others and taking advantage of opportunities. But, as an introvert myself, I can tell you that I’ve met more people at events while with a friend than alone.

As long as you’re still open to conversations with others, having a sidekick can help you feel much more at ease, can take some of the pressure off you when it comes to keeping up a conversation, and avoids that awful scenario where you’re standing alone, feeling decidedly awkward and out of place.

It’s especially helpful if that friend already knows someone else at the event, because then they can organise an introduction. Just remember that they’re there to facilitate your networking, not frustrate it.

Gather intel beforehand

Ask around to see who’s going. If there’s an online presence on social media, follow along and introduce yourself. Get to know a few people there first and it will make real-life meetings considerably less anxiety-ridden. It also increases the chance of someone recognising you at the event and introducing themselves, rather than you having to do it yourself.

Dress comfortably

If you’re already going to be feeling anxious and uncomfortable in the situation, the last thing you’ll want is to be worrying about what you’re wearing or tugging at things to get them to sit properly. The same goes for shoes — if you’re not used to wearing heels, go for smart flats instead.
Have business cards close to hand

If it’s that sort of event, keep a few in an easy-to-access place so you’re not left rooting and rummaging through your bag.

Get there early

You may feel that arriving late means less time you have to spend there, but it’s hard to walk into an event that’s already in full swing and where everyone has already formed groups. It’s less overwhelming to arrive early, make a few introductions while there are only a handful of people around, and then duck out than it is to try insert yourself into a crowd.

Eschew formal introductions

If you’re like me, the thought of walking straight up to a stranger and introducing yourself puts the frighteners up you. Instead, I’ve found that a great way to get chatting to someone is to make a casual comment.

Networking events usually involve food or drink so, while I’m standing next to someone at the buffet, I’ll say something positive and follow it up with a question. Something like, “Oh, everything looks delicious. Do you know what you’re having?” or — bonus points for giving someone a genuine compliment because it makes a great first impression — “I love your shoes. Are they as comfortable as they look?” (I try to avoid asking people where they got something because not everyone feels comfortable sharing.)

This has proven successful for me on numerous occasions and, even if it doesn’t lead anywhere meaningful, that person will probably recognise me the next time they see me, making future conversations much less daunting.

Have a list of questions prepared

Being an introvert at a social event is bad enough without the inevitable brain freeze that sets in as soon as someone opens their mouth to speak to you. Make it as easy as possible on yourself by compiling a list of questions beforehand that will keep the conversation flowing. Here are some examples:

1. Where’s that accent from?
2. Do you know many people here?
3. Have you been to this venue before [in a “It’s quite nice here” way rather than a “Do you come here often?” way]?
4. Any plans for [insert upcoming holiday season]?
5. What did you think of the speaker/performance/exhibition/whatever?
Have a list of answers prepared

If you’re like me, there’s always at least one question you get asked that trips you up. (For me it’s, “So what do you do?”) Have a short little “speech” prepared for the areas you find most difficult to discuss. If you’re stuck, think about how a friend would describe it. Or, better yet, go and ask one!

Be as present as possible

As I’ve said, it can be hard to concentrate at events like these because you’ve so many things running through your head, but try to really focus on what the other person is saying. Listen intently. Go in with the mindset that you want to find out something interesting about them.

Take regular breaks

Remember those pit-stops we talked about? Take them before you run out of steam. Again, bathroom breaks are great. But also use things like buffets, bars, exhibitions, etc. as an excuse to step away for a minute and collect your thoughts. Even a pretend phone call can work wonders.

Have an escape plan

If you’re enjoying yourself, by all means stick around. But if you find yourself getting more anxious by the minute, then make your excuses and say your goodbyes. I find it’s easier to put people on notice in advance so they’re not suspicious when you slope off early.

They don’t have to be elaborate excuses, and they should include a little get-out clause in case you decide to stay a bit later after all. Like having a really early start in the morning (but I guess a few more minutes won’t hurt), or having to attend a private party elsewhere (but they won’t mind if I arrive a little late), or the babysitter can only stay until a certain time (but she just called to say she can hang on an extra hour).

Or extricate yourself from an excruciating conversation by saying it’s been lovely chatting to them but you’ve just spotted someone you need to talk to, and then walk out of their line of sight. (Toilets are usually a good destination because, even if pulled up on it later, you can say you thought you saw them go in but then lost them.)
Plan something restorative for afterwards

Remember that those batteries need to be recharged, so have a plan in place for how you’re going to relax and rejuvenate. The temptation to crawl straight into bed will probably be strong, but take a moment to read an extra few pages of your book, or to sit in silence and sip a hot drink, or even just to enjoy the peace and quiet for a few minutes.

Follow up in a way that feels comfortable

If you did get chatting to someone, send them an email or tweet or whatever seems appropriate the following day so that you can keep the conversation going in a way that feels much less intimidating. Or, if there was a social media profile or hashtag for the event, use it to say something positive. I usually say I had a great time and was sorry I couldn’t get to chat to everyone. More often than not, that simple statement starts a conversation with others at the event. And BAM, before I know it, I’m networking with people who were at the event from the comfort of my couch. MUCH less stressful.

Go easy on yourself

Situations such as these are challenging for introverts. Being fearful of something but doing it anyway is the very definition of bravery, so be proud of yourself for showing up. If you get to connect with someone, great. If you don’t, you’ve still fought a hard battle and come out the other side. Give yourself the credit you deserve.

May the luck of the Irish be with you