

APRIL 2012

KNOW MORE, GROW MORE

UK EDITION £3.80

PSYCHOLOGIES

PSYCHOLOGIES.CO.UK

MAGAZINE

The **one** conversation that could change your life

WHY INTROVERTS ARE FINALLY WINNING

TEST S, M or XL
What size is your ego?

«**Why I finally quit therapy**»
BY DAVID BADDIEL

18-PAGE DOSSIER

Kickstart your creativity

How creativity can enrich your life
Where do ideas come from? 6 experts reveal their secrets

WELLBEING

Retreat guide
Get away from it all

KRISTIN SCOTT THOMAS
«I've learnt that I can't be perfect at everything»



We need to talk...

Although most of us spend a large portion of our day talking to other people, how often are we having conversations about what matters to us most? A new book provides a road map for how – and when – to express what’s really on your mind

BY ANITA CHAUDHURI ILLUSTRATION HADLEY HOOPER

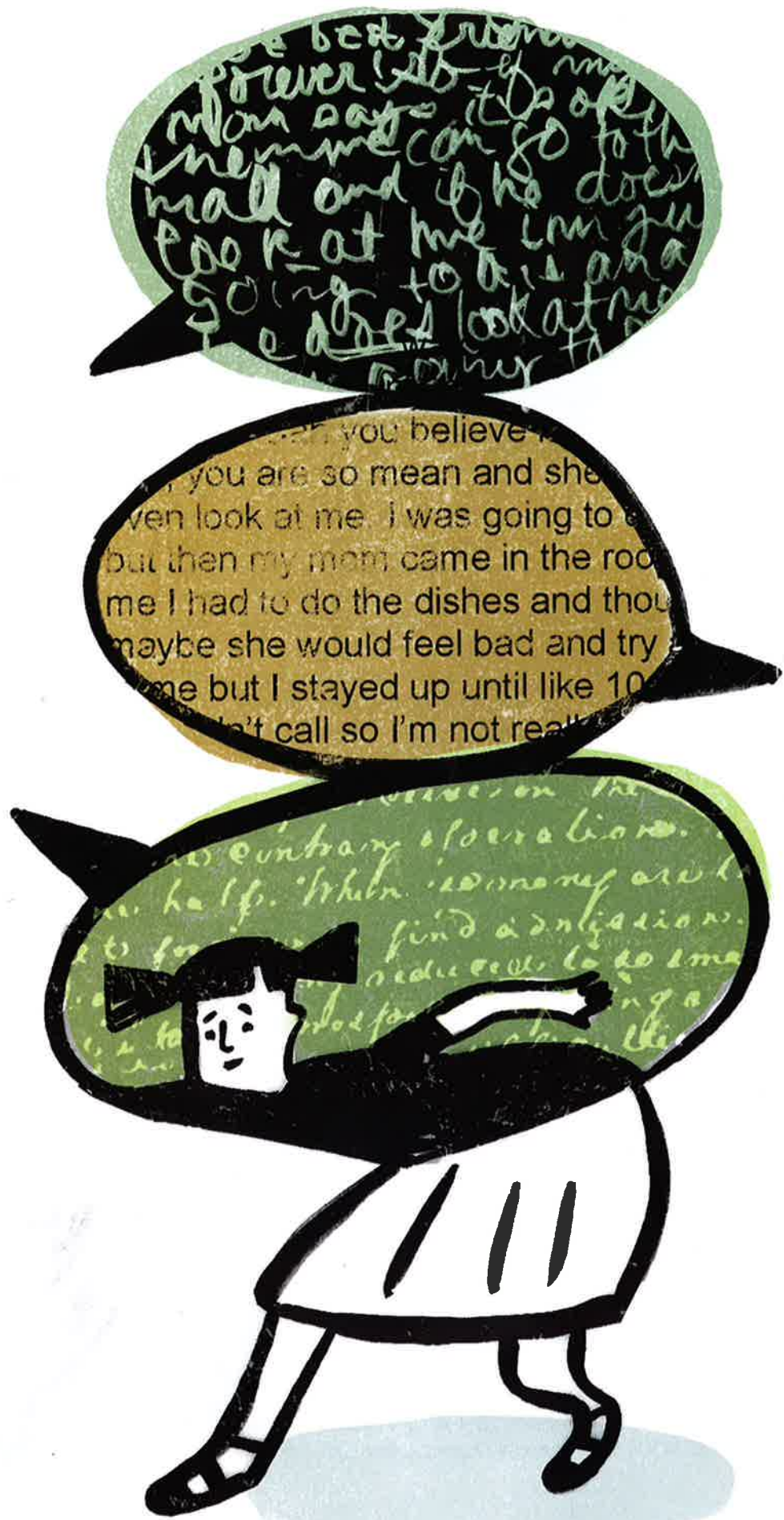
Sitting down to talk to another human being is such a simple act. A successful conversation can begin a marriage, create a new business, start a family, or end a feud. A destructive one, on the other hand, can lead to divorce, disappointment and disputes.

Yet despite the fact that dialogue can change lives, it’s not something we devote much time or attention to. It’s reported that we have, on average, 27 conversations a day, but research indicates that it’s those substantial, meaningful conversations that make a difference to our wellbeing rather than bonding over the latest gossip. A study published in *Psychological Science* in 2010 found that the happiest participants had twice as many meaningful conversations as the unhappiest respondents.

‘I see a lot of big conversations not happening,’ says Sarah Rozenhuler, therapist and author of the new book *Life-Changing Conversations* (Watkins). ‘A big conversation is risky, because a real one has an inherent unpredictability. You are co-creating it with other people, and responding to them in the moment.

What you can’t be is in control – and that’s a position none of us likes very much, so we shy away from going there.’ Another reason such discussions can feel so scary is that we fear the other

person may not respond in the way we hoped. ‘When we ask for what we want, it can make us vulnerable,’ says Rozenhuler. ‘We risk being told “no” or being given unwanted feedback. For example, if we ask for a pay rise, our boss might not just say “get lost”, they >>>





«Envisage the different ways a conversation might play out. How are you going to deal with compromise?»

have a cup of tea en route. I'd advise steering clear of alcohol, too – often you forget what's been said, or say too much.'

3 Manage your expectations
It can take courage to broach a big conversation. You want something, and you might not get it. Weigh up the risks and benefits of going ahead beforehand. 'It's helpful to envisage the different ways a conversation might play out,' says Rozenthuler. 'How are you going to deal with compromise, or rejection, if that comes up?'

Imagine your partner never wants to discuss any plans for the future. You might picture them telling you it's because they prefer to live in the moment or, at the other extreme, that actually they don't see a future for the two of you at all. 'Also ask yourself what outcomes you would be willing to accept even if they're not your ideal,' says Rozenthuler. 'Thinking about the various possible outcomes in advance will help you to stay calm in the moment.'

4 Find your opening
If it's a conversation that has been on hold for some time, you may feel at a complete loss about what to say. 'It's



whether they'll agree to reduce your hours, or perhaps with someone at the college where you might train. Only you can decide which one is the most important. 'The outcome of conversation A will affect what you say in conversation B – such discussions rarely exist in isolation,' says Rozenthuler. 'You're usually going to have a series of conversations.'

2 Set the scene
Whatever you want to achieve from the conversation, it's important to prepare the ground beforehand, and allow the other person to do so as well. 'Don't just barge in there and throw them a curveball – that's controlling. You need to flag it up,' says Rozenthuler. 'Have a pre-conversation. Say, "I'd really like to talk to you about X. When could we do that?"'

Then choose a time and place when you'll both feel relaxed and able to focus. 'Don't be tempted to have the talk over the phone – a face-to-face meeting is so much more powerful,' says Rozenthuler. 'Choose a neutral place, away from distractions such as TV, mobile phones or email – ideally somewhere that you won't be overheard.'

She advises having the conversation when you're actually looking at each other so you both pick up on facial expressions and body language. 'Don't have the talk while you're out for a walk,' she says. 'Agree to stop and

a good idea to decide on your opening line in advance,' says Rozenthuler. 'Something like "This is the most important conversation I've ever had in my life" or "You know I'll always be there for you" can offer a way in.'

Before the conversation, it can be helpful to identify your dilemma. 'You can figure this out in your head or in a journal,' says Rozenthuler. 'Try saying, "On the one hand... on the other hand". For example, "On the one hand, I love the people I work with; on the other hand, this isn't what I want to be doing for the rest of my life and I need to make changes."

'If you share a dilemma with another person, it's more likely to pave the way for a real heart-to-heart than if you sit down and present your idea as a done deal ("If you don't let me leave my job I'm getting a divorce").'

Make the conversation a creative encounter by allowing the other person to express how they see the situation.

5 Decide what not to say
A conversation is not an excuse to upload every last thought you've ever had about the issue at hand. "Deciding what *not* to say is as important as what you do want to express," says Rozenthuler. "If we are clear about what should be left unsaid, we are less likely to find troublesome things tumbling out of our mouths in the heat of the moment."

If in doubt, try writing down everything you think and feel about the issue, including any negative thoughts or frustrations you might have about the other person without censoring yourself. For instance, you might write "You always pour cold water on my dreams" or "I feel I'm always the one making all the compromises."

Then review your words. Decide to leave out those things that relate to the past rather than the situation at hand. This will make you more available to talk and ready to listen to what's going on now.

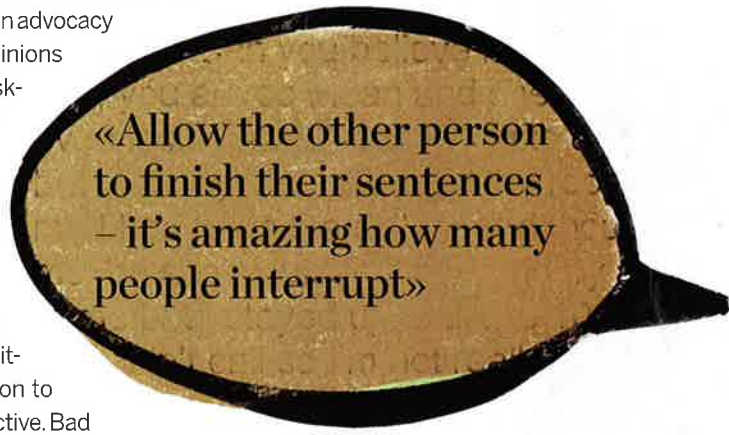
6 Connect with respect
'In the dance of dialogue we receive as much as we broadcast, it's an ebb and flow,' says Rozenthuler. 'What we need is a balance between advocacy – asserting our opinions – and enquiry – asking questions.' Society tends to reward speaking out over asking questions. 'We focus on what we want to say rather than inviting the other person to share their perspective. Bad

idea. Ask open-ended questions rather than those that will yield a yes or no answer.' Above all, she suggests, make an effort to listen fully to what's being said. 'Allow the other person to finish their sentences – it's amazing how many people interrupt the whole time.'

7 Speak your truth
'Being afraid to hurt another person's feelings is an enormous barrier to having a conversation. And sometimes our truth changes over time and we think that we'll betray someone if we voice how we now feel,' says Rozenthuler. But while we might think we're being sensitive, we're really being controlled by fear. 'It is our fear of rejection that makes us not want to go against anyone else. We can convince ourselves that we're look-

ing out for their feelings when really we're hiding from our own.'

If in doubt, before sitting down to talk, try writing a truth inventory. In one column write a list of facts about your situation – things that are objective, such as 'We've been close friends for seven years, but whenever I mention my new partner, you change the subject' or 'Last Friday



«Allow the other person to finish their sentences – it's amazing how many people interrupt»

when the four of us were supposed to be going out, you cancelled.'

Then, in a second column, write down all the thoughts and feelings that have arisen from the facts, such as 'I feel you don't like him' and 'I don't believe our friendship will last'. Distinguishing the facts from your emotions or imaginary future scenarios will give you the confidence to stay focused on what you want to achieve.

