



Have You Heard the Schmooze?

The thought of wedding small talk got you stressing? Less of a wallflower and more of a giant shy ivy, clinging perpetually onto anything – anything – that will stop you having to strike up conversation? Chill out, we've got your back

Some of us are able to walk into a room with enough swag to radiate the words 'Hello, I am a human being ready to engage in conversation with you' without even opening their mouth. Some of us are like those lab mice you see gently easing their way into the labyrinth that is a social occasion, frantically looking back and forth in fear of the next unwelcome attack.

But for your best mate's wedding day you need to be James Bond, not Adrian Mole, working that room with confidence. Belinda Alexander teaches confidence courses to wedding parties, schools and individuals, and has seen the things that separate the very best men from the worst.

At the simplest level, being a good best man boils down to three important principles: 'you need to have good manners, thoughtfulness, and be clean and tidy,' she says. Of course, if you're a shrinking violet, those principles are easier said than done. Making sure you're dressed well – and comfortably – can go a long way to helping you feel more confident, though. 'Feeling good in your clothes is such a confidence boost,' says Belinda, and luckily science shows that no man has looked bad in a well-cut suit. Go for something you like, that's well-tailored and fits well (that means cuffs the right length so you're not constantly fiddling with them), and you'll be able to stride around the reception with confidence.

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Speaking of which, Belinda advocates taking a very regimented approach to working the room in your role as best man. 'Regard the room, and the gathering, as a cake,' she says. 'You're dividing them into slices', making sure that you engage with someone in at least every part. In order to do so, you need to demonstrate military precision, a deft touch with conversation, and a polite ruthlessness.

Side up to a party (or a lone guest, who you should single out for special attention) within the first slice of your cake and get into the conversation. Don't worry about butting in: everyone knows who you are because they've seen you in the church. Good opening gambits focus around being attentive to guests. 'How are you getting on? Have you got everything you need? Have you got a drink? Have you had any canapés? Do you know where you're sitting for the meal?' are all good examples.

'As a best man you need to be moving on, not getting stuck with Aunt Edna for hours,' says Belinda. 'You need to extricate yourself carefully from a situation like that.' She recommends being upfront and honest. 'Just say: "I'm really sorry, I must get on. Today is a really busy day for me and I need to circulate a bit more." Being polite is important. People mind much more if someone disappears without saying something because they feel "God, am I that boring?"'

To keep the conversation going, Belinda recommends you don't reach far for inspiration. You're at a wedding: talk about it. 'Ask about the marquee, the beautiful flowers. Then you can ask whether you're friends with the bride or the groom's family, or both? Then it's how did you meet them. Easy really!'

If the conversation is really running dry, make sure you're equipped with props. We're not talking about magic tricks to pull out to keep people entertained, but always have a glass of something in your hand (though drink sparingly: you've got a job to do), and make sure to pick from the canapés as they can become ways to keep a conversation going.

It's also crucial to ensure that the person you're talking to makes sure they feel you're interested. 'If you look furtively from side to side it looks as if you want to get away,' says Belinda. Keep working the room, making eye contact and nodding politely as an endless stream of guests drone on about their summer holidays. Being a best man only happens once every so often, and in a few hours you'll be able to let your hair down without having to make small talk with a bunch of people you've never met. Either that, or you can escape to your room and avoid all interpersonal contact until breakfast tomorrow morning.

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How to Win at Conversations

Memorise your part of the conversation and recite each line. Not the Derek bit, obv

- Hi, I'm Derek, lovely to meet you.
- Ah, that's a lovely name: where does it come from?
- Excellent. So how do you know the bride and groom?
- I bet you've got some stories about them.
- That's interesting. Your suit/dress looks lovely: where did you get it from?
- What are your thoughts on late-era Girls Aloud?
- No I agree, Nicola is the best one.
- Would you rather fight a horse-sized duck or a hundred duck-sized horses?
- Well, you see, the trampling probably wouldn't be an issue with the horses because... actually, it doesn't matter. Going anywhere nice this summer?
- Lovely. Sadly, I'm afraid I have to dash as I've just seen the groom's brother run off with a small child's balloon and I'm slightly worried about what he has planned.

Images: Dreamstime.com