



Meet A Stranger

A Toolkit for Community Builders

So, you want to host your own “Meet a Stranger” event within your local community? Awesome! This toolkit will provide you with an outline of how we run our events. We encourage you to modify the process to better suit your specific community; however, when operating an event under the “Meet a Stranger” banner, we ask that you adhere to our community agreement.

OK, I'll do it! What are the rules?

Glad you asked. Our **community agreement** consists of two main rules:

1. These events are **platonic**. Looking for a date? Try Tinder instead.
2. Act with **kindness and mutual respect** by:
 - a. Acknowledging that we all have different lived experiences.
 - b. Acknowledging that we all have our own biases.
 - c. Setting, maintaining, and respecting boundaries. It's OK to say, “I don't feel comfortable talking about this.”

Core Values:

The “Meet a Stranger” project aims to **soften the edges of judgment** by looking **beyond the social labels** that tend to divide us. By sharing a conversation, and seeing life from someone else's perspective, it helps **build the foundation of social trust**, ultimately leading to an **increase in collective social health**.

The project is open to any adult who wishes to participate. It's also important to note that every participant is free to leave at any point in the conversation, should they wish.

Although the program is offered for free, it's OK to request donations from participants to help cover the costs of room rentals, snacks, and other items such as pencils, name tags, and printing.

Guiding principle: finding commonality through connection, one conversation at a time.

Sounds fantastic! So, is this really just talking with a stranger for an hour?

Yep. It sounds basic, because it is. It's just two people sitting down for a good old-fashioned chat.

Many people struggle to ignite a conversation, because they want an invitation to engage with the stranger first. When someone walks into a “Meet a Stranger” event, they already have that permission they seek, knowing that everyone in the room is open to conversation. More specifically – a conversation with *them*.

We also use a symbol at events and in our promotional materials that was designed to help foster this openness between strangers. The symbol can be worn as a pin, used as a signpost, or placed on a table top to signal an opportunity to meet someone new. Printable materials are freely available through our website (see Appendix).

The main obstacle is removed, so what happens next?

Here's where you can modify your approach to best suit your specific environment or goals. What we do for our monthly gatherings works well for us – but you do you.

As people walk through the door, we greet them, and ask them to write their names on a piece of paper, depositing it into a jar. For our large monthly events, we use two jars, in an attempt to make the pairing process go faster: two hosts, two jars, twice the speed. However, for smaller events, we would recommend only one jar.

We like to have a jar that reads, “open to chatting outside” and another jar for those who “want to stay warm and dry inside.” Any simple prompt works, as long as the two jars are clearly identified, so participants know in which jar their name is.

We then invite them to create a name tag for themselves. Near the name tags, we casually leave conversational prompts around. We cut them down into small strips of paper, so that they can subtly be taken, if required (see Appendix).

We like to do a short introduction, as the last of the participants trickle in. To be respectful of everyone's schedules, we encourage a prompt arrival time. We try to get people paired within 15 minutes of arrival.

During the introduction, we read everyone the community agreement, and give instructions regarding pairing, timing, and feedback opportunities. Then the pairing process begins. Pairs are selected at random by drawing two names at a time from the jar. As long as the both parties consent to the pairing, it's a match! (If there's an odd number, a group of three can be formed or a host can fill in as a partner.) We also recommend that people set their own timer on their phones, and that pairs check in with each other at the half-hour mark to see if they are both content to continue the conversation.

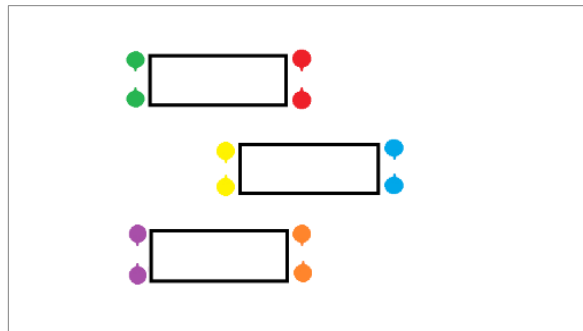
We provide drinks and snacks at our events (to avoid anyone getting too “hangry” during their conversation). Having a snack-zone can also help provide a break in the conversation, or be a gentle “subject change excuse” when needed (“I'm going to grab a snack, would you like one?”).

At the conclusion of the hour, we ring a bell to indicate that the conversation has come to a close.

How do you have an in-depth conversation with a stranger in a room filled with people?

The honest answer: you need space.

Creating an environment that is comfortable enough for people to lower their boundaries and relax into the conversation can be a challenge. It's easy to fit 50 strangers into a small room; but in reality, that same small space can really only hold about five private conversations. During the warmer months, you can host in a park, where pairs can walk around, or sit at a table, park bench, or picnic blanket. An indoor setting comes with challenges, undoubtedly. We still give strangers the opportunity to walk around outside, but for those who wish to be indoors, we alternate the tables in a zipper pattern to create space.



You can even throw some picnic blankets on the floor and toss a couple of pillows on them to make them more inviting. Ultimately, any configuration that suits the space will work; however, it's vital to create physical space between each pair, so that both parties feel comfortable having a private conversation, in a public place.

What happens if a conversation turns ugly?

The key to diffusing a tense situation comes down to our guiding principle: **find the commonality**.

From the feedback that we've been receiving, most participants enjoy their conversation, and are able to find commonality with even the strangest of strangers. However, we've all experienced a conversation that went from light to fight in a matter of moments, so each month we bring a conflict resolution kit to help find a peaceful resolution for any disagreements that may arise.

So, would you recommend that we tell people to avoid having difficult conversations?

Nope. Quite the opposite; we encourage people to embrace the difficult conversations.

Not all conversations are going to be light and easy. Some are going to trigger people. We suggest that those who feel triggered by a conversation allow themselves the grace to fully explore why the conversation triggered them. We all grow as a community through self-awareness, self-reflection, curiosity, and empathy.

Alright, I've got the basics; however, what happens if no one shows up?

Rome wasn't built in a day. Keep the faith, and try again the following month.

It can take a while for momentum to build. Consistency is key. If the first event has a limited turnout, we encourage you to simply try again the following month. Remember: people *want* to talk; they just need an invitation ... and some people need a little time to accept that invitation.

Some ideas to spread the word: print flyers, encourage word of mouth, post your event online, and start an email list to keep participants in the loop for future events (see Appendix).

What happens after the one-hour chat?

Feedback is a golden opportunity to learn what participants like, and dislike.

We offer an anonymous feedback system, and encourage participants to be as brutally honest as possible. Once they've written their feedback on the paper that we provide, they place it inside an opaque manilla folder. No names are attached.

Do I need to let you know that I'm running an event with your toolkit?

Nope! You just take it and run with it!

That being said, do we want to hear about how your event went? Heck yeah! If you feel like letting us know, we'd love to hear about it. Feel free to contact us at info@meetastranger.ca to let us know how it turned out!

What about the legal fine print?

You'll have to do your own research based on your specific community.

However, note that rented locations will require you to have insurance, and we suggest you write a release statement. You can find examples of release statements online. Remember, you're accountable for your event.

That's it! Thank you for stepping up to be a community builder and organizing a "Meet a Stranger" event. We wish you the best of luck, and genuinely thank you for helping to find commonality through connection, one conversation at a time.

Appendix (available as separate files on our website):

Community Agreement, Icebreaker prompts, Email list, Flyer templates, Conversation Symbol kit