### Talk Deeply, Be Happy?

By [RONI CARYN RABIN](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/author/roni-caryn-rabin/)
ZenShui/Getty Images Deep conversations made people happier than small talk, one study found.

Would you be happier if you spent more time discussing the state of the world and the meaning of life — and less time talking about the weather?

It may sound counterintuitive, but people who spend more of their day having deep discussions and less time engaging in small talk seem to be happier, said Matthias Mehl, a psychologist at the University of Arizona who published a study on the subject.

“We found this so interesting, because it could have gone the other way — it could have been, ‘Don’t worry, be happy’ — as long as you surf on the shallow level of life you’re happy, and if you go into the existential depths you’ll be unhappy,” Dr. Mehl said.

But, he proposed, substantive conversation seemed to hold the key to happiness for two main reasons: both because human beings are driven to find and create meaning in their lives, and because we are social animals who want and need to connect with other people.

“By engaging in meaningful conversations, we manage to impose meaning on an otherwise pretty chaotic world,” Dr. Mehl said. “And interpersonally, as you find this meaning, you bond with your interactive partner, and we know that interpersonal connection and integration is a core fundamental foundation of happiness.”

Dr. Mehl’s study was small and doesn’t prove a cause-and-effect relationship between the kind of conversations one has and one’s happiness. But that’s the planned next step, when he will ask people to increase the number of substantive conversations they have each day and cut back on small talk, and vice versa.

The study, [published in the journal Psychological Science](http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/02/17/0956797610362675.full), involved 79 college students — 32 men and 47 women — who agreed to wear an electronically activated recorder with a microphone on their lapel that recorded 30-second snippets of conversation every 12.5 minutes for four days, creating what Dr. Mehl called “an acoustic diary of their day.”

Researchers then went through the tapes and classified the conversation snippets as either small talk about the weather or having watched a TV show, and more substantive talk about current affairs, philosophy, the difference between Baptists and Catholics or the role of education. A conversation about a TV show wasn’t always considered small talk; it could be categorized as substantive if the speakers analyzed the characters and their motivations, for example.

Many conversations were more practical and did not fit in either category, including questions about homework or who was taking out the trash, for example, Dr. Mehl said. Over all, about a third of all conversation was ranked as substantive, and about a fifth consisted of small talk.

But the happiest person in the study, based on self-reports about satisfaction with life and other happiness measures as well as reports from people who knew the subject, had twice as many substantive conversations, and only one-third of the amount of small talk as the unhappiest, Dr. Mehl said. Almost every other conversation the happiest person had — 45.9 percent of the day’s conversations — were substantive, while only 21.8 percent of the unhappiest person’s conversations were substantive.

Small talk made up only 10 percent of the happiest person’s conversations, while it made up almost three times as much –- or 28.3 percent –- of the unhappiest person’s conversations.

Next, Dr. Mehl wants to see if people can actually make themselves happier by having more substantive conversations.

“It’s not that easy, like taking a pill once a day,” Dr. Mehl said. “But this has always intrigued me. Can we make people happier by asking them, for the next five days, to have one extra substantive conversation every day?”