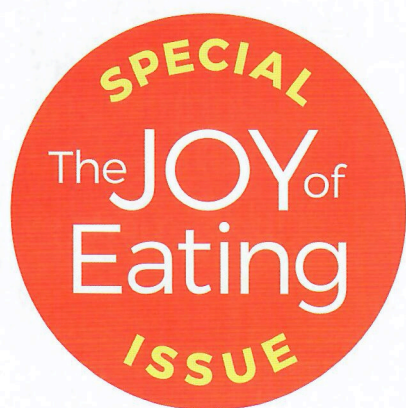


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HOW TO HAVE
dazzling dinner conversations



7

FOODS THAT BOOST YOUR MOOD AND MEMORY



How
to Have

Dazzling Dinner Conversations

{ Start discussions that make mealtimes more interesting and inspiring }

By Christa
Melnik Hines

Puzzled about how to get everyone to talk during dinner? Wondering how to avoid awkward silences at your next gathering? Try engaging your mealtime companions with fun and uplifting conversations that help you feel closer to each other.

Why conversation matters

Meaningful conversation deepens our relationship with just about anyone, from family members and

forever friends to neighbors, colleagues, and new acquaintances.

Done well, we can create a positive experience that's not only gentle on the digestive tract, but also uplifting to the spirit.

"Maintaining or creating new routines and rituals for mealtimes in person, or virtually, with people that love and support us is extremely beneficial and can contribute to a positive mindset," says Jane Enright, author of *Butter Side Up: How I Survived My Most Terrible Year and Created My Super Awesome Life*.

Enright believes that a positive mindset can put us at an advantage, especially during times of extreme stress, like when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

“Getting dressed up for a date night with your partner at home, scheduling a virtual family dinner, or safely having an in-person or online family game night can help bring more balance to our lives and make things seem more ‘right side up’ during uncertain times,” Enright says. “Staying connected with friends and family and developing new traditions can help us create new memories and create a vibrant, healthy lifestyle while massive upheaval plays out.”

Try a few of these ideas to facilitate a more meaningful and uplifting discussion:

Declare the dinner table a device-free space.

A study in the journal *Environment and Behavior* suggests that simply having your phone sitting on the table or in your hand during a conversation reduces the quality of your interaction.

Try limiting device usage when you’re eating out at restaurants too. Appeal to your friends by challenging them to a game of “whoever grabs for their phone before dinner is over has to foot the bill!”

Keep it positive.

Request that controversial political opinions and contentious family issues are set aside during your mealtime conversations, especially if these discussions generally end up in screaming matches between participants.

“Ditch the drama,” says Peggy Caruso, author of *Take the First Shot: Strategies to Fire You Up and Change Your Life*. “Positive and negative cannot occupy the mind at the same time. Negative is a dominant emotion. Let go of all of those opinions and focus on what is right, not what is wrong.”

4 Lighthearted Ways to Engage with Kids at Mealtime

Routinely eating meals together as a family has enormous health benefits for kids, according to the Family Dinner Project. This precious time together can lower the incidence of obesity, eating disorders, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and depression. Children who eat family meals also often enjoy stronger self-esteem and higher grade point averages.

To make mealtime fun, try one of these conversation games that kids of all ages will love to play:

1. Draw forth a discussion.

Cover the table with butcher paper and put out crayons. No matter how old you are, it’s fun to doodle! Ask questions about the pictures your kids draw to spark conversations and stories.



2. Play High-Low.

Share the ups and downs of the day to get conversation rolling. *What was the best thing that happened to you today? What was the hardest?*

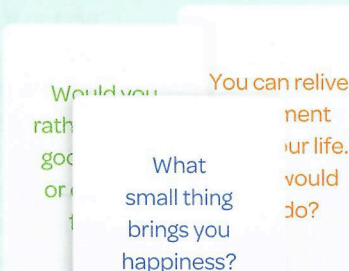
3. Put a conversation in a jar.

Create a jar with dinnertime conversation starters on strips of paper. For example: *Name someone who made you smile today and why. What was something kind you did for someone? What’s one of your first memories?*



4. Pick a card, any card.

Purchase a pack of conversation questions and table topics, and take turns choosing questions to discuss. Try a stack of cards, such as Kid Talk: Conversation Cards; Poobah: The Conversation Game; or Chat Packs, available at area retailers, bookstores, or online.





{ Show gratitude. }

Gratitude is good for you *and* those you love! Robert Emmons, PhD, a leading gratitude researcher, author, and professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, writes that regularly practicing gratitude strengthens your relationships, enhances your physical and psychological health, and reduces feelings of loneliness or isolation.

During your meal, take turns going around the table and sharing what you're grateful for with each other. Acknowledge the moments that made a positive difference in your day. Maybe you're grateful for the delighted sound of a child's laughter or your dog's enthusiastic greeting when you walk in after a rough day at work. Perhaps you're thankful to the Good Samaritan who pulled over to see if you needed help when you were stuck on the side of the road with a flat tire.

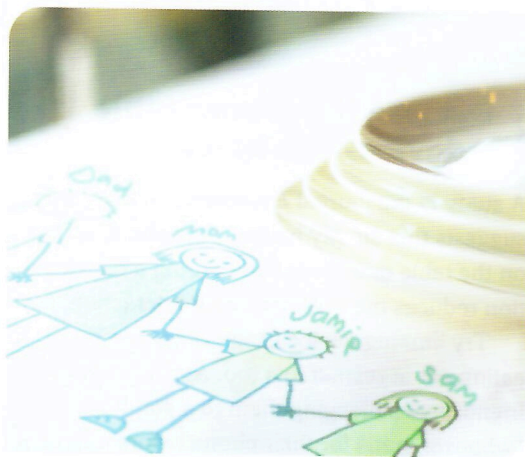
To make it a regular practice, try starting a gratitude jar. Keep a small pad of paper and a pencil next to it. Throughout the week, ask your loved ones to note the big and small moments they feel grateful for, and drop them in the jar.

Lead by example to get your family used to the idea. Even if they seem shy about participating at first, your family may grow more interested in sharing as they grow accustomed to you doing so. Once a week, read the gratitude slips together at a family dinner.

{ Invite someone who might feel alone or left out. }

"Chances are you know someone who is single, alone, or lonely; someone who would really appreciate being part of a group. Inviting that individual to share a meal (safely, of course) can mean all the difference in the world," Enright says.

Adding a new person to a dinner offers the opportunity to hear entirely new stories and ideas. As you give them the opportunity to open up, you'll likely be surprised by some of the things you'll learn. Everyone has a story—it's fascinating and fun to find out what it is!



{ Sign the tablecloth. }

If you're hosting a holiday meal or special occasion, such as an anniversary or birthday, ask all of your guests to sign the tablecloth, along with a note, the date, and their hometown. You can also trace the handprints of children who are too young to sign, along with their name and date.

If you host an annual gathering, pull the tablecloth out each year and add on to it with a different colored fabric marker each year. As the years go by, you'll find that the tablecloth becomes its own conversation piece.

"This has become one of our favorite family traditions, and it's a way to remember who attended the gathering," Caruso says.



Reminisce.

Swap your favorite memories. Strolling down memory lane can be especially meaningful to do with an elderly friend or relative.

“As we age, we tend to become forgetful, so ask them to reminisce about their lives from years past,” Caruso says.

For example, you might ask: *What were your holidays/birthdays like growing up? How did you meet your spouse? What was one of your most unforgettable vacations? What was one of your favorite traditions as a child?*

“It will create a sense of happiness within them, and they truly enjoy discussing those fond memories,” Caruso says. “Everyone should make positive comments while they give their undivided attention.”

Keep in mind that reminiscing isn’t just for the older generation: Kids also enjoy hearing amusing stories about things they said or did when they were younger.

Riddle me this.

Get your mealtime mates thinking by posing a few riddles (check online for ideas), or play trivia by using the cards from a trivia game (no pressure to play the board game, just pull the questions).

You can also make up your own trivia questions, like a family-themed trivia game, to find out how much you each know about each other.

“It is a great way to talk about old memories and make new ones,” Caruso says.

Place trivia questions in a fishbowl or basket to pass around the table. Each person can take a turn pulling a trivia question. Play in teams, or compete individually.

Play Icebreaker Bingo.

For a group gathering or a team-building event, play Icebreaker Bingo. Create a bingo card on a sheet of paper with five rows and five columns. In each of the 25 boxes, put one characteristic or trait, such as “Is an only child,” “Plays a musical instrument,” “Has a pet,” “Isn’t on social media,” etc. Give each person a copy of the bingo card.

Set a timer. The person who meets and finds five different people who can help them complete a row, vertical, or diagonal, gets bingo. (It’s OK if more than one person gets a bingo!)

During your meal, ask people to share what interesting or surprising things they learned about the people they talked to. This playful exercise gives everyone a chance to get to know each other better.

Icebreaker Bingo

Icebreaker Bin

Isn't on social media	Has a pet	Has 2 or more brothers	Has lived in 3 or more states
Plays a musical instrument	Has been to Mexico	Has a family member in the military	Plays softball/baseball
Is an only child	Plays tennis	FREE SPACE	Drives truck
Is allergic to nuts	Doesn't have a pet	Has been to Canada	Has a pet
Has been to Europe	Has 2 or more sisters	Plays disc golf	Is allergic to dogs

When you begin to see meals and gatherings as moments to treasure with friends and loved ones, you’ll strengthen your relationships and create positive new memories.

“Family gatherings and mealtime has become a significant part of capturing the important moments with those I love,” Caruso says. “The right environment and effective conversation can make all the difference.”

Christa Melnyk Hines is a nationally published freelance writer. She is the author of *Happy, Healthy & Hyperconnected: Raise a Thoughtful Communicator in a Digital World*.