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DERREN BROWN'S GUIDE TO OVERCOMING AWKWARD SITUATIONS

Navigating life's stickier situations

Life. It's always waiting around the corner, ready to stick out a gnarly ankle to send you tumbling into the muddy puddles of social peril. Whether it's coming a cropper with oversharing youths on public transport, failing to network at work parties or finding yourself face to face with an aggressive drunk on a Saturday night, you never quite know when you'll be caught in an awkward or potentially dangerous situation. But, as we're always keen to lend a hand, we asked thought-pestering psychological illusionist Derren Brown to give his tips on avoiding the everyday obstacles of 21st-century existence, guiding you safely home with your dignity, takeaway curry and smartphone all intact.

HOW TO... HANDLE AGGRESSIVE SITUATIONS

This is simply about not engaging with your aggressor at the level they expect. I was coming back from a hotel at about 3am one night and there was a guy in the street with his girlfriend. He was really drunk, clearly looking for a fight and he started kicking off at me. I had a routine ready in my head for this sort of situation and it worked a treat on this occasion. He asked me that typical aggressive rhetorical question — "Do you want a fight?" You can't say "yes" or "no" — you'll get hit either way. So, I responded with, "The wall outside my house is four-feet high."

I didn't engage at the level he was expecting me to, so immediately he was on the back foot. He came back with, "What?" and I repeated my bizarre response. I delivered the line in a completely matter-of-fact tone, as if he was the one who was missing something here. Suddenly, he was confused. All his adrenaline had dropped away, because I'd pulled the rug from under him. It's the verbal version of a martial-arts technique called an 'adrenaline dump', whereby you get the person to relax before you hit them. A punch will have much greater impact if the recipient's guard is down. I stuck to this surreal conversational thread with my assailant, saying things like, "I lived in Spain for a while and the walls are really huge, but in this country they're tiny." After

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a few of these exchanges, he just went, "Oh f*ck!" and broke down in tears. The guy had all this adrenaline and was on the point of really laying into me — I was seeing myself beaten to a bloody pulp — but these non-threatening nonsense statements broke that aggression down and he genuinely started crying. I ended up sitting next to him on the kerb, comforting him. It's the same with guys that come up and ask to "have a look at your phone", and you end up handing over your stuff and hating yourself for doing it — you can use the same approach. My PA had some stuff nicked in a Tube station recently, and I said to him, "If you'd just starting singing, they would have left you alone."

HOW TO... GET SOMEONE ON THE BUS TO TURN THEIR MUSIC DOWN

This is the same principle as trying to keep the seat next to you free. Don't put your bag on it and stare at your feet, because people sense what you're trying to do and it doesn't work. Instead, you should smile at them as they approach and pat the seat invitingly. That guarantees it's kept free, as no one wants to sit beside a nutter. Similarly, when someone's playing their music loudly, don't directly ask them to turn it down. Instead, catch their eye. Nod, smile — maybe even conduct along to the music they're playing or go and sit down next to them. Generally act like you're enjoying their awful din, which will promptly weird them out to the point that they will turn it off just to get you off their case. I had a friend who used to walk home every night through a dodgy part of London and there were always gangs of guys out on the street. He'd get abuse from them, so he'd cross over on to the other side of the road. Then, one day, he stayed on their side of the street and walked past them shouting, "Hello! Good evening!" He never got any hassle after that.

HOW TO... EVADE A PERSISTENT CHARITY COLLECTOR

The best way out of this situation is to initially engage fully with them and feign interest in what they are saying. Then, at one point, ask for clarification regarding exactly what they're raising money for and immediately appear disgusted by what they tell you. So, they say, "We're trying to raise money to save the dolphins," and you reply, "I'm sorry? To save the dolphins?! Oh, God. That's disgusting." Appear utterly outraged, as if they've somehow got the wrong end of the stick. This should baffle them enough to leave you alone. Charity 'muggers' occasionally recognise me, and I always stop and say hello. Recently, however, one of them managed to turn the conversation quickly from how much they enjoyed my shows to how much money I was willing to give them. So, there was no way I could say no to signing up. I plucked up the cowardice to cancel the direct debit the next day, though.

HOW TO... AVOID EMBARRASSMENT WHEN YOU CAN'T REMEMBER SOMEONE'S NAME

I was in this situation with someone famous, and because I don't watch TV I have a terrible time with famous people's names. Who was it? I can't even remember now. Anyway, I wouldn't tell you even if I could — it would be embarrassing. But they approached me and knew my name, and I couldn't remember theirs. What I did was to say, "Oh, I was writing about you in an email the other day," — which is flattering, firstly, and gets you off on the right foot — "but I think I spelt your name wrong. Don't you have a strange way of spelling it?" He then had to spell his name for me. Problem solved. It even works for simple names — if you find out they're called Chris, you can just say, "Oh, I thought you spelt it with a 'K'." If they're called Tom — "I thought you had an 'H' after the 'T'."

HOW TO... RETURN A MEAL AT A RESTAURANT

I'm generally quite fussy, so I do end up sending stuff back occasionally. The problem with this one is that you're engaging with the waiter, not the chef, and the chef is the person who'll be doing the spitting if you complain about his food. So, you need to worry about what the waiter tells the chef. The best trick is to frame your complaint as a



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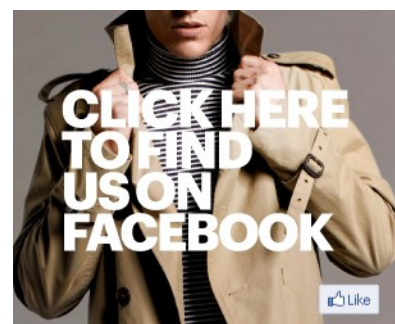
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compliment. Say, "Excuse me, could you please tell the chef this is the best steak I've ever had... but would it be possible for him to cook it a little longer?" You could even add a question — ask which herbs he used, say, "They're delicious... but could it could be a tad more well-done, perhaps?"

HOW TO... MAKE FRIENDS IN A ROOM FULL OF STRANGERS

The key thing, initially, is remembering people's names. I have to do this on-stage with volunteers from the audience and it's no good pulling off 'amazing mind feats' if you can't remember the name of someone you met two minutes ago. My technique is, when you are introduced to someone, to make a visual link between them and whatever their name reminds you of. So, if I meet someone called Tom, I immediately think of my friend Tom from university, who had ginger hair and lived in a castle. I'll picture this new Tom with a big red mane, standing on top of a turret and whenever I see him again, that visual will immediately present itself. So, if somebody's called Mike and they're wearing a stripy jumper, I'd imagine a big stripy microphone — that's what 'Mike' makes me think of — the more bizarre the image, the better, as if it's too ordinary, you'll forget it. If you're like me at parties, and you often find yourself looking round, thinking, "I don't like these things, what the f*ck am I doing here?" take a minute to review the people you've met and see how many names you remember. People are always delighted when you approach them again later in the evening and remember their name. If you're not hugely confident, just turn the spotlight on the person you're talking to. Ask them questions and be engaged and enthused by their answers. It's very simple — the nicer you are to people, the more they will like you.

HOW TO... REJECT SOMEONE'S ROMANTIC ADVANCES

I have nothing to say on this matter. I'd usually be quite happy to encourage them.

Derren Brown's DVD Enigma is out now and tickets for his new tour 'Svengali', coming to London's Shaftesbury Theatre from 8 June, are now on sale; shaftesburytheatre.com

Main image: Rex

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