

## 4 Topics to Avoid in American Small Talk

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### Key Vocabulary Words

1. To offend
2. Sexual harassment
3. To draw the line
4. To make assumptions
5. To cling
6. Heated
7. To keep something to oneself
8. Like-minded

**Lindsay:** So hey Georgia and Vin. How's it going?

**Georgia:** Very well. Thanks. It's Christmas day.

**Lindsay:** Absolutely it is. It's a nice, cold day here in New Hampshire.

**Vin:** Yeah. Absolutely. It's freezing out there, but it's nice to be warm and snuggly by the fire.

**Lindsay:** Yeah. So today we're talking about four topics that you want to avoid or that Americans commonly avoid when they're engaging in what

we call small talk, right? So at a cocktail party or at a dinner where you don't know the people very well. You would want to avoid these four topics: sex, religion, um, politics, and money. So let's talk about why and how you might go around the topic and move on to something else. The first one is sex. Why do we not talk about that in American culture?

**Vin:** (Uh), well, I guess it's kinda (kind of) hard not to **offend** somebody. You never know what somebody's, you know, if you tell somebody that their dress is very attractive, they maybe think you're hitting on 'em (them).

**Lindsay:** Oh yeah, okay. You wanna (want to) avoid like the sexual come-ons, that sort of thing.

**Vin:** Right.

**Lindsay:** Okay. **Sexual harassment** is a big issue in the workplace.

**Vin:** Right.

**Lindsay:** Absolutely. Definitely. Yeah.

**Vin:** And where the **line is drawn** is different for every single person on the planet. So you just -- it's just like you can't win in that scenario.

**Lindsay;** So it's better to just avoid it, but it's interesting because it's all over our media. American movies are known for being very sexualized. So, yeah.

**Vin:** Well, that's not just American movies, but yeah.

**Lindsay:** That's true. Yeah. Okay the next topic is religion. Why do, would we want to avoid religion in conversation?

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**Georgia:** Well I, I think that there are many different religions that, (um), people, (um), are involved in, um, they – I think it's hard for you to know what religion somebody is with whom you may be speaking and you may **make assumptions** for instance, by saying "It, it's Christmas day here." Well that might not matter to anybody else, but somebody who is Christian and then again, there are Christians who are of different denominations and (uh) very conservative

with liberal stances that, that maybe, you might say something offensive as well to them, so...

**Lindsay:** Okay. So as a way to avoid that, people tend to say "Happy Holidays," right?

**Georgia:** I, I believe so. I have that on my mind when I say "Happy Holidays." I don't say "Merry Christmas" to very many people.

**Lindsay:** Right. Right. Okay. (Um), the next one was politics. So why is politics – I mean in a lot of countries, (you know), people wanna (want to) talk about politics all day, political views, perspectives. I mean why do people -- this is not everyone in the US of course. We're not, (you know), trying to say everyone avoids it, but in general it's common knowledge

that you might want to avoid getting into a discussion about politics when you're at a party where you don't know people very well. Maybe. Why?

**Vin:** Well, I think it's awfully hard to win at that too because the likelihood of your political views being the same as some – a total, stranger you just met at a party are very close to zero. And people – and not everybody's comfortable talking about it certainly.

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

**Vin:** The people that are more comfortable sometimes tend to attempt to impose their, uh, feelings on other people and that becomes uncomfortable for that second person.

**Lindsay:** Good way to lose a lot of friends at a party.

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**Georgia:** And you may make assumptions that what you think about and what political points of view you have are also the same points of view, (uh), of the people you are speaking with and that can be quite offensive for the listener.

**Lindsay:** Yeah. And I think people **cling** really hard to their political points of view don't they? They really take, they tend to, (you know), it's a personal issue. These are really personal issues. I think that's what it comes down to. Sex, religion, politics, and money

are personal. (Um), and so the main political issues that tend to get really **heated** are I think are war, um, you know, healthcare reform is a big one in the news right now. What else?

**Vin:** Equal, civil rights.

**Lindsay:** Civil rights. Right. Gay issues for example, (uh), gay marriage, and abortion is another one. Those are four that people really get into, they get really, um, upset about on either end. (Um), and the next issue is money. What aspect of money are we not talking about?

**Georgia:** (Uh), could you re-word that question?

**Lindsay:** Yeah, what aspect of the money issue are we avoiding at a cocktail party in conversation?

**Georgia:** What aspect of the money issue...? Well you don't want to be talking about how much money you make in the office.

**Lindsay:** Yeah. So your income.

**Georgia:** Your income or your hourly wage.

**Lindsay:** Right.

**Georgia:** And you may be talking to somebody that works in the same company and you're earning more than they are even though they've been there ten years more than you...

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

**Georgia:** ...it could create, you know, (uh), you know, bitter feelings. (Um), and then (uh) the boss would be in a difficult position.

**Vin:** And along the same lines too, you don't wanna (want to), you don't wanna (want to) uh, explain to somebody how you just bought yourself a new Maserati and your, and your third vacation home needs to be painted...

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

**Vin:** ...'cause (because) it's unlikely you'll get much pity for that (uh)...

**Lindsay:** Right.

**Vin:** ...mindset.

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**Lindsay:** So you really don't wanna (want to) say – right. So when you bought something nice and luxurious, maybe you don't wanna (want to) – you may not even wanna (want to) talk about it or you also might not wanna (want to) say how much it cost.

**Vin:** Right.

**Lindsay:** Anytime you buy something – you bought a new boat. You don't wanna (want to) say “Oh, I bought a new boat,” and it cost \$100,000.

**Vin:** And it's kinda (kind of) silly because lots of times people try to use their possessions as way of validating themselves to other people.

**Lindsay:** Absolutely.

**Vin:** But the sad reality is most people that have those possessions really don't have the income to afford those possessions, but the impression that they give is more important than their actual balance sheet.

**Georgia:** And it's often times true that people who are very wealthy don't talk about their money at all and dress as if they didn't have anything.

**Lindsay:** Right.

**Georgia:** And they don't want to appear to be any different than anybody else.

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

**Georgia:** So that is a very polite, (uh), way to maintain friendships and (um), and (um), (uh) have a good rapport.

**Vin:** If you see somebody wearing elbow patches, don't think they're poor.

**Georgia:** Yeah. That's true.

**Lindsay:** Maybe they're just lazy. Too lazy to buy something new.

**Georgia:** No, no. It's just one of those things. You know, they just let... you know they use their clothes for a long time and...

**Lindsay;** Sure and the other aspect of money that people might want to avoid talking about – so we've said income, how much you make and we've said spending, how much you've spent on something and the other one is I guess savings, right? How much savings do you have? (Like) how much do you have in the bank, how much do you have in your retirement plan, your retirement fund?

**Georgia:** I feel that most people probably should **keep that to themselves**. I think that's very personal and...

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

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**Georgia:** ...then it just becomes if you discuss that, (uh), kind of a competition with somebody else. "Oh, I have more than you do."

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

**Georgia:** Or "Oh, you have that. Oh jeez," and that makes them feel like less of a person, if they might have less. So...

**Lindsay:** Yeah.

**Georgia:** ...it's just not a polite topic of discussion.

**Lindsay:** Okay. There you go. So those...

**Vin:** So what the heck do you talk about when you go to a cocktail party?

**Lindsay:** Good question! We'll cover that in a different module, but um...

**Vin:** All right.

**Lindsay:** ...but yeah, those are the things, the four things to avoid: sex, religion, politics, and money. In general, of course, not every party, not every group. In some groups you'll be in and it'll be just fine to engage in these topics, but um...

**Georgia:** Especially if they're **like-minded**.

**Lindsay:** Sure, sure. Of course, but in general, you probably wanna (want to) just, in the beginning, steer clear of these four topics. Thanks a lot for chatting with us today guys.

**Vin:** Hey, it was a good time. Thank you.

**Georgia:** Yeah, thank you Lindsay.

**Lindsay:** See ya!