

REAL SIMPLE



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I Spent a Week Talking to Strangers at Every Meal—and It Completely Rewired My Comfort Zone

The perks of pushing beyond discomfort.

By [Wendy Rose Gould](#) | Published on August 2, 2026

“Would you like to be seated alone, or at a communal table?” The host looked at me expectantly, and every fiber in my body wanted to say, “Table for one, please!” But instead, I felt my mouth quietly say the words, “I’ll sit at a table with others.” It was my first night at [Rancho La Puerta](#) in Tecate, Mexico—one of the world’s first wellness resorts that’s served as a true blueprint for all the others to come—and I was full of excited energy to experience such a legendary place, but also a little trepidation since I came alone.

The server led me to a group of four women already seated, older than me by a couple decades, who looked up at me and smiled as I arrived. We had room for one more at our table, and shortly enough a gentleman was brought over, and we continued introductions. Together we all sat—through four courses and post-dinner tea—from all walks of life and with very little in common except that we were here to [experience something new](#) for ourselves at a beautiful place.

It was perhaps a bit awkward at first with some small talk and introductions. But the beauty of sitting with a group of strangers is that, soon enough, they're not so strange to you anymore. I learned that two of the women had lost their husbands and made this an annual trip together. That the gentleman next to me was a singer-songwriter who'd traveled the world performing. That another woman had been coming to "The Ranch" (as longtime visitors endearingly refer to it) for years. That she thought the communal meals were some of the best parts of every trip.



Credit: Wendy Rose Gould

The Challenge of Meeting New People

It's a known fact that the older you get, the harder it is to [make new friends](#). In grade school and through college, our social circles organically evolve because we're consistently meeting new people in classes and extracurriculars. That naturally slows down as time goes by, especially if we're not challenging ourselves to try new things.

"Meeting new people asks our nervous system to [tolerate uncertainty](#)," explains [Joy Berkheimer](#), PhD, LMFT. "Our brains are naturally wired to scan for social acceptance and belonging, so introducing ourselves to someone we don't know can briefly activate fears of rejection, embarrassment, or simply not knowing what to say."

Even people who appear outgoing often experience those thoughts, Berkheimer notes. However, when we choose to move through the discomfort, it opens up a world of possibilities and, yes, friendships. So yeah, it's hard. Really hard. But it's not impossible. It simply means you've got to put yourself out there, stretch beyond your comfort zone, and make a concerted effort to connect with others.



Credit: Wendy Rose Gould

The Rewards of Pushing Through Discomfort

Choosing to sit at a communal table on that first night at The Ranch was overwhelming and made me feel vulnerable and nervous. I truly had a moment when I thought, *"Nah, I'll eat my meal alone and head back to my room."* But pushing through the awkwardness allowed me to make new friends. And the next morning—and through the rest of my stay—I was greeted by those same familiar faces time and again.

The following day, at lunch, I ended up sitting one-on-one with a kind gentleman who was about my age. He'd managed to swing some extra shrimp for his meal, and after a double cardio class I eyed them and made a joke about how I wanted some, too. He kindly offered to share the delicious plate with me.

Over expertly-grilled seafood, we talked about everything—life, children, health, our marriages, aging parents, travel, and our experiences at the resort. And over a simple meal, barely an hour long, I somehow managed to connect with someone I didn't even know existed the day before.

Another day, after an incredible and much-needed yoga class, I had lunch with some others who'd attended the same class. By this point in the week, most of us had fully settled into the resort's rhythm and gotten comfortable talking with others; it was almost like an adventure in learning about others—why they were there, what they were getting out of this experience, what they had on their docket for the day.

On my final night at Rancho La Puerta, I participated in a Chef Series "make your own dinner" program, which involved moseying through the organic garden to collect produce and then cooking with a group before enjoying the meal together alongside the chefs who helped steer our cooking ship.

A woman I'd sat with on the first night was there, and we got to know each other even better. And so was a couple who'd driven from California for just a few days, and another couple who'd come all the way from New York City. Surprisingly, one of the women was someone I'd met before, but we couldn't figure out how. While chopping radishes, we eventually figured out she'd taught a class I took a year ago—perhaps proof that the world is smaller than we think.

That experience was incredibly nourishing, from spending time outdoors to creating a beautiful meal, enjoying it together, and learning about each other along the way.

Expanding Your Surface Area

I'm really drawn to the concept of "[increasing your surface area](#)." It's an optimist's perspective, but by expanding your existing bubble, you're more likely to experience so much more joy. You'll make friends, discover things you like, hone skillsets, find new paths, and boost your luck. Is it hard? Yeah. Is it worth it? Absolutely.

"Keeping life new and interesting is always a positive choice for emotional well-being," says psychotherapist [Mindy DeSeta](#). "The best-case scenario is that, by taking advantage of new situations, you increase your odds of meeting new people, and from there, you can spend time with them and see if there is common ground for a friendship."

And when putting yourself out there, the "worst" outcome is usually much smaller than our minds imagine. Someone may not engage, or the excursion may end up being a dud. But you still learned something and built confidence. And at the very least, you've got a story to tell—perhaps to a new friend.