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The interview was broadcast on October 9, 2021. Joe Keohane is a New York-based writer who is the author of the book *The Power of Strangers: The Benefits of Connecting in a Suspicious World*.

*Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)*

## The peculiar power of talking to strangers

### Transcript:

**Sana Qadar (presenter):** Where do you stand on talking to strangers? Like when you're at a café, or in a queue, do you chat to the barista or the person next to you? Or does the thought of that sound like your idea of a nightmare?

5 **Joe Keohane:** I was raised by people who talk to strangers constantly. I was actually raised in a family of funeral directors<sup>1</sup>, of all things. And so growing up, I got to see my parents just chat with people all the time. And they would be so brazen<sup>2</sup> as to lean across the table in a crowded restaurant and start talking to people. And it wasn't as horrifying or traumatic to me as it is to a lot of teenagers who have parents like this. I got to see them live their lives like this, and it seemed like a pretty good, pretty connected and pretty fun way to live.

10 **Sana Qadar:** That's Joe Keohane. From a kid of chatty parents, he grew up to become a journalist, which means talking to strangers became his job.

**Joe Keohane:** And, you know, in my 20s, in my 30s I would talk to people a fair amount, not as much as my parents, but I would talk to people in bars, I would talk to people in coffee shops.

15 **Sana Qadar:** But a few years ago he realised, apart from work, he had stopped talking to the strangers around him.

**Joe Keohane:** I hadn't decided to stop doing it, it just occurred to me that, you know, for some reason I had eliminated an entire category of human interaction from my life. So I became curious, you know, knowing that... that it was edifying<sup>3</sup>, knowing that it was interesting, it was a source of serendipity<sup>4</sup> and inspiration and hilarity, why did I stop doing this?

20 **Sana Qadar:** He realised it was a combination of things; his demanding job, being the parent of a young child, and his ever-present phone. He was exhausted, and distracted.

**Joe Keohane:** So from there I just started asking bigger questions. You know, what keeps people from talking to strangers? And then I wanted to dig into the benefits. You know, what happens when people do it, when they get over this hump<sup>5</sup>, when they get past this fear and this suspicion

<sup>1</sup> funeral directors: bedemænd

<sup>2</sup> ligefremme

<sup>3</sup> (her) lærerigt

<sup>4</sup> spontan lykkefølelse

<sup>5</sup> forhindring

25 and they actually engage people they don't know. That led me down about 15 different rabbit holes<sup>6</sup>.

**Sana Qadar:** The result was a book, *The Power of Strangers: The Benefits of Connecting in a Suspicious World*.

30 **Joe Keohane:** It's funny, you know, that people's expectations are dismal<sup>7</sup> going into it. They're remarkably pessimistic about the prospect of talking to strangers. But a growing body of research that has taken place from Toronto to Turkey and a few places in between, have found that though we go into these interactions fearing the absolute worst, people find, coming away, that these interactions make them feel happier.

**Sana Qadar:** Not convinced?

35 You're listening to *All in the Mind*, I'm Sana Qadar. Today, the case for "talking to strangers".

There are lots of reasons we generally don't talk to strangers, from our innate wariness<sup>8</sup> of others, ideas about 'stranger danger'<sup>9</sup>, technology, to, more recently, the pandemic<sup>10</sup>. There's also a quirk<sup>11</sup> of our psychology where most of us seem to think other people don't want to talk to us, but we're all kind of thinking the same thing. [...]

40 **Joe Keohane:** A growing body of research involving different genders, different ages, you know, commuters, students, adults, a pretty wide range of people, have found that these interactions make them feel happier. They make them feel more connected to the places where they live. They help them, you know, expand their social networks. Talking to strangers can alleviate<sup>12</sup> loneliness, it can boost even cognitive performance<sup>13</sup> because it's hard, right. It's like exercising, when you work out really hard you get stronger. This does that in the same way for your kind of cognitive facilities. There is just this raft<sup>14</sup> of benefits that are really, really both profound and really important at this particular point in time. Feeling less lonely is important now because we have a loneliness epidemic that is overtaking the West. It is tremendously damaging to individuals and to societies. We have polarisation that when you do talk to strangers, when you talk to people from different groups, it can alleviate that, like it really can address a lot of the more pressing problems of our age. And I was surprised to see that, you know. When I thought about talking to strangers I thought it was fun, it was a good way to pass the time, and I learned something, right, I would gain an insight into someone else's experience. But it turns out that the benefits are actually more profound than that and I find that fascinating.

(2021)

<sup>6</sup> *That led me down about 15 different rabbit holes:* (her) Det sendte mig i cirka 15 forskellige retninger

<sup>7</sup> negative

<sup>8</sup> *innate wariness:* (her) medfødte forsigtighed

<sup>9</sup> *stranger danger:* det, at fremmede kan være potentielt farlige for især børn

<sup>10</sup> coronapandemien 2020-2021

<sup>11</sup> særhed

<sup>12</sup> mindske

<sup>13</sup> *cognitive performance:* evnen til at tænke

<sup>14</sup> række