CONVERSATION GUIDE

50 Conversation Starters

For when there's nothing left to say.

🔑 **These are not activities. They are one question each.**
The kit has seventy talk-and-remember activities, and they need ten minutes and a bit of planning. This is for the other moment: the corridor, the edge of the bed, the five minutes after the family leaves, the resident who has not spoken since breakfast. One question. No setup. No materials.

⚠️ **The rule that makes these work: ask about the thing, not the feeling.**
"*How much did they pay you?*" opens a story. "*How did that make you feel?*" closes one. Every question here is deliberately concrete — a price, a colour, a smell, a seating plan. Concrete questions still have answers behind them long after abstract ones don't.

How to read the marks
○ works with anybody, including advanced memory loss
◐ needs some recent conversation ability
● for someone sharp who is simply not talking today

1 · WHEN THEY HAVE NEVER SPOKEN TO YOU (10)

Start here with a new resident, or with the one everybody says "doesn't talk."

1 ○ What should I call you? Is that what people have always called you? **2** ○ Are you a tea or a coffee person? Has that always been true? **3** ○ Whereabouts did you grow up — town or countryside? **4** ○ Were you the oldest, the youngest, or somewhere in the middle? **5** ◐ What did your father do for work? **6** ○ Do you like the window open or shut? *(Then do it.)*
7 ◐ Were you a dog person or a cat person? **8** ○ What's the best thing they've cooked here so far? **9** ◐ Did you walk to school or ride? **10** ● What's the one thing I should know about you that nobody's asked?

📌 **Number 6 is the most important on this page.** It is a question whose answer you can act on within ten seconds. Being listened to and having something change is worth more than any story.

2 · WORK AND MONEY (10)

The most reliable ground there is. People who won't talk about family will talk about work.

11 ○ What was the first job you ever did for money? **12** ◐ How much did they pay you that first week? **13** ◐ What did you spend it on? **14** ○ Did you have a boss you couldn't stand? **15** ◐ What could your hands do that other people's couldn't? **16** ◐ What time did you have to be there in the morning? **17** ○ What did you wear to

work? **18** ● Did you ever nearly change trade? What stopped you? **19** ◐ What did a loaf of bread cost when you were young? **20** ◐ Who taught you the job?

🔑 **Number 12 works when almost nothing else does.** Numbers from sixty years ago are often sharper than this morning's breakfast, and being able to answer exactly is worth a great deal to someone who has been failing at questions all week.

3 · THE HOUSE AND THE STREET (10)

21 ○ What colour was the front door? **22** ◐ Which room in that house was the warmest? **23** ◐ Who sat where at the table? **24** ○ What could you see out of the kitchen window? **25** ◐ What was on the corner of your street — a shop, a pub, a postbox? **26** ◐ Did you have a garden, a yard, or neither? **27** ○ Was the house noisy or quiet? **28** ◐ Where did you keep the biscuits? **29** ● What would you change about that house if you could? **30** ◐ What did it smell like when you came in from outside?

📌 **Seating plans survive when names don't.** If number 23 works and the names won't come, ask about the chairs instead: who had the good one, who sat nearest the fire.

4 · MUSIC, PICTURES AND SATURDAY NIGHT (10)

31 ○ Could you sing, honestly? **32** ◐ What was playing when you were twenty? **33** ◐ Where did you go dancing? **34** ○ Did you have a radio in the house? Where did it sit? **35** ◐ Who chose what the family listened to? **36** ◐ What did the pictures cost to get in? **37** ○ Who was the film star everybody was in love with? **38** ◐ What did you do on a Saturday night before you had children? **39** ● What's a song you'd be happy never to hear again? **40** ◐ Did you ever play anything — an instrument, a comb and paper, anything?

🔑 **Musical memory outlasts nearly everything.** If a question here draws a blank, stop asking and hum something from their twenties instead. Watch the foot, not the face.

5 · FOOD, WEATHER AND SMALL THINGS (10)

41 ○ What's the best thing you ever ate? **42** ◐ Who was the best cook you knew? **43** ○ What did you refuse to eat as a child? **44** ◐ What was always on the table on a Sunday? **45** ○ Do you remember a winter that was worse than the others? **46** ◐ Did you ever get properly sunburnt? **47** ○ What's your favourite kind of weather? *(Then look out of the window together.)*
48 ◐ What did your mother always smell of? **49** ● What's overrated? **50** ○ What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

📋 The page that matters most — how to use these

Ask one. Not three. This is a conversation, not an interview. If the first one lands, you will not need the second.

Wait longer than is comfortable. Count to ten in your head before you fill the silence. Most people give up at four, and the answer very often arrives at seven.

Never correct a date, a name or a number. Not once. The accuracy is not the point and the correction costs you the next three questions.

🔑 **If a question fails twice, change the subject, not the difficulty.** Somebody who cannot answer about their mother may answer instantly about a bicycle. Failure here is almost always the topic, not the person.

⚠️ **Some of these open grief.** A question about a house, a wedding or a mother can reach a loss that is still raw — and for someone with dementia that loss may be experienced as new. If it happens: do not correct, do not explain, do not change the subject brightly. Stay, acknowledge it — "*that sounds like you miss her*" — and let the moment be what it is. Presence is the activity at that point. Come back tomorrow with number 11.

⚠️ **None of this is medical treatment.** These are conversation and companionship prompts. They do not halt or reverse any illness, and they do not replace the advice of a healthcare professional.