

# Wellness Wednesday



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## How To Fight The Urge To Always Make Everything About Yourself

*Are you "autobiographical listening" or practicing "conversational narcissism"? The behavior is more common than you think.*

We've all been there. You're having a conversation with someone and it feels like every time you share something, they chime in with their own similar — or not-so-similar — tale or reason why what you said resonates with their experience. Or perhaps you're the one who can't help but jump into discussions with your own related anecdotes.

"This is incredibly common and is something called autobiographical listening," said Amelia Reigstad, a Minnesota-based communications consultant and coach. "Autobiographical listening is when we listen with a view to respond instead of actively listening to the person we are interacting with. When we do this, we tend to think of our own experiences and filter what others say through our own stories."



Although this approach to conversation can be appropriate at times, there are situations when you'll want to be cognizant and avoid the urge.

"When someone really needs to be understood, jumping in and sharing our own related stories gets in the way," Reigstad said. "I think it's more about awareness than balance. It's OK to share your stories and relate to the person you are speaking with when appropriate but also know when they really need you to simply listen."

Another term that can describe this tendency to steer discussions back to yourself or jump in with your own experience is conversational narcissism. "I think when people are quick to refer everything back to a personal experience, it can be interpreted as thoughtless and, at its worst, selfish," said Meg Gitlin, a New York City-based psychotherapist. "By responding with something that has happened to them personally, the person could be trying to do several things — one of which is to create connection through shared experiences. When used thoughtfully, this can be a wonderful way to make a person feel less alone. However, some people just like to hear themselves speak and have a bad habit of making everything about them."

Even when we have good intentions, constantly sharing how something relates to our own experiences can still be off-putting. In doing so, we go beyond making someone feel validated and into the territory of not giving them the space to express themselves.

"I think we often forget that there is tremendous value in simply listening and making space for someone when they want to share," Gitlin said. "I think most of us are pretty self-involved and feel the need to connect based on shared experiences. However, if we suspend this impulse, we will likely find a shift toward more meaningful and genuine interactions."

Below, Gitlin and other experts share their advice for resisting the persistent urge to make conversations about ourselves.

### **Practice 'empathic listening.'**

"It's important to be aware in our conversations and practice empathic listening — listening to understand, not to reply," Reigstad said. "I'm sure we have all been in conversations where words are just sitting on the tip of our tongue waiting to spit out, but when we do this, we aren't actively listening. Being a good listener takes work and the more we understand and acknowledge that, the better at it we become."

Working on your ability to listen can help with effective communication in both personal and professional relationships, so these are skills worth honing.

"When we fail to listen from the other person's perspective, we are listening through our own lens and tend to pass more judgments compared to simply listening," Reigstad added. "There are four types of autobiographical listening — evaluate, probe, advise and interpret. These responses tend to have us asking questions based on our experiences, offering advice to fix the problem and so on. It's important to resist the urge and allow the other person to speak."

### **Verify what you're hearing.**

"Demonstrate you're listening by paraphrasing and giving the person back what they're saying," advised Racine Henry, a licensed marriage and family therapist in New York City. "If you hear a story or experience, say, 'What I hear you saying is XYZ' or 'What I think you're trying to express is XYZ — is that accurate? Is that what happened for you?' Then let the person confirm or deny."

This listening exercise keeps you engaged with what the other person is saying and deepens the conversation.

"If they confirm it, then they can feel you were listening to them and made them feel understood," Henry said. "And if they deny it, you can ask them to say it again so that you can understand, empathize and be present with them in this moment. That verification, that check-in slows down communication and takes the focus off you."

### **Remember times you've been on the other side.**

"I think it's valuable to consider how it's felt in the past when you came to a friend to share something and they hijacked the conversation," Gitlin said. "It probably didn't feel great and left you feeling less understood and seen than if you hadn't shared in the first place. Sometimes role reversal is a great way for us to see how it feels to be on the other end of this exchange."

As the saying goes, try to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Just as you want to feel understood and validated, the person talking to you likely does as well. Trust that you'll have your turn to share your own experiences later in the conversation or at another time and give them your full attention and the space to express themselves in the present.

Furthermore, ask yourself what will happen to the conversation if you act on your impulse to relate it back to yourself.

"I would encourage people to consider what sharing their own experience will bring to the table other than changing the subject," Gitlin said. "If it feels that it skews the balance of the conversation from the primary speaker, consider shelving it for now."

### **Ask what they want out of the conversation.**

"When you go into a conversation, I think there is value in trying to figure out what the person is looking for," Gitlin said. "Are they seeking advice, or a safe place to vent? You can even ask how you can be most helpful so that it's not a guessing game."

Just a simple ask toward the beginning of the discussion can set you on a good path toward meaningful connection.

"After fully listening to and engaging with what the other person has to say, then we ask, 'Do you have time and energy to hear my story?'" Henry said.



"We can also ask when would be a good time to talk about ourselves and what we've gone through, noting that the present might not be the best time if they're in an emotional space."

She noted that people may feel hesitant to ask these questions because it feels like work, and we tend to expect all of our interactions to be organic.

"But sometimes we need encouragement or the blatant communication of 'what I need from you at this moment as a friend,'" Henry said. "It can be uncomfortable to be more intentional in relationships, but that's what's really needed. We need to be more intentional in our lives all the way around."

## Consider if you're 'matching' or 'topping.'

"I often call this impulse 'matching' other people, and it's not a good thing to start off doing that right away," said Denver-based communications expert and "The Fine Art of Small Talk" author Debra Fine. "Say you ask your friend, 'What's new in your life since I last saw you?' She says, 'I recently went on a golfing vacation for the weekend.' You're matching if you immediately say, 'Oh we went on a golf vacation a couple of years ago.'"

She also advised against "topping" — which goes a step beyond matching by sharing how your experience was bigger or better. In the above example, it would be saying, "Oh we went on a golf vacation to Scotland and stayed a week."

"Finding a commonality is a good thing," Fine said. "We want to connect in conversation for business, social, or romantic reasons, but connecting requires matching later on. So instead, say, 'Oh you went on a golfing vacation — tell me about it! Have you done that before?' Show an interest in their vacation, in their child, in their project at work. Then disclose your commonality."

In the same vein, you'll want to avoid giving the impression of "been there, done that" in your responses to other people's experiences. "If you're describing your decision to switch careers and I say, 'Oh, been there, done that,' that's cutting you off and saying your experience isn't unique," Fine said. "It's matching and ending the conversation in an arrogant way. If you say, 'I was laid off, and it's been tough,' then don't engage in topping by saying something like, 'Oh, you think that's tough, I lived through the dot-com meltdown.'"

## Give yourself time limits.

"It's not just loud, gabby people who take over conversations," Fine said. "Some people are nervous. They might be shy introverts who find themselves in a situation where people show an interest, so they keep talking about themselves and lose track of time."

Of course, there's nothing wrong with sharing your own experiences and thoughts, but try to strike a balance to avoid doing it at all times in all conversations. Fine has a rule that you should try not to talk about your project, vacation, interest or whatever you're zeroing in on for more than five minutes.

"No one thinks they're a monopolizer, but then they find themselves babbling on and on about the New York Giants," she said. "So give yourself a five-minute limit, or ideally even a three-minute limit before turning back to the other person's interests. 'Assume the burden of other people's comfort in conversations' is my mantra."

## Focus on what you don't know and ask questions.

"One point that's critical is we know our own stories," Fine said. "I know about my vacation and how it was, but I don't know about that journey for you with your vacation — or your work project or child. That's what I'm here to find out."

She recommended walking into interactions prepared with a few topics to ask about that show an interest — whether it's family or sports. Even in Zoom meetings, she asks questions like "Where are you today?" or "What kinds of plans do you have for the upcoming season?"

"Yes, it's good to go back and forth like a volleyball and not a batting cage," Fine said. "But take a breath, listen, genuinely show an interest, be present and see what this person is saying. Connect and learn whatever there is to learn."





# TOFU POKE BOWL

520 Calories | PREP TIME: 10 mins | MARINADE TIME: 10 mins | COOK TIME: 50 mins | TOTAL TIME: 1 hr  
YIELD: 4 servings | Course: Dinner | Cuisine: Hawaiian

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 14-ounce package extra firm tofu, drained
- ¼ cup reduced sodium soy sauce or gluten free tamari, plus optional more for drizzling
- 4 garlic cloves, crushed through a garlic press or finely minced
- ½ medium cucumber, 3/4 cups
- 2 scallions
- 1/2 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 2 cups mixed greens
- 1 cup cooked brown rice
- ½ cup shelled edamame
- 2 ounces avocado, sliced, from 1 small
- Sesame seeds, for garnish
- Sriracha mayo\* or Sriracha, for topping (optional)

If you want a tasty plant-based dinner, you'll love these Tofu Poke Bowls! This is a flavorful, vegan version of the popular Ahi Tuna Poke bowl.

### Meal Prep

Cooked tofu will last up to four days refrigerated in an airtight container. To pack the leftovers for lunch, store the tofu and rice in one container, the cucumbers, scallions, and edamame in another, and the greens in another. Wait to slice the avocado until right before eating.

### Nutrition Information

Serving: 1 bowl, Calories: 520 kcal, Carbohydrates: 47 g, Protein: 29 g, Fat: 24 g, Saturated Fat: 3 g, Sodium: 956 mg, Fiber: 12 g, Sugar: 5 g



## INSTRUCTIONS



1. Place tofu on a paper towel or tea towel lined plate. Cover with another towel and place a heavy pan on top to press out excess water from tofu.
2. Transfer to cutting board, flip on its side and slice in half lengthwise. Flip it back over to lay flat on the cutting board and cut into 32 equal cubes. Place in a medium size shallow container so the cubes are in 1 even layer.
3. In a small measuring cup or bowl, add the soy sauce and crushed garlic.
4. Pour  $\frac{1}{2}$  the marinade (about 2 tablespoons) over the tofu, gently flipping to make sure all sides are covered. Marinate for at least 30 minutes.
5. Meanwhile, peel and dice the cucumber and chop the scallions, separating whites from greens. Transfer the scallion whites and cucumbers to a small bowl and toss with 2 teaspoons of the remaining marinade. Set aside.
6. Sprinkle marinated tofu with the cornstarch, tossing gently to coat.
7. In a large skillet, heat the sesame oil over high heat. Add the tofu and cook for 2-3 minutes, until the first side is browned.
8. Flip cubes with a spatula, cooking each side for a couple minutes until evenly browned on all sides. Toss with remaining marinade.

### Assemble the bowls:

- In 2 shallow bowls, layer each with 1 cup greens,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup rice, half the edamame and cucumber/scallion mixture, 1 ounce avocado and  $\frac{1}{2}$  the cooked tofu.
- Garnish with scallion greens, sesame seeds and Sriracha mayo, if using.



## FEATURED EXERCISE

[https://www.livestrong.com/slideshow/1012833-10-stretches-make-feel-like-new-person/?utm\\_source=pinterest&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=wgpin](https://www.livestrong.com/slideshow/1012833-10-stretches-make-feel-like-new-person/?utm_source=pinterest&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=wgpin)

## Featured Exercise ► Wide-Leg Spinal Rotation

» **Do it:** This exercise helps offset the negative effects of poor posture from sitting all day.

- Start by standing with your legs wide.
- Bend forward and place your hands on the ground. Place your right hand behind your head.
- Leading with your elbow, rotate your chest toward the ceiling as high as possible.
- Rotate back to start, trying to touch your left arm with your right elbow.
- Do 10 reps, then switch sides.



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*Regular exercise can help you control your weight, reduce your risk of heart disease, and strengthen your bones and muscles. But if it's been awhile since you've exercised and you have health issues or concerns, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.*



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