TREASURE TROVE OF REMOTE ICE BREAKERS
(aka Stokes)

For those of us fortunate to be able to work from home during the COVID crisis, we’ve been forced to ask ourselves, how do we maintain a human connection in our remote meetings and workshops? Given our shared COVID experience and the opportunity to pause and reflect on how we show up in our work, I believe that remote tools can help us not only maintain those connections, but deepen them.

As a facilitator and coach, I spend a lot of time thinking about how to design environments that bring people together and allow for collaboration to thrive. One impactful way I help to set the tone of any meeting or workshop is with the right ice-breaker. Design Thinkers like me call ice-breakers “stokes”...and we borrow our stoke exercises from the world of improv.

Whatever you call them, these mental and physical warm-up exercises help create a safe space and build trust. Stokes do this by helping us practice vulnerability and pushing ourselves outside of our comfort zones. They help us build connection and promote creativity and focus.

The next time you start a meeting, as part of your introductions, include a stoke. If you are a team that has been working together regularly, skip the introductions and start every meeting with stoke. Setting aside just 5-10 minutes for a stoke can completely change the dynamic of your time together.

To keep the stokes I practice lively and fresh, and to know that what I’m asking my clients to do works remotely, I reached out to trusted facilitator friends to ask what remote stokes are working well for them. I’m grateful to Betsy Peretti, Ryann Hoffman, Courtney Kaplan, Chris Gaither, Tutti Taygerly, Pam Dineva, Surabhi Mahapatra, and Daniel Siedel Gomez for sharing stokes they’ve been loving.

To keep this post concise, our list of over 20 stokes can be found in this Google spreadsheet or in this PDF.

I invite you to use these stokes to help your teams through COVID! I’d love to hear what works, what doesn’t work, and the impact you’ve seen on your team by using these stokes.
Stokes Treasure Trove

A couple quick notes:

• Many of these exercises can be shortened or lengthened depending on your needs. Adapt them to what works for you and your team!

• Some of the stokes below require you to use the breakout rooms tool in Zoom. When you have more than a few people in a meeting and want to ensure everyone can participate in the stoke, breakout rooms are a great tool. You can send pairs or small groups into a breakout room to answer a generative prompt or do an exercise, and then bring them back to the group.

• Any reference to “you” below refers to you as the facilitator. Any reference to “they/their/them” refers to the participants.

Story Stokes

One Word

Everyone shares one word that captures how they are feeling in the moment. Depending on your goal and how much time you have, you can have people briefly explain why they chose that word. This can be used at the start and/or end of a session to take the pulse of the group.

Variation: Choose one word to describe something specific. For example, choose one word to describe their morning or one thing they’ve learned in the past week due to COVID-19.

Shared by Betsy Peretti, Courtney Kaplan & Abby Sturges

Emoji of the Day

Ask everyone to find an emoji that represents their day or how they are feeling in this moment. Enter the emoji into the video chat or hold it up to the screen.

Variation: If everyone has Snap Camera, this game is called "Mood". Pick from your Snap camera options to describe/show your inner feelings.

Shared by Betsy Peretti

Connection Intros

Introduce yourself and ask anyone who has something in common with your introduction to go next. Anyone connecting with something in the second person's introduction volunteers to go third, etc. For example, person #1 says, "I'm Courtney, and I'm from Ohio." Courtney is followed by
person #2 who says, "I'm Jane. I am from the Midwest, too. I went to engineering school at Purdue." Followed by person #3, "I'm Joe. I went to Purdue and have three boys." Person #4, "I'm Paul. I'm a parent of boys." This is a great way to get people to pay attention and make connections.

*Shared by Courtney Kaplan*

**Generative Prompts**

Choose an open-ended question for everyone to answer as part of their introduction. Try one of the following:

- One good thing that has happened lately?
  *Shared by Surabhi Mahapatra*

- What is one thing you don't want me to know about you right now?
  *Shared by Chris Gaither via Rich Litvin*

- What is one thing you are doing to keep yourself sane right now?
  *Shared by Abby Sturges*

- If you could have dinner with a fictional family, which one would you choose?
  *Shared by Pam Dineva*

- If you could absorb a new language overnight, which one and why?
  *Shared by Pam Dineva*

- If you could explore one: deepest ocean or the moon, which one?
  *Shared by Pam Dineva*

- What's your favorite purchase that made your work from home nicer?
  *Shared by Pam Dineva*

- What's your most inventive "made it with what I had in the pantry" quarantine dish been so far?
  *Shared by Pam Dineva*

Often what's shared will range from personal to work-related, and lends an air of levity to the rest of the meeting.

*Variation: Mindsnacks* is an Instagram feed run by Daniel Siedel Gomez sharing daily conversation prompts. Check it out for ongoing prompt inspiration:

**Fill In The Blank**

Ask each person to fill in the blank with one word or a short sentence:

My mind is _________
My body is ________
My spirit is ________
This is especially useful for traumatic times like now.

Shared by Tutti Taygerly

**Thorns & Roses**

Set a timeframe (today, yesterday, or last week), and share one of each:

- Rose - one good thing or high experience
- Thorn - one low thing or difficult experience

**Variation:** This stoke is also known as "High, Low, Gruffalo". In addition to sharing one high/good experience and one low/difficult experience, participants are also asked to share one Gruffalo, which is anything they'd like to share.

Shared by Betsy Peretti

**Three-Headed Expert**

Anyone can enter questions into the video chat. You will select a question and three people to be the three-headed expert answering the question. They must answer the question together, but each person can only give one word at a time. For example, person #1 says one word, person #2 says one word building on that, person #3 says one word, person #1 says the next word, and so on until the answer is complete. This works well even with larger groups as only three people need to be synchronized around who talks when.

Shared by Ryan Hoffman & Abby Sturges

**Two Truths and a Lie**

Each person tells two truths and a lie and asks the group to guess which one was a lie. After everyone weighs in, they reveal which one was lie and choose who goes next. As the facilitator, make sure to keep track of who went and who is going next.

Shared by Ryan Hoffman & Abby Sturges

**(Remote) Physical Stokes**

**Cheers!**
Share a series of statements and ask people to raise their coffee cup, hand or pencil if they agree. A few examples of statements you can use, "Give me a cheers if..."

- You have had an uninvited guest join your online meetings this week!
- You managed to exercise every day.
- You worked in your PJs at least once this week.
- You’re wearing yoga pants or pajama bottoms
- You are homeschooling your kids as well as working from home
- You feel anxious
- You’re stress eating
- You’re hopeful

Use whatever statements make sense for you while also building connection and keeping people listening and engaging. This stoke helps people bond and see they’re not alone. Also, statements can be contextual to the topic of your meeting or workshop.

*Shared by Courtney Kaplan and Tutti Taygerly*

**Variation:** Before the session, ask participants to bring a beverage of their choice. Give each person 30 seconds to come up with a quick toast. Each toast has to end with the phrase "To ________." At the end of each toast, after the speaker says "To ________," the whole group repeats it in unison and takes a drink. Remember to schedule a bio break within 30 minutes of the activity! This exercise helps to get people over the hump of creating and failing and has everyone saying and doing the same thing at the same time - the psychology of rituals says that the mere act of doing things at the same time, visibly, creates a sense of connection and overlap of self.

*Shared by Ryan Hoffman*

**Draw a Picture or Postcard**

Ask them to select a moment, an idea, a memory, a concept, or any other prompt. Then ask them to draw a picture or postcard to share with the group by holding their picture/postcard up to the video.

It's like adult show and tell, bring the physical into the virtual world.

*Shared by Betsy Peretti*

**Share an Object**
Ask people to bring [choose a description] object or give them each 1-minute to find an object in their homes. Ask everyone to introduce themselves with that object. You choose the descriptor. For example, with designers you can ask them to share their favorite "design" object. This is an opportunity for each person to share something visually with the group and explain its importance.

*Shared by Courtney Kaplan*

**Mini Scavenger Hunt**

Give people five seconds for a mini-scavenger hunt to "find a purple object," "find a metal object," etc. and let folks share whatever they found near their desks/workspace at home. It's a fun and improvisational way to help people find connections with each other.

**Variation:** Ask everyone to grab one thing that's within a few steps of their desk or computer that has meaning for them, and share why it's meaningful.

*Shared by Courtney Kaplan & Chris Gaither*

**Share a Photo(s)**

Prior to the session ask people to bring a photo to share or in the session give them 30 seconds to find a photo to share. When they share, ask why they chose that particular photo. Depending on how much time you have, you can also give people 1-minute to find three photos on their phone to share with the group.

**Variation:** Ask people to take a picture of the shoes they're wearing, their current view, etc.

*Shared by Courtney Kaplan & Abby Surges*

**Centering**

Ask them to stand or get into a seated position with a straight spine and level chin. Explain: "We'll think of the breath as up and down instead of in and out. When you inhale, see if you can lengthen the back of your neck and push the breath out the top of your head. As you exhale, soften your shoulders and body and breathe down into the earth. The exhale will be slightly longer than the inhale. Close your eyes, and we'll do this together. Inhale up, lengthening the back of the neck. Exhale down, softening the shoulders and breathing into the earth. [repeat twice more]. Now, on your next inhale, think of something in the recent past that makes you smile. Exhale, down into the ground. [repeat twice]." When we smile, we release dopamine and serotonin into the body. You can think of that as our happiness hormones. This helps us to change the state of the body and helps us get to a more creative place where we're much more likely to take skillful action.
**Simon Says**

Ask everyone to stand up and play Simon Says. As the facilitator, you say "Simon Says, touch your nose [or any instruction]". If you give an instruction without saying "Simon Says", that person is out and must sit down. Continue until there is a winner. Or, set a timer for 5-10 minutes before you begin and play until the timer finishes. This is good for large groups as it gets people up and moving. It can feel silly if people aren't into it.

**Interactive Stokes (using Software)**

**Custom Zoom Background**

Ask everyone to create a custom Zoom background that says something about them. Ask them to activate it when they share out and keep it on until everyone is done. Then turn it off or turn it to something neutral as the custom backgrounds can be get distracting.

**Variation:** Ask them to create a custom Zoom background with a photo of themselves and someone they love, a place they'd like to go someday, etc. Or for a visual and creative tech-savvy audience, ask them to mock up something quick that tells a story about their day yesterday, etc...

**Six-Word Memoir**

Give them one minute to create a six-word memoir. You can have them share their memoir out verbally or use this as a warm-up tool in a shared collaboration space such as Mural or Miro.

**Personal Collage**

If you are facilitating an online session like brainstorming and need to teach people the basics of how to use whatever tool you're using, this one is great. Basic functions of learning the collaboration tool you're using might be: adding an image, shapes, or text.

Ask participants to create a collage of images, icons, and words to introduce themselves. A range of prompts can be used for whatever collage you ask participants to create. The instructions might be: write your name, import a photo of you, write down the item you brought for show and
tell (with prep work to bring an item for show and tell), add any other images or icons that speak to you.

Shared by Ryann Hoffman

How to Make Toast

If you are working with a software development team and following design process, this is a great warm-up to use to before user interviews, user analysis, journey mapping, concept development, service blueprinting, etc. This exercise helps you to talk about components in an experience or process and the varying levels of detail we can use to describe the same process.

In a digital tool that allows post-it creation (my favorites are Miro and Mural), teach us how to make toast by putting each step on its own post-it. Encourage them to add images and icons.

Variation: Teach us how to make peanut butter & jelly.

Shared by Ryann Hoffman & Abby Sturges

Aliens Have Landed

This is a great exercise for a shared collaboration tool like Miro or Mural. This icebreaker can be useful for teams with remote participants with language and cultural differences.

Tell the group to imagine aliens have landed on Earth and want to learn about their company. But since they don't speak English or understand the company's product, it needs to be explained with five symbols or pictures. Ask each participant to upload or draw five simple images that best describe and communicate the company's products and culture. Take a few minutes and look at all the images. Are there common themes?

Shared by Ryann Hoffman

Inspiration Corner (in Mural or Miro)

Ask everyone to bring the last thing (screenshot, drawing, photo, etc.) that inspired them to learn something new (related to the project you're working on). Show participants where within the shared workspace (in Mural or Miro) you want them to add their inspiration item. The process of doing this in a shared tool like Mural or Miro also lends itself to participants showing each other tricks for using the workspace tool.

Shared by Pam Dineva