

Shyness - and how to overcome it

First published in LIFE.info 2007

Vol. 6, Issue No. 2

Most of us have experienced feeling shy at some stage in our lives; indeed research has shown that 93 per cent of people have experienced shyness. But while children can often get away with it, adults are more likely to be considered hostile and unfriendly if they persist in extreme shy behaviour.

Although it is good to embrace individualism – we wouldn't want everyone vying to be the centre of attention – it is not good to be so shy we fear socialising, dislike meeting new people and have difficulty forming and keeping relationships. When shyness becomes an everyday problem, preventing us from leading rich and full lives, we need to do something about it.

What is shyness?

Shyness is a fear that is rooted in a lack of confidence in your own abilities to socialise, sometimes a lack of skill, and a lack of belief in yourself that you are someone worthy of other people's attention.

A more scientific look at shyness shows us that it is made up of four elements: social anxiety, inhibition, reticence and social incompetence – these are explained below. Psychologists have found that people who experience only social anxiety and inhibition are not at all shy with people they know well – but those who have a degree of reticence or social incompetence have problems communicating with everyone.

Through understanding what shyness involves, you are able to consider your own motives for turning an invitation down or not extending one to someone else – and where you need to direct your efforts to help you feel more comfortable with other people.

Being socially anxious is fearing you cannot live up to your own expectations of how you project yourself in the company of others – and a fear of rejection and ridicule. Anxiety can make your social performance well under par as it interferes with how you behave with other people and how you react to them.

Knowing that your social performance was poor gives you the message that you are no good, confirming any previous negative views you had about yourself. This makes the next social

situation more anxiety provoking and therefore even less likely to be successful. You are then in a position of self-fulfilled prophecy – you always thought you were no good and now you know it. You will probably believe this even though the grounding for this logic is based on initial anxiety that affected your social performance rather than your inability to make friends and have fun.

Some people have so much social anxiety that they have a panic attack - at the thought of having to do something involving other people or during the actual event. Extreme over-reaction to a social event leading to panic and avoidance is known as social phobia. However, there is often no clear cut off point from someone being intensely shy to being social phobic – it's a sliding scale. If you think you have social phobia you need to seek professional help through your doctor – or the National Phobics Society.

Being inhibited is where you find it hard to behave normally in front of others as you cannot remain relaxed. However, this may just be with people you don't know well or when you feel out of your depth. For example, if you have to accompany your partner to a work function you might feel everyone there is much better educated than you and that you are not good enough so you shy away from conversation fearing you will be found out – yet you are well able to chat easily when with friends.

Being reticent – or reserved - is a reluctance to communicate with other people. This may be a combination of not wanting to, and not knowing how to, share experiences and thoughts, and steering clear of social contact to avoid the anxiety you may feel at having to communicate.

If you are reticent you are likely to be regarded by other people as hostile and negative rather than shy or nervous – so people won't be encouraged to make friends with you. They will think you are deliberately holding back any intimacy because you don't want to be friendly with them and they will believe that you are not interested in the conversation, or them. Being used to indifference, you will come to expect nothing more from the people you meet – and so your body language will show you as hostile and indifference is just what you get.

Being socially incompetent is having social skills deficits. This means that you do not respond positively to people in social interactions and they find you off-putting because of your manner, your behaviour or by what you say – and don't say.

What causes shyness?

Some shyness is down to genes – if you have a shy parent, there is a possibility you are naturally shy, and some people are born with a predisposition for being anxious and sensitive. But shyness

can also be down to the fact that you have not had good role models to follow – perhaps your parents were socially awkward? If so, bear this in mind if you have children of your own – if they see you display shy behaviour the chances are they will copy it.

Shyness can also be caused by your upbringing – if you were neglected, abused, heavily criticised and controlled you might fear criticism of other people, think that you are not good enough and expect to fail socially. Experiencing a traumatic event, living or working in a stressful environment, being bullied or publicly ridiculed over something have also been found to contribute to shyness.

What can you do to combat shyness?

Be kind to yourself and don't have over-high expectations of yourself; work on raising your self-esteem and tell yourself that your worthiness as a person is not judged on how well you perform socially. Remind yourself of the things you are good at, all your achievements and your personal qualities. Believe that you are someone other people would like to get to know.

If you are nervous around some people – particularly people you perceive to have a higher status than you or people in authority - try to deliberately relax when in their company and concentrate on getting to know about their interests, work and family. Remember that they are just people. Reduce them to a more comfortable size in your mind by remembering that they have bodily functions and needs like the rest of us – even picture them taking care of these needs!

If you are very reserved, practise letting people in to your world, bit by bit and see the difference it makes – you may find you are connecting with other people, making your chats more meaningful than they were previously.

Read a book on people skills. Hone and frequently practise them - with strangers as well as people you already know – to help you become more confident and more at ease when socialising.

Set yourself a social challenge every day. Smile at people in the queue in front of you, say hello and goodbye to the people serving you – in a shop or when you buy a ticket – and even make comments to people when you are in the supermarket. For example, you could say, 'Oh, the price has gone up again!' or, 'Gosh, that's a good offer,' or, 'Do you know where the eggs are kept?'

As you become more confident, set yourself harder and harder challenges until you are happy with the person you have become and take joy in meeting new people.

Watch outgoing people and discover their secrets but don't copy them exactly as they are not you. Instead adapt their actions and words to suit your personality; you need to feel comfortable in the way that you socialise.

Tips

- Concentrate on the other person, not on yourself.
- Consciously relax your muscles and slow your breathing.
- Understand that conversations are two way affairs – try to devote equal time to talking as well as listening.
- Show plenty of interest in the other person to help keep the conversation going. Say, 'How did you feel when that happened?' or, 'What did you do about it?' or, 'That sounds an interesting job. What does it involve?... Do you enjoy it?'
- Be prepared to share your feelings and thoughts with other people at the same level at which they disclose theirs to you.
- Be tolerant of other people – accept people as they are without trying to change them – then they are more likely to accept you.

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