

## People Skills Help Reduce Social Anxiety

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As a child and teenager, I was extremely shy and timid. I hated having to talk to adults, was reluctant to raise my hand in class and, when I did, blushed crimson from anticipation. As soon as I spoke, all eyes turned to me. My blush lingered so long, friends laughed and teased me. 'Oh, it's so hot in here,' they said, fanning their faces and flicking their collars.

Surprisingly, I became a teacher. My parents doubted I would manage it, being so shy. I doubted too, but two things encouraged me. A shy friend, who left college the year before me, successfully completed her teacher-training course. Stories of her teaching practice enraptured me. I thought, if she can do it, why can't I? Also, during my final year, I was asked to read in front of six others at evening mass at the college chaplaincy. Being asked on the spot meant I'd only ten minutes or so of anxiety to suffer while I familiarised myself with the words. Despite reading less than perfectly, I was elated for having done it. Each week, I was asked to read again and each time it became a little easier.

Knowing about my friend and reading in church gave me the confidence to believe that I could stand in front of a class and teach. My determination helped enormously. Part of teacher training is to watch other teachers teach. I knew that if I learned to look and behave like a teacher all my pupils would believe I was a teacher. As long as I could act the part, I knew I'd be OK.

I believe that being a sensitive child helped in my role as teacher. If I knew there were children in my class that hated to answer questions, I didn't ask them unless they raised their hand. But if a child raised his hand for the first time, I would make sure I rewarded him by giving him the opportunity to speak. If he got the answer wrong, I'd explain that it was a very good answer because... and that it would be an easy mistake to make. Then I would find someone to suggest another answer. If the answer a shy child gave was right, I would lavishly praise him in front of the others so that he would be encouraged to raise his hand another time. It worked. I also knew how dreadful it was to be embarrassed in front of peers, so I never teased a child that didn't want to be teased and I never ridiculed anyone.

Unfortunately, I had to give up teaching because of my health. This happened soon after I had moved away from my hometown and friends; I had no local social support. I have always known that I lacked the easy bonhomie that seems to come to many others so naturally. I wanted their obvious

ease with themselves to be a part of me too. I wanted to know how other people managed their relationships – because I had to do something about mine.

Consciously, over more than ten years, I spent my time watching people. I had done this passively from my teens from a genuine interest in others, but now it was purposeful. I wanted to know their secrets. I tried things out and found out what worked for me.

I also found that when I looked confident and behaved confidently, everyone assumed I was confident. I'd managed to pull this off before for interviews and during teaching but that was when I had a specific role to play. What I still had to do was fudge how I felt during social situations. Some of my greatest teachers were those people who could not hide how ill at ease they were; I considered them my mirrors. I try to ensure that, no matter how anxious I am, I do not show it. Although I have succeeded in my personal life, I would not like this put to the test in extreme situations such as live media interviews! I am still the shy old me – it's just that now one has to dig deeper to find my discomfort.

You might think I spend my time critically assessing people. This implies that I inwardly sneer at their mistakes and think what fools they are. Not a bit. I feel sad when I see how clumsily someone is behaving and want to desperately put her right. But she wouldn't thank me.

I've known from my teens there was something dreadfully amiss with how I related to people – it wasn't that I didn't have friends, it was just there were times I didn't say a word when someone had hurt my feelings because I didn't know how to respond. Only when a person had thoroughly trodden and re-trodden over my sensitive nature, did I react and then it was with verbal aggression. I was always more worried about hurting the other person's feelings than what he was doing to mine, so put things off until I could stand it no longer. I also had trouble expressing sympathy and always felt awkward in new situations.

It comforted me to discover that no one is socially skilled all the time; we are all flummoxed at some stage. This fact was crucial to my willingness to take risks in talking to strangers – something I have since become addicted to. I am amazed at how varied and fascinating other people's lives can be. We can learn so much from them if only we take the time and trouble to listen.

I know that with only a few small changes, people can transform their relationships. Learning people skills can improve your life and take some of the sting out of social anxiety. It has mine.

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