

A LINE ON LIFE

7/6/97

Shyness *

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Are you shy? If not, have you ever been shy? If so, do you like being shy?

In the research of a social psychologist, Philip Zimbardo, more than 80% of those questioned said they were shy at some point in their lives. Of these, 40% saw themselves as presently being shy.

What exactly is **shyness**? Shy people avoid others. Even when shy people do interact, they are very inhibited, restrained, and uncomfortable. They find it difficult to make new friends or meet people. They feel isolated and lonely. Generally, they lack self-confidence in social settings. They may be misperceived by others as being vain, bored, unfriendly, or uninterested.

Several factors combine to cause shyness. First, most shy people lack **social skills**. They have not learned how to meet others, how to start a conversation and keep it going, or how to end a conversation. Most shy people have **social anxiety** when meeting others. This is mainly due to evaluation fears — fears of being embarrassed, ridiculed, rejected, or seeming inadequate to others. In addition, shy people have a **self-defeating bias** in their thinking. They always blame themselves when a social situation does not go well. On the other hand, they rarely give themselves credit when the interaction is successful.

Even if you are not shy, almost everyone has been uncomfortable in social situations at some time in their lives. This is most likely to be triggered by *novel or unfamiliar* social situations. It is even more likely when you are:



1. with strangers,
2. in a formal situation,
3. meeting someone of higher status,
4. noticeably different from others around you,
5. the focus of attention (like when you have to give a speech to a group).

Under the above conditions, almost everyone would experience some symptoms of shyness — blushing, heart pounding, "butterflies" in the stomach, and strong feelings of uncertainty. However, only some people going through these feelings would label themselves as shy. With the same experiences, others do not see themselves as shy.

Shy people (those who label themselves as shy) see their feelings as part of a *lasting personality trait* that cannot be changed. In contrast, non-shy people see *external events* as the cause of their feelings of shyness. The *lower self-esteem* of shy people is caused by the perceived difference in the causes of their shy feelings. Shy people blame themselves for social failures, but never give themselves credit for their successes. In contrast, non-shy people give themselves credit for their successes and recognize their failures as often being due to the external circumstances.

**Acquiring and using social skills
can help people become more confident in social situations.**

What can shy people do to change their situation? Rather than being innate (inborn), shyness is *learned*. Anything that is learned can also be unlearned. Professional help can be very effective in reducing shyness. If you do not want to seek professional help for your problem, it is helpful to follow some basic rules.

1. Be more active in social situations. (For people to meet, one has to make the first move. If you make the first move, it gives you more control over the situation.)
2. Don't wait until you are completely comfortable or relaxed before taking a social risk. (Waiting to be completely relaxed means you will probably continue to do nothing at all.)
3. Don't pretend to be someone that you are not. (This pretense will probably make you more anxious.)
4. Set reasonable goals for expanding your social experience and skills.
5. Be aware that even socially skilled people are not successful in all social situations. (If an encounter does not go as well as you want it to go, you will not be as upset.)
6. Realize that even though you think others are harshly judging you, it is actually *you* who is being hard on yourself.

One effective way to reduce your self-consciousness in a situation is to try to **help someone else feel more comfortable**. If you seem interested in them, this will be likely to make them feel more at ease. After introducing yourself, you can indicate your interest by asking them some questions. Rather than "Yes-No" questions ("Do you like oysters?"), the questions should be open-ended.

"What kind of _____ (food, books, films) *do you like?*"

"What kind of work *do you do?*"

"What hobbies (interests) *do you have?*"

Even if you know nothing of their work, hobbies, or interests, you can always ask them to explain it. "I don't know much about _____, what does it involve?"

If you are willing to take a few social risks — even if they may include a few awkward or unsuccessful encounters — you are more likely to develop more human companionship and greater personal freedom. Try it. You'll like it!

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West, 1995, pages 505-507.