

## Shyness

*Shyness creates a keen sensitivity to cues of being rejected, preventing a person from speaking and expressing opinions. Excessive preoccupation with emotions, thoughts and behaviors in social situations is common. In order to face social/performance situations exposure therapy teaches how to overcome speaking softly or speaking too fast, giving short answers to questions, covering one's face with one's hand.*

Key words:

- Shyness
- self-aware
- goal setting
- behavioral change,
- behavioral measurement
- exposure
- assertive behavior

If you are a little quiet, if your heart pounds at school/ work, if you have too few friends, if you are scared to talk and if you are worried about what other people think of you...continue reading.

Current studies by experts have shaped successful methods for overcoming shyness which can manifest in a variety of ways --- from blushing, conversation avoidance to staying in a corner of the room or being unable to deal with someone who forces his or her opinions on everyone.

Frequently shyness means being worried about what other people are thinking about you. This can affect quality of life by interfering with the ability to communicate and form relationships.

*“Shyness is well known to many people. It is that all-too familiar feeling of discomfort, tension, or anxiety that a person may experience when interacting with other people...Up to 80% of people report that they were shy at some time in their lives... if you think of yourself as shy, it does not always mean you have a problem that requires professional help” . ( Fact Sheet, ABCT (Association for the Advancement of Behavioral and Cognitive Psychotherapies )*

The causes of shyness are not known but probably it results from a combination of environment and genes.

The signs of shyness are:

- Avoidance of friends
- Not making eye contact
- Speaking very little
- Worrying about how to behave in front of others.

Shyness is a way of thinking that includes a) excessive negative self-evaluation “people will think I am stupid” b) a way of feeling ie high levels of anxiety such as “sweaty palms” c) a way of behaving such as avoiding of social situations even when one’s the preference is to be with others. Shyness may also produce physical sensations, such as a racing heart.

These symptoms are likely to happen while giving a class presentation, during a job interview and/or social encounters.

Just as when you take the temperature to check the fever one can measure when a person feels overly self-aware around others and is afraid of being watched or judged by others. If the fear of being embarrassed is so strong that it disrupts relationships, school, work and other activities, it is called social anxiety.

Social anxiety occurs when a high level apprehension in social situations persists at least 6 months or longer such as when a person feels excessively self-aware around others and is afraid of being judged or watched by others and there is sizable fear of acting in a way that will be humiliating or lead to rejection.

Both fears – shyness and/or social anxiety- can be overcome, but willpower is not enough; instead it is better to find a competent therapist to help with the specific circumstances of each person. Treatments that rely on the best of research, clinical expertise and consumer values are called evidence based. In a nutshell therapy becomes a learning situation where the therapist uses specific guides to overcome a person’s social fear.

Remember that magic does not take away the fear. What diminishes fear is specific guidance provided after the person a) responds to a simple questionnaire b) practices

behaviors tailored to each situation and c) carefully makes repeated rehearsals of new social behaviors. All of these will help in learning new ways of interaction in social situations.

I A first step is to listen to yourself **become self-aware** and make sure you identify your emotion and what your thoughts are. Here is an example of how you can do this:

Summarize a situation which you dislike:

At home \_\_\_\_\_

At school \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

What happens immediately before ?

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Specifically what would you like to change ?

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What happens as a result of the incident ?

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It is useful to record and then **measure the behavior** you want to change with an app on your phone or in a sheet of paper so that it records the situation. Just as when you take the temperature to check the fever one can measure when a person feels self-aware around others and is afraid of being watched or judged by others. Here is an example:

When did the situation happen \_\_\_\_\_

Where \_\_\_\_\_

What occurred \_\_\_\_\_

How often in a week does this happen

Monday \_\_ Tuesday\_\_\_\_ Wednesday\_\_\_\_ Thursday \_\_\_\_\_Friday\_\_\_\_ Saturday\_\_  
Sunday \_\_\_\_

II A second step is to set **small goals** and rewards, start with very, very small talk. Say “Hello” to someone you would like to make eye contact with. Ask for simple directions. Offer to get someone refreshments while you are getting your own.

All of these may be a big first in terms of social behavior, of course. The reward is discussed with your therapist so that you obtain whatever you like most.

Rehearsal is an active strategy for learning new skills. A change in behavior, thought or emotion needs to be broken down into smaller steps, practice makes perfect, try and try again. For example:

- Create a scene
- View a live or video model of someone you like
- Check how you feel
- Check what your thoughts are
- Practice on your own in front of a mirror
- Practice with a friend or someone you trust
- Reward yourself with a simple reward

Remember, social encounters are shaped by how you interpret situations. If you think “something is wrong with me” it could be that the person with whom you are trying to interact is busy, has too many friends or is introverted, among other reasons.

III Relaxation is a third step.

**Relaxation** ensures the confidence and calmness which permits learning . Relaxation may also occur when you observe social appropriate models.

A simple way to relax is deep breathing. Involving the diaphragm when you breathe allows you to lower stress in the body while reducing both heart rate and high blood pressure. Progressive muscle relaxation helps to focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation. It works with five groups of muscles: face, shoulders, thorax, lower back and legs,

IV **Exposure** is a fourth step . The idea is to create a list of things that are very hard to do, things that are hard to do and things that make you a little worried.

The following is an example of **graded exposure**, prepared as a hierarchy – in ascending order of difficulty:

- Eat a hamburger with others watching
- Talk to the cashier at the supermarket
- Talk to a teacher/boss
- Go to a party
- Ask someone for a date

**Intense Exposure** on the other hand requires help from a psychotherapist because it involves 90 minutes of situations such as the following:

Fear of shaking in front of others ? Practice shaking on purpose while holding a soda.

Fear of sweating ? Workout until you sweat in excess and then engage in a conversation.

Intense exposure is effective because it involves response prevention, which means that the situations must be maintained for a long time - up to 90 minutes- then fear subsides and after repeated exposures fear can be greatly diminished, even to the point of extinction.

V **Meeting New People** is a fifth step.

- Volunteering
- Hobbies
- Exercises
- Sports

Adolescence is a time of change that can often lead to emotional ups and downs. Many programs aim to increase capacities to cope effectively and deal with feeling ‘butterflies in the stomach’. Skills and strategies in getting on better with others, coping with feelings and building self-esteem are helpful to improve quality of life and enjoy relationships.

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**Information for consumers**

<http://www.abct.org> Fact Sheet : “ *Shyness, Social Anxiety and Social Phobia*”

(Association for the Advancement of Behavioral and Cognitive Psychotherapies )

Describes in a few paragraphs the main symptoms of shyness and how to differentiate it social anxiety and social phobia.

<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/shyness.aspx> Avoidance or inhibition creates problems for the painfully shy and for those around them. It can include canceling social events at the last moment, few or no friends, passivity, excessive computer use.

<http://www.susankramer.com/TeenMeditation.html> This is a good preparation and practice for even breathing and harmonizing the body, mind and emotions.

**Books**

Antony, M (2004) 10 Simple Solutions to Shyness, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, California This is a self-help book appropriate for young adults, an essential guide for anyone seeking to overcome problems with shyness and fear of public speaking.

Antony, M and Swinson, R (2000) The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook: proven step-by-step techniques for overcoming fear, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, California.

Rapee, Ron (2014) Overcoming Shyness and Social Phobia, Anxiety Association of Victoria, Inc, Australia. This program can help you:

- to identify your fears, worries and feelings in social situations;
- to worry less about what people think of you;
- to overcome those annoying 'mental blanks';
- to face your social fears head on;
- be more assertive.

**Training**

Henderson, M. Zimbardo, C and Carducci, B (1999) The Shyness Institute, Palo Alto, Stanford University, California “*The pain of shyness can be relieved by challenging negative thoughts and beliefs, and learning new behaviors. Participants have opportunities to learn and to try new behaviors in a safe and supportive environment*”

