

## **ARE YOU SHY?**

When I was about 10 years old, my parents would sometimes arrange family gatherings. I used to hide under the house until one of them came to find me. At 14, I found it very difficult to walk into a shop and ask for help from the sales assistant. During high school, I couldn't get a date, and I couldn't have fun or relax at parties. Making presentations, I froze in front of the audience like a deer caught in car headlights.

You are likely to have had similar experiences. Each one of us feels shy at some time or another.

## **What is shyness?**

Shyness expert Philip Zimbardo defines shyness like this: “Discomfort and/or inhibition in interpersonal situations that interferes with pursuing one’s interpersonal or professional goals.”

People often misunderstand the concept of shyness and what it can do to those afflicted by it. Some shyness is normal in most people. Research shows that only 5 per cent of people believe that they are never shy. Most people feel at least a little shy in unfamiliar social situations, but many people overcome it in time. There is nothing wrong with shyness per se, and a little caution may even be beneficial when in a new environment. Shyness is only a problem when it won't go away and it stops you from doing what you want to do: get a date, get service, get a job, do your work, or anything else.

Research indicates that shy people are likely to have problems at work. Their career progress is often slow and they don't achieve their potential. They rarely work in jobs requiring verbal fluency or leadership skills. Negative feedback has a powerful effect on them. Shy people sometimes overwork to avoid social situations. Long-term shyness can lead to loneliness, overwork, and depression.

Introversion is not shyness, although many people confuse the terms. The majority of shy people tend to be introverted. However, introverts only have a preference for solitary activities. They do not fear social encounters as shy people do. Many professional entertainers and trainers are shy extraverts – publicly outgoing yet privately quite reserved.

## **How does shyness develop?**

In some cultures, such as that of Finland, shyness is considered part of the national stereotype. Yet many Finns show very good interpersonal skills in familiar social situations. Finland has an introverted culture rather than a shy one. Shyness may be partly related to culture, as introverts are more likely to be shy than extraverts.

Shy people who live in an introverted culture (e.g. Finland, Japan) will tend to have less problems due to their shyness, because many people appear to behave in a similar

way, even if they are not shy. But shy people in extraverted cultures (e.g. United States, Israel) often have difficulties because their behaviour is contrary to the accepted social norms.

One theory about shyness says that people who are naturally timid and easily aroused often avoid people, which leads to habitual shy behaviour. However, research also shows that shyness can be caused by bad parenting, a stressful time at school, and unsuccessful private or professional relationships. There is evidence that levels of shyness in society are increasing, with many blaming television, computers, the automation of many services (e.g. basic bank functions), less intact nuclear families, and the tendency to do more work with less free time, is reducing the ability of people to learn and practice social skills.

Never fear, hope is at hand! No matter how shyness develops, you can overcome it.

### **You used to be a shy boy**

I'm still shy sometimes, but my general level of shyness is a lot lower than it used to be. Through the study of psychology, I learned about the way people behave. However, the number one best way to reduce your shyness is to practise being outgoing. When I was younger, I forced myself to interact with other people, frequently putting myself in social situations. I got jobs in which I had to talk to others and make presentations. It wasn't nearly as bad as I'd feared.

If you are shy, just get out in the world and start talking. Visualise success in every social interaction: practise in your mind before an important interview or presentation. Be encouraging to shy colleagues and help them to be brave enough to talk. Or have you considered an organisation like Toastmasters, that allows you to practise in a supportive, nurturing environment?

As somebody who has been painfully shy and is now outgoing, I assure you it is well worth changing yourself for the rewards it brings!

### **Summary and conclusion**

Shyness is natural and normal. Everybody feels shy at some time or another. It is only a problem when it stops us achieving what we want in life. Shyness can cause a number of problems at work, including reluctance to advance, a fear of interaction with colleagues, and overwork in order to avoid social situations outside of work.

Culture tends to be introverted rather than shy. In an introverted culture, shy people are less conspicuous. A number of social problems seem to be primarily responsible for shy behaviour.

The best way to combat a fear is to face it. So if you are shy, just act as if you are not. Other people can't tell the difference, and over time, you will naturally become less shy as you get used to this new way of interacting.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

*The Shyness Home Page*

<http://www.shyness.com/>

*20 ways to attack shyness*

<http://thinksimplenow.com/happiness/20-ways-to-attack-shyness/>

*Philip Zimbardo*

<http://www.zimbardo.com/zimbardo.html>

Next time, we will be discussing how sleep can help you work more effectively.

*References:*

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Strickland, B. (Ed.). (2001). *Gale encyclopedia of psychology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group.

Zimbardo, P. (1990). *Shyness: What it is, what to do about it*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, Inc.

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