

TOO SHY?

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

According to Dr. Lynne Henderson, Director of the Shyness Clinic in Palo Alto and lecturer at Stanford University, 40-50% of the public is affected by shyness. About 15% of these individuals are considered chronically shy. For this portion of the shy population, their shyness is so debilitating they cannot do the things they want to do. Constant avoidance or inhibition can create enormous problems, not only for the painfully shy person, but also for people around them. The problem of shyness affects children as well as adults. One of Dr. Henderson's clinic patients, for example, asked a girl out in high school and was turned down. He was so affected by this that he didn't try to ask another woman out for ten years. That is an extreme example.

Lets consider some more common examples of chronically shy behavior. The shy individual might cancel social events at the last moment; produce written work at school to avoid class participation; spend excessive time on academic work or solitary professional activity to the exclusion of social interactions; have few or no friends; spend excessive time on the computer (not social in nature); and cause family members or teachers to express concern about the shy person's isolation.

Research shows there are many causes of chronic shyness including temperament or biological influences, stressful life events or negative family interactions. These various causes indicate that shyness is not just a personality trait that one is born with. Shyness can develop situationally in reaction to external events. Shyness can develop in an attempt to defend oneself in an upsetting situation. By escaping an emotionally painful person or event, the individual's avoidance behavior becomes reinforced. Whenever behavior is reinforced, it increases in frequency. Hence, the individual begins to appear "shy" as s/he uses behaviors we describe as reflective of shyness.

Fortunately, there are many ways that family, friends and mentors can help a shy loved one. For instance, they can maintain appropriate expectations while expressing empathy for the shy person's painful emotions; role-play challenging situations that are coming up with the shy person; avoid negative labels and intense pressures for social performance; and lighten up and use appropriate humor. They can encourage the shy person to be more playful and physically looser while they try new things. It often helps to adopt a health or sports-oriented model to the problem of shyness. Physical exercise makes you fit and keeps you fit.

As the statistics suggest, shyness and social anxiety are common experiences for many people. A psychologist can help when a person frequently avoids or withdraws from social situations, experiences emotional discomfort or is extremely concerned about evaluation or rejection. The American Psychological Association can provide a free copy of their new brochure called "Painful Shyness in Children and Adults." Simply call toll-free 1-877-603-4000 to request your copy.

Key tips for Coping with Shyness

People who feel shy are not victims. There are things they can practice and do to make their life easier. But like anything else, it takes a commitment to make a personal change.

Maintain Appropriate Expectations:

- Maintain appropriate expectations while communicating empathy for the shy person's painful emotions.
- Encourage them to tell you about their daily experiences and how they feel about them.
- Acknowledge the conflict between needs to belong and fear of rejection.
- Role-play challenging situations with the shy person.
- Help the shy individual set specific, manageable behavioral goals, and agreed upon reasonable means to attain them.
- Help challenge the frequent negative thoughts about them self and others, and help them develop constructive alternatives.
- Avoid negative labels and intense pressures for social performance.
- Remember that shyness and social anxiety are common and universal experiences at all ages for most people.

(Significant others can help) Give Specific Behavioral Feedback:

- Tell the person exactly how the specific behaviors of avoidance, passive aggression, or inconsistency affect you, while communicating acceptance of the person.
- Ask permission for when and how best to offer constructive feedback (what might be done in the future to achieve favorable outcomes).
- Acknowledge the person's strengths and resources, while communicating your warmth and positive feelings toward them.
- Encourage the shy person to be more playful, physically looser, and to practice looking "foolish" while they try new things; do the same yourself.
- Lighten up, use humor.
- Arrange for shy children to play with, and mentor, younger children.
- Encourage group sports, acting and dancing classes in a supportive environment.

Change Yourself:

- Challenge and counter maladaptive thoughts and negative emotional states that interfere with functioning, active exploration, and that lower your self-esteem.
- Set specific behavioral goals and practice desired actions in feared situations.
- Give yourself credit for taking social risks.

Change the Situation:

- Create cultures and groups environments that work well for everyone, where all temperaments are acceptable. Encourage people to use their natural styles and forms of self-expression. Enable all to participate, to share, listen, learn, explore, and enjoy self-expression of thought and emotion.
- Collaborate in shared responsibilities with mutual group goals.

Practice Social Fitness:

- Adopt a health - or sports-oriented model. Being socially fit is like being physically fit. Exercise makes you fit and keeps you fit.

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