

Shyness and Social Anxiety

For some people shyness and social anxiety feel inescapable. A frustration that interferes with even the simplest human interactions, and something to be endured on a daily basis. It does not however need to be an invisible sentence destined to last a lifetime. When feelings of shyness begin to dominate and hold you back in your life, an important first step is to break down what exactly is happening for you. We are such unique individuals, that the umbrella term 'shyness' will include a complexity of issues that are different for every person. Therefore it is only once you have uncovered your own set of unique blocks and triggers, that it is possible to come up with a SMART set of goals to help you address the issues and move on.

How to Begin

Philosopher Hannah Arendt states:-

“Each wo/man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.” (The Human Condition).

This is our first physical birth. Once we are adults we confirm our identity in numerous ways, the family and friends we relate to, the work we undertake, with all our actions having some kind of an effect. It is essentially impossible to live invisibly, and irrespective of whether you 'feel' shy, your life has already effected hundreds of others.

If you have ever watched a contestant on 'Britain's Got Talent' edge out onto a stage and stare out at the audience, and the audience stare back. Within the first minute, our audience have already 'read' the contestant, primarily physically, then, as she speaks, tonally, and finally through the words she says or the song she sings (which are the least important factor). There is a lot that is 'known' within a short space, because as human beings, we have needed to be superquick at reading each other. In other words, there is no escaping your interrelatedness with others. "All the world's a Stage" as Shakespeare said, but even Sir Jon Gielgud suffered from stagefright.

You are seen and heard every single day, even if you think you are not.

Just check in with yourself as to how you felt when you read the sentence above? Does it make you want to shrink away? Or are you ready to accept that you are born twice, once physically, and once through your identity and your unique actions in the world. Don't worry if you experience discomfort at the statement, as it is very common to be conflicted in terms of wanting to change the shyness you suffer from, yet at the same time, wanting things to stay the same so you don't have to confront the thing causing the anxiety, namely other people. Perhaps you fear their judgements. Or you feel 'different' from them and won't be accepted. What you do know is that a whole storm of internal thinking about your 'Self' is happening when confronted by interactions with others. Possibly followed shortly after by your own internal analysis of how you failed and what went wrong.

Working with the Conflict

Often a person wants to change the avoidant behaviours they have around interacting with people, but find they can't do it on their own. That maybe because they:-

1. Don't feel they have the appropriate social skills, and need to learn new helpful behaviours, (such as assertiveness, or practice social scripts).
2. That by engaging in a social interaction with a stranger, they will invite back something they can't cope with, and situations that are unwanted. They will lose their 'protection'.
3. There are subconscious beliefs holding you back, that people are not to be trusted, and to live in isolation is safer.

These are a few pointers, there are many more. The important thing is that you start to break down what may feel a large problem, into its component parts. This process will also include what *is* working. For example, the interactions that feel easy and simple, perhaps with your family or particularly trusted colleagues, because this is all evidence of what is working for you, and your current skills and abilities. This analytical inventory of what comes easy, and what doesn't, will help you identify and initiate your particular best first 'small changes'. Small change is good change, because enough small changes, and suddenly you realise you are somewhere completely different.

The work around shyness you do in counselling is not about identifying 'you as a problem' – it is about understanding your specialness, giving you the space to articulate who you really are, and essentially identifying the pieces of learning that will enable you to develop alternative skills. Knowing yourself, feeling comfortable in your own skin and celebrating who you are, are all achievable. Engaging confidently with people is just a piece of learning. Allowing yourself to be truly 'known' is another piece of learning. You are helped in this because we are all blessed with such plastic, creative minds, so that over time, by simply engaging in the process, your mind will create new and more helpful associations. Consider if you were learning the violin over six weeks for an hour a day, you would expect to be able to play a tune or two and after a while become quite competent, perhaps pretty good. Think about 'working the issue' in the same way, and that it is all good work in progress.

When Failing is Winning

All learning takes time, and all learning involves successes and failure. By trying, you will have successes, yet additionally, even within perceived 'failures', we have much to learn. Think about the original mobile phone produced by Apple – called a Newton, a person digital organiser, which, apparently was deemed a 'failure', before its real use became apparent. Many scientific discoveries, and artistic works were considered mistakes or failures. Beauty itself is often created and defined by its mistake or flaw. The important thing here is your 'Intention', and that you are engaging in the process. Because within the process we will ensure that even your failures offer you the possibility of a win. You are embarking on improving your interrelatedness – and the most important relationship you ever have in your life is the one you have with yourself. When we feel we 'fail' it is an opportunity to treat

ourselves with kindness and compassion, knowing we tried. And if we relate in a supportive and kind fashion to ourselves, then one may find deep changes start to work their way into our world view too, because when you see the kindness and compassion within yourself, you start to perceive it out there too.

Recommended Reading: I would recommend 'Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness', by Gillian Butler, and, in order to keep laughing through your learning process, try 'Failed it!' By Erik Kessels.

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