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UNDERSTANDING AND OVERCOMING SHYNESS

By Karen Payne, Ph.D.

Shyness is a commonly used but often misunderstood term. The purpose of this article is to clarify what social scientists have come to know about this very common problem and then begin to discuss the impact that shyness can have on your self-esteem, as well as your interpersonal and social well being. In addition, strategies for dealing with shyness will be discussed.

Shyness can be defined as a feeling of discomfort or inhibition in social or interpersonal situations that keeps you from pursuing your goals, either academic or personal. Shyness results in excessive self-focus and worry, often preoccupation with your thoughts, feelings or physical reactions (accelerated heart rate, pulse, etc.). The degree to which shyness can create problems for people varies widely, from mild social awkwardness to debilitating social phobia. Very common is situational shyness, which refers to the phenomenon of becoming fearful or inhibited in certain situations. The most typical situations that often trigger this kind of reaction are ones involving authority figures (teachers, administrators, leaders, etc.), potential one-on-one romantic or intimate encounters, having to initiate action in a group setting, or initiating social action in unstructured settings. These kind of situations often elicit reactions at one or all of the following levels: cognitive, meaning thoughts; affective, meaning feelings, physiological, meaning within the body; or behavioral, resulting in a withdrawal from the difficult situation. Less common than situational shyness, but important to understand is the more chronic form of shyness that involves avoidance and/or fear of most situations involving contact with others. This form of shyness is often described by mental health professionals as Social Phobia. Social Phobia often leads to a much more pervasive degree of isolation, avoidance and loneliness. Chronic shyness can clearly be distinguished from introversion. Introverts are people who prefer solitary to social activities but do not fear social encounters as do the shy. Shy individuals have a wish for more contact with others and are not content with the degree of isolation that pervades their lives. Whether it is situational or chronic shyness that is experienced, the shy individual will report feeling some degree of disconnection with others and a longing for closer bonds with people in their lives.

The number of people reporting some form of shyness has been gradually increasing over the years. The most recent research suggests that at any given point in time, close to 50% of the general population report that they currently experience some degree of shyness in their lives. In addition, close to 80% of people report having felt shy at some point in their lives. Many of these people could be referred to as "shy extroverts". These are people who are publicly outgoing, but privately experience painful thoughts or feelings. Social Phobia, which again is the more chronic form of shyness, is now thought to have a lifetime prevalence rate of about 13%, which makes it the third most prevalent psychiatric disorder. All of these statistics demonstrate that the number of people suffering from some form of shyness and/or social isolation and avoidance based on fear is very high, certainly deserving of attention and treatment. The other important factor to consider in understanding the very large numbers of people effected by shyness is the interactive effect of shyness on other emotional problems. People who are shy are much more vulnerable to developing other kinds of psychological problems, such as depression and/or anxiety. Given the large number of people experiencing shyness and the risk of either staying stuck in the shy behavior or developing other maladaptive responses, it becomes clear that it is important to recognize the shyness and work on developing alternative and healthier ways

of coping with the fear.

Before discussing treatment options, let me first mention two factors to consider in the growing numbers of people defining themselves as shy: culture and technology. Cultural tradition is important in understanding who defines themselves as shy. Different cultures clearly have different definitions of what is normative interpersonally and socially. Interpersonal styles vary across cultures and it is important to consider this when interacting with people who are culturally different from yourself. Cross-cultural studies on the prevalence of shyness have been done and indicate that there are differences in numbers across cultures, though the overall pattern of results indicates a universality of shyness across all cultures. What is important to remember in this regard is that a person's own definition of his/her degree of shyness may be at least somewhat dependent on the cultural background and ethnic identity. In addition, cultural changes within the United States, such as increased crime forcing children off the streets and smaller families resulting in fewer siblings and smaller peer groups, are thought to be influences resulting in children growing up with less opportunity for unstructured interpersonal development. The issue of technology and its impact on shyness is very interesting when considering the growing numbers of people self-identifying with this problem. It could be that the rising numbers of shy young adults is due in part to the growing dependence on non-human forms of communication, coming about as a result of our huge advances in technology. Most university students now have grown up spending considerable amounts of time using video games, computer CD-rom games, web surfing, emailing friends, and finding chat rooms to develop relationships. If this has been your experience, you may want to think some about the impact that this may have had on your feeling comfortable and confident interacting with others. While some shy people benefit from using the anonymity of email and chat rooms, the danger is that for others this may become a substitute for contact with people. In addition, automation is replacing people serving people, so in many areas of everyday life, from bank ATMs to gas stations to automated telephone answering services, it is quite possible to avoid dealing with human beings. The difficult question that remains unanswered is what the long-term effect of this massive change in information, technology and culture will be on individuals' ability to develop and sustain human relationships.

There are many treatment strategies and options for people who identify themselves as needing help in overcoming their shyness. The first and most important step in overcoming shyness is finding the right person to talk to. A skilled mental health professional can very helpful in assessing the degree to which your shyness is effecting your well-being and can help you determine whether or not shyness is really the problem, versus some other type of emotional difficulty (anxiety, depression, etc.). Once properly assessed, the counselor or professional might suggest several options: individual counseling, group counseling, or medication. Medication has been shown to be helpful for some people experiencing certain forms of situational shyness, like public speaking anxiety. In addition, some more chronically shy individuals seem to respond to certain types of anti-depressant medication. Most situationally shy people respond very well to short-term counseling, either individual or group. The treatment process generally uses both behavioral and cognitive forms of intervention to help you overcome your shyness. Behavioral interventions include recognizing the kinds of behaviors that result in avoidance and working on engaging in more active initiating kinds of behaviors that will result in increased contact with others. Cognitive interventions include recognizing the self-defeating thought patterns and excessive worrying that occur in the shyness pattern. Working on developing optimistic and productive thought patterns and eliminating the ruminating thoughts follows in the cognitive treatment process. Situationally shy people report that they are able to see clear change and progress in their issues when they apply these treatment strategies to their problems. Some people feel more comfortable working singularly with a counselor, but many feel helped more by working in a group setting with other people experiencing similar problems.

The Counseling Center here at Caltech is a good place to begin your process of understanding how shyness may have been a part of your life and the impact it continues to have on your interpersonal, social and academic well being. The psychologists at the Counseling Center are available to consult with you at any time around this issue. We can

work with you individually or suggest books or web sites for you to read. Most importantly, remember that shyness is a very common but often painful state that can be treated and overcome. Taking the first step in recognizing the problem and asking for help is often the most difficult part of the process of feeling better.

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