



Painful Shyness

In Children and Adults

Avoidance or inhibition creates problems for the painfully shy and for those around them

Avoidance and inhibition include:

- Canceling social events at the last moment
- Avoiding situations that provide positive social interaction
- Few or no friends
- Avoidance of activities that are otherwise pleasurable
- Passivity, pessimism and low self-esteem
- Friends, family members, teachers, or mentors are concerned
- Excessive computer use that is not social in nature, and is without face to face contact with others

Research shows that causes of avoidance, inhibition, distress can include:

Temperament or Biological Influences

- Withdrawn, avoidant, excessively emotionally reactive
- Highly sensitive, when lacking adequate social support
- Poor emotional "fit" with family members or some environments

Stressful Life Events

- Shaming experiences
- Major moves from one school or city to another
- Abrupt changes or disruptions in family life

Negative Family Interactions

- Frequent parental criticism and shaming to enforce behavioral compliance, high parental control with little expressed warmth
- Chaotic family interactions or neglect

Stressful Work or School Environments

- Highly competitive, critical, or hostile environments
- Public embarrassment for poor performance
- Dominance behaviors rewarded, and bullying or teasing ignored or encouraged

How loved ones, friends and mentors can help

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 fears 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 the 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.

A psychologist can help

- Group therapy provides a place to explore, experiment, test pessimistic hypotheses about the self and social interaction, and develop adaptive interaction styles.
- Successful therapy lowers barriers to action and increases appropriate risk taking and self-acceptance. Deliberate social "niche picking", or choosing situations that suit one's temperament, also increases.
- Individual therapy provides a place to explore one's needs, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors without pressure from others.
- Group and Individual therapy help clients develop more empathy for others and themselves by reducing negative selfthoughts, self-blame and shame while building positive perspectives and effective behavioral patterns.
- Medication may help clients enter feared situations.

About this guide

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