

Dealing with Loneliness and Shyness

Making Friends Even if You Feel Shy or Socially Awkward



Are you shy and self-conscious in social situations? Do you feel isolated and lonely, but unsure how to connect with others? You may feel like you're the only one, but the truth is that lots of people struggle with shyness and social insecurity. No matter how awkward or nervous you feel in the company of others, you can learn to silence self-critical thoughts, boost your self-esteem, and become more confident in your interactions with others. You don't have to change your personality, but by learning new skills and adopting a different outlook you can overcome your fears and build rewarding friendships.

Do you need help dealing with shyness and loneliness?

As humans, we're meant to be social creatures. Having friends makes us happier and healthier—in fact, being socially connected is key to our mental and emotional health. Yet many of us are shy and socially introverted. We feel awkward around unfamiliar people, unsure of what to say, or worried about what others might think of us. This can cause us to avoid social situations, cut ourselves off from others, and gradually become isolated and lonely.

Loneliness is a common problem among people of all ages and backgrounds, and yet it's something that most of us hesitate to admit. But loneliness is nothing to feel ashamed about. Sometimes, it's a result of external circumstances: you've moved to a new area, for example. In such cases, there are lots of steps you can take to meet new people and turn acquaintances into friends.

But what if you're struggling with shyness, social insecurity, or a long-standing difficulty making friends? The truth is that none of us are born with social skills. They're things we learn over time—and the good news is that you can learn them, too. Whatever your age or situation, you can learn to overcome shyness or social awkwardness, banish loneliness, and

enjoy strong, fulfilling friendships.

Is shyness and insecurity a problem for you?

- Are you afraid of looking stupid in social situations?
- Do you worry a lot about what others think of you?
- Do you frequently avoid social situations?
- Do other people seem to have a lot more fun than you do in social situations?
- Do you assume it's your fault when someone rejects you or seems uninterested?
- Is it hard for you to approach people or join in conversations?
- After spending time with others, do you tend to dwell on and criticize your "performance?"
- Do you often feel bad about yourself after socializing?

If you answered "yes" to these questions, this article can help.

Tackling social insecurity and fear

When it comes to shyness and social awkwardness, the things we tell ourselves make a huge difference. Here are some common thinking patterns that can undermine your confidence and fuel social insecurity:

- Believing that you're boring, unlikeable, or weird.
- Believing that other people are evaluating and judging you in social situations.
- Believing that you'll be rejected and criticized if you make a social mistake.
- Believing that being rejected or socially embarrassed would be awful and devastating.
- Believing that what others think about you defines who you are.

If you believe these things, it's no wonder social situations seem terrifying! But the truth is never quite so black-and-white.

People aren't thinking about you—at least not to the degree that you think. Most people are caught up in their own lives and concerns. Just like you're thinking about yourself and your own social concerns, other people are thinking about themselves. They're not spending their free time judging you. So stop wasting time worrying about what others think of you.

Many other people feel just as awkward and nervous as you do. When you're socially anxious, it can seem as though everyone else is an extrovert brimming with self-confidence. But that's not the case. Some people are better at hiding it than others, but there are many introverted people out there struggling with the same self-doubts as you are. The next person you speak to is just as likely to be worried about what you think of them!

People are much more tolerant than you think. In your mind, the very idea of doing or saying something embarrassing in public is horrifying. You're sure that everyone will judge you. But in reality, it's very unlikely that people are going to make a big deal over a social faux pas. Everyone has done it at some point so most will just ignore it and move on.

Learning to accept yourself

When you start realizing that people are NOT scrutinizing and judging your every word and deed, you'll automatically feel less nervous socially. But that still leaves the way you feel about yourself. All too often, we're our own worst critics. We're hard on ourselves in a way we'd never be to strangers—let alone the people we care about.

Learning to accept yourself doesn't happen overnight—it requires changing your thinking.

You don't have to be perfect to be liked. In fact, our imperfections and quirks can be endearing. Even our weaknesses can bring us closer to others. When someone is honest and open about their vulnerabilities, it's a bonding experience—especially if they're able to laugh at themselves. If you can cheerfully accept your awkwardness and imperfections, you'll likely find that others will, too. They may even like you better for it!

It's okay to make mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes; it's part of being human. So give yourself a break when you mess up. Your value doesn't come from being perfect. If you find self-compassion difficult, try to look at your own mistakes as you would those of a friend. What would you tell your friend? Now follow your own advice.

Your negative self-evaluations don't necessarily reflect reality. In fact, they probably don't, especially if you:

1. Call yourself names, such as “pathetic,” “worthless,” “stupid,” etc.
2. Beat yourself up with all the things you “should” or “shouldn't” have done.
3. Make sweeping generalizations based on a specific event. For example, if something didn't go as planned, you tell yourself that you'll never get things right, you're a failure, or you always screw up.

When you're thinking such distorted thoughts, it's important to pause and consciously challenge them. Pretend you're an impartial third-party observer, then ask yourself if there are other ways of viewing the situation.

Building social skills one step at a time

Improving social skills requires practice. Just as you wouldn't expect to become good on the guitar without some effort, don't expect to become comfortable socially without putting in

the time. That said, you can start small. Take baby steps towards being more confident and social, then build on those successes.

- Smile at someone you pass on the street.
- Compliment someone you encounter during your day.
- Ask someone a casual question (at a restaurant, for example: “Have you been here before? How’s the steak?”)
- Start a conversation with a friendly cashier, receptionist, waiter, or salesperson.

How to face your biggest social fears

When it comes to the things that really scare us, you want to face your fears in a gradual way, starting with situations that are slightly stressful and building up to more anxiety-provoking scenarios. Think of it as a stepladder, with each rung a little more stressful than the last. Don’t move on to the next step until you’ve had a positive experience with the step below. For example, if talking to new people at parties makes you extremely anxious, here is a stepladder you could use:

1. Go to a party and smile at a few people.
2. Go to a party and ask a simple question (e.g. “Do you know what time it is?”). Once they’ve answered, politely thank them and then excuse yourself. The key is to make the interaction short and sweet.
3. Ask a friend to introduce you to someone at the party and help facilitate a short conversation.
4. Pick someone at the party who seems friendly and approachable. Introduce yourself.
5. Identify a non-intimidating group of people at the party and approach them. You don’t need to make a big entrance. Just join the group and listen to the conversation. Make a comment or two if you’d like, but don’t put too much pressure on yourself.
6. Join another friendly, approachable group. This time, try to participate a bit more in the conversation.

More tips for developing social confidence

- **Fake it til you make it.** Acting as if you’re confident can make you feel more confident.
- **Focus externally, not internally.** Instead of worrying about how you’re coming across or what you’re going to say, switch your focus from yourself to the other person. You’ll live more in the moment and you’ll feel less self-conscious.
- **Laugh at yourself.** If you do something embarrassing, use humor to put things in perspective. Laugh, learn, and move on.
- **Do things to help others** or brighten another person’s day. It can be something as small as a compliment or smile. When you spread positivity, you’ll feel better about

yourself.

Tips for making conversation

Some people seem to instinctively know how to start a conversation with anyone, in any place. If you're not one of these lucky types, these tips will help you start talking when you first meet someone:

Here are some easy ways to engage in conversation with someone new

Remark on the surroundings or occasion. If you're at a party, for example, you could comment on the venue, the catering, or the music in a positive way. "I love this song," "The food's great. Have you tried the chicken?"

Ask an open-ended question, one that requires more than just a yes or no answer. Adhere to the journalist's credo and ask a question that begins with one of the 5 W's (or 1 H): who, where, when, what, why, or how. For example, "Who do you know here?" "Where do you normally go on a Friday?" "When did you move here?" "What keeps you busy?" "Why did you decide to become a vegetarian?" "How is the wine?" Most people enjoy talking about themselves so asking a question is a good way to get a conversation started.

Use a compliment. For example, "I really like your purse, can I ask where you got it?" or "You look like you've done this before, can you tell me where I have to sign in?"

Note anything you have in common and ask a follow up question. "I play golf as well, what's your favorite local course?" "My daughter went to that school, too, how does your son like it?"

Keep the conversation going with small talk. Don't say something that's obviously provocative and avoid heavy subjects such as politics or religion. Stick to light subjects like the weather, surroundings, and anything you have in common such as school, movies, or sports teams.

Listen effectively. Listening is not the same as waiting for your turn to talk. You can't concentrate on what someone's saying if you're forming what you're going to say next. One of the keys to effective communication is to focus fully on the speaker and show interest in what's being said. Nod occasionally, smile at the person, and make sure your posture is open and inviting. Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal cues like "yes" or "uh huh."

What to do when social situations tire you out

There's a common misconception that introverts aren't social. In fact, introverts can be just as social as extroverts. The difference between the two is that introverts lose energy when they're around people and recharge by spending time alone, while extroverts gain energy by spending time with other people.

What this means is that even socially confident introverts will feel tired after a lot of socializing. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you or that you're incapable of having a fulfilling social life. You just need to understand your limits and plan accordingly.

Don't overcommit. It's okay to turn down social invitations because you need a break or schedule downtime after socializing. After a fun Saturday out with friends, for example, you may need to spend Sunday alone to rest and recharge.

Take mini-breaks. There will be times when you're feeling drained, but you can't leave the situation for extended alone time. Maybe you're at a busy work convention, you're on a getaway with friends, or you're visiting family for the holidays. In these circumstances, try to find time to slip away to a quiet corner when it wouldn't be seen as rude. Even 10 or 15 minutes here and there can make a big difference.

Talk to your family and friends about your alone-time needs. Be up front about the fact that socializing drains you. It's nothing to be ashamed about, and trying to hide it will only add to your social exhaustion. Good friends will be sympathetic and willing to accommodate your needs.

Dealing with social setbacks and rejection

As you put yourself out there socially, there will be times when you feel judged or rejected. Maybe you reached out to someone, but they didn't seem interested in having a conversation or starting a friendship.

There's no question: rejection feels bad. But it's important to remember that it's part of life. Not everyone you approach will be receptive to starting a conversation, let alone becoming friends. Just like dating, meeting new people inevitably comes with some element of rejection. The following tips will help you have an easier time with social setbacks:

Try not to take things too personally. The other person may be having a bad day, be distracted by other problems, or just not be in a talkative mood. Always remember that rejection has just as much to do with the other person as it does with you.

Keep things in perspective. Someone else's opinion doesn't define you, and it doesn't

HelpGuide

mean that no one else will be interested in being your friend. Learn from the experience and try again.

Don't dwell on mistakes. Even if you said something you regret, for example, it's unlikely that the other person will remember it after a short time. Stay positive; refrain from labeling yourself a failure, or from telling yourself that you'll never be able to make friends. The very shyest people do, and so will you.

Recommended reading

[Improving Your Social Skills](#) - Self-help articles on how to get past shyness and social awkwardness. (SucceedSocially.com)

[Social Anxiety](#) - Self-help online course. (Centre for Clinical Interventions)

[How to Be Awesome at Approaching People](#) - Tips for approaching new people and engaging them. (Nerd Fitness)

[Show Off Your Social Self](#) - Tips for managing shyness and challenging negative views that get in the way of social success. (Psychology Today)

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A. and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: October 2018.