

Is shyness America's no. 1 disease?

By Ray Walden

A band of sweat begins to trickle down your forehead. Heart pounding and stomach churning, a rush of heat sweeps over to your cheeks. You haven't moved a muscle, but surely everyone in the room can see the agony you're going through—the chaos in your mind.

Now then, what was the question?

Why are they all staring? Waiting? Judging? Wouldn't it be great to turn invisible and walk away thumbing your nose as you go?

More than 80 percent of us have been shy at some time in our lives, according to a study published this year by Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo. Forty percent of Americans claim to be shy now, Zimbardo found in a survey of more than 5,000 people, mostly college students.

He outlines the nature and surprising scope of the shyness problem in *"Shyness: What It Is. What to Do About It"* (263 pages, Addison-Wesley, \$9.95).

His survey results offer a mix of optimism and gloom for shy people. Half of the subjects who have been shy now claim to be cured. However, a quarter of those surveyed always have been shy and still are. This includes a four-percent slice labeled "true-blue shy," people who are shy all of the time in all situations and with almost all people. In contrast, seven percent claim to have never had shy feelings.

That makes shyness a nearly universal experience. But what is it?

"Shyness spans a wide psychological continuum," according to Zimbardo. "It can vary from occasional feelings of awkwardness in the presence of others all the way to traumatic episodes of anxiety that totally disrupt a person's life. For some people, shyness seems to be a chosen, preferred style of life; for others, it is an imposed life sentence without possibility of parole."

At first blush, shyness may appear to be a personality disorder, finding cause in "unconscious conflicts raging deep within the psyche." That is the psychoanalytic view. Other branches of psychology view it as an inherited personality trait, a failure to learn social skills or a product of social conditions which stress competition, individual success and personal responsibility for failure.

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Zimbardo acknowledges all of these approaches, except for the one claiming genetic causes. But he puts more emphasis on the thought that shy people are shy because they say they are.

Almost everyone shows signs of shyness at times. Your heart pounds when you make a speech. Your palms are wet as you pick up the phone to make a date with a person you recently met. You come up short of words when a professor startles you out of a daydream.

The difference between the shy and the non-shy, Zimbardo asserts, is that the latter recognized that their shy reactions are caused by an awkward situation and the former pin the blame on themselves. Similarly, the shy often have low self-esteem.

The shy person lacks respect for himself, so he expects others to judge him negatively. His tendency to be introspective and even egocentric leads him to believe that others are judging him all the time. This self-consciousness dominates him at moments when he should be concentrating his thought on the outward situation.

In this way, the shy may seem cool and aloof to others when they really are yearning for approval, but because they don't expect to receive it they protect themselves from criticism by withdrawing into themselves.

Zimbardo uses a metaphor of a prisoner and guard. In a prison the guard sets up rules of behavior and enforces them and the prisoner obeys. The more demanding and brutal the guard becomes, the meeker the prisoner is. As a result, the guard becomes more contemptuous of him and more restrictive.

A shy person carries both the guard and prisoner in his head, Zimbardo wrote. The prisoner side of him wants to be free, to be sociable. But the guard side puts the clamps on.

This makes the prisoner of shyness envy the easy talker while he stays silent himself. He turns down a party invitation, then sits at home alone and broods over his loneliness.

The shy are afraid of failure and convinced that they will fail. This can become a self-fulfilling prophesy and the shy person may take a dive rather than deal with unex-



Photo by Ted Kirk

pected success. Even when success comes, the self-described loser may play it down—"any dummy could have done that."

Zimbardo contends the shy can change if they want to. First, they must recognize they can change. There is no such thing as "the real me," he argues.

"You can change the direction of your entire life any time you choose to do so," he wrote. His book devotes about 100 pages to a game plan for conquering shyness.

The strategy begins with self-awareness. The shy person, who normally is too introspective, becomes even more so in order to identify the nature of his shyness—when he is shy, who makes him shy, how he acts when he is shy.

He finds that he has erected a series of barriers between himself and other people. When he has discovered what those barriers are, he begins to break them down by attacking them in sequence, beginning with the easiest and least threatening.

"No go out and take a risk," Zimbardo advises at one point. "Do something 'scary' that you would like to, ought to, but have been avoiding."

The "scary" stunt might be something commonplace, but threatening for the shy person. Such as calling Directory Assistance to ask for a phone number. Later, he works up to making small talk with people in theatre lines, beginning conversations with strangers and (horrors, horrors) asking someone for a date.

All along the line, the patient, who is acting as his own therapist and with the guidance of the book, is learning social skills and practicing them. At first he rehearses encounters before they happen. He plays a role to protect his ego. Later, so the theory goes, the social skills become spontaneous. The shy person becomes more and more confident and positive about himself. The shyness circle is broken.

Shyness therapy is aimed at giving a person control over his life, freeing him from the prison guard which reigns in his personality and stunts his growth, according to Zimbardo. But his strategy for doing this leaves the author, who directs a shyness clinic at Stanford, open to criticism.

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His suggestions for meeting people, for starting and prolonging conversations, for making dates, include some which are trite and superficial. Phony, by definition if you have to rehearse first.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" is a suggested line for opening a conversation.

Shyness, while it may be painful, at least tends to be honest. Little is to be gained by transforming two-fifths of society into shallow social animals.

Despite this flaw, the shy do have much to gain from an effective program to conquer shyness and raise self-esteem. However, as Zimbardo points out, therapy deals with one person at a time, reversing damage already done. Meanwhile, the real problem lies with a society that generates shyness.