

Helen's Guide to Overcome Severe Shyness

by

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[A Guide to Overcome Severe Shyness](#)

This guide is a compendium of various steps, including ideas and short articles that deal with overcoming severe shyness from different approaches, in the hope that the reader will find help and meaning from some of them.

Outline of Steps to be Learned

To understand the nature of shyness

To observe others to see how they communicate

To look inward for a better understanding and acceptance of yourself

To relax when you are with others

To discuss creativity and uncover your creative talents

To explore ways to use your creative talents to bolster your self-confidence and also to use it as a means to get to know others

To be in the moment

Understand the Nature of Your Shyness

Describe your shyness. Create a Working Definition of your Shyness. Here is mine as I wrote it for a workshop...

“I feared people. I was lonely. I had almost no self-expression. I felt different, like an outcast. I had no close friends, little personal growth and little self-esteem. Except at home, no one knew me simply because I could not speak up! I felt shame because of it. Shyness robbed me of myself. It held me in a trap that I kept failing to dismantle. But, most of all, I just plain missed out on the love and warmth that only friends and others can provide and I could not grow or enjoy life the way I wanted to.”

In order to thoroughly understand what shyness is, read Phil Zimbardo’s classic book, *Shyness*. It came out in 1977 and is considered one of, if not the best, helpful accounts of it. It gives an overview of the various problems associated with shyness and includes exercises on how to overcome them. In addition, it helps remove the fear and hopelessness you feel when you think about your shyness. Many shy people consider Zimbardo to be their guru. When reading his book, I thought that he was the very first person - ever - to understand me.

Learn About and Observe Others

After you understand how shyness functions, observe how people communicate; begin by standing bravely near others. Watch people talking in twosomes and also talking with one another in large gatherings. Study the different types of expressions they make with their faces and watch their body language. Knowing how your fellow humans express themselves will help you to do the same.

To learn more about other people, study the different types of personalities. Two books about them that I like are Carl Jung's and Robert Riso's. Based on Jung's psychological types, my Jungian analyst astonished me by saying I had a fairly strong innate ability to communicate with others, a part called an extrovert feeling function. Delighted, I started practicing small talk right away, and, to my amazement, found it was very easy. (This wasn't until 2001, and by then I'd already learned other communication skills that helped me do it.)

Riso's book describes characteristics of the three levels for each of his nine types: the unhealthy, the normal and the healthy. Learning the healthy traits of my type helped immensely. I already knew only too well the average and unhealthy traits, but the description of my healthy type provided a model for me to aspire toward.

Understanding others will help you lose your fear of them and at the same time open pathways to talk with people and befriend them. With the Enneagram and/or Jung's typology, you can not only learn about your type, but also that of members of your family and of some friends.

Understand Yourself

Thirdly, look inward for a better understanding and acceptance of yourself. Feel compassion for yourself. You must know yourself and feel compassion for yourself before you can feel compassion for others. Lynne Henderson's new book on Amazon's Kindle called "Improving Social Confidence and Reducing Shyness Using Compassion Focused Therapy" is a helpful guide.

To help gain self-confidence and acceptance of yourself, I found Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's book *Flow* very rewarding also. He describes in detail how our minds function, for example, that we have the ability to make conscious decisions about what we think. I found being able to control my thinking to be an extremely important tool to help diminish my anxieties. Csikszentmihalyi is easy to read and *Flow* provides simple, straight-forward advice to help you develop self-confidence, awareness and acceptance of yourself.

Don't disdain anything about yourself; everything about you is a part of you and it is all important to you. When you discover who you are, you can become sincere. Always be true to yourself and others—that's you - the real you, the you you've been waiting and waiting to find and to acknowledge, so don't waste a precious moment pretending to be something or someone you are not.

Learn to Relax

Learn to relax and to be a warmer person when you are with others. This took me forever. For at least ten years, from 1990-2000, I used to write in my journal: I must learn how to relax! I must learn how to relax... I had no idea how to do it. Eventually I learned I first had to know myself before I could like myself, before I could be relaxed with myself. To help get to know myself, I asked myself many questions about myself, my likes and dislikes, and kept a journal of them. Only after I could understand myself and I felt good about myself, could I feel relaxed with others and truly like them.

Discover Your Creative Talent

If you don't already know it, discover your creative talent. Do the exercise of writing for three minutes first thing in the morning focusing on, "What is my passion?" Keep doing this until you discover some real interests you want to develop. It may be writing, acting, painting, carpentry, gardening, teaching – anything. Nurture it, become better at it by practicing it alone and also with others in workshops.

Usually shy people don't speak up because they are afraid to. But self-expression is one of the very important keys to feeling good about yourself. Find ways and avenues to express yourself using your talent. Yes! Start doing it! Performing is a great learning tool and it can only become easier. Try teaching your skill to others; in the process, you will increase your own knowledge of it and get to know other people. You might even make friends with someone you're teaching. Build upon your strengths, gently laying aside your weaknesses.

Learn to be in the Moment

Once you can relax, you can acquire the art of being in the moment when you are with people. To learn this, I reflected upon the idea over and over and over....I would imagine myself with someone and would say to myself things such as “Don’t think about anything. Look at the person in front of me and think about them....give my total attention to the person who is speaking to me...hear and appreciate what they are saying; respond; think in the now...be in the now.”

For some the idea of being in the moment may sound simple, but when you’ve spent a lifetime worrying about the present moment and the people you are with, it’s hard to lose the habit. For me the art of being in the moment came slowly, but once I thoroughly understood the concept, it became a miraculous tool. Then, I knew the secret to a fulfilling life: relax, be genuine and be in the moment – that’s the gateway to making friends, something that previously had been next to impossible for me. But after I learned these skills, the world became a very different home, a much, much happier place where I delight in other people

Finally, Enjoy the Process

These learning skills are not something you do one by one, but rather you work on one skill, and then another, and spend a little a time practicing each one. There are three sets of building blocks: attitudes, theoretical knowledge and practice. It's like playing bridge....there are different aspects for it, defensive playing, (learning to relax, to be in the moment, self-confidence etc.) offensive (practicing with others, being brave) and bidding and coordinating with your partner (theoretical knowledge.) Study each part separately and eventually they come together. Be patient.

Overcoming shyness isn't all hard work! There are several things you can do that will make you feel good, such as learning activities, enjoyable ones, ones that will make you feel more wholesome each day and each day will make you want to do more, to feel even better, more relaxed, more serene and more appreciative of yourself as well as others.

I'm sure you can do all this much faster than the twenty years it took me. Regardless of how long it takes, doing it allows you to become the real you, the genuine you, and it makes overcoming shyness perhaps more important than anything else you could ever do.

The single most necessary factor that helped me to overcome shyness was being brave, brave to insist on doing things that all my life I'd been too timid to do, because I knew that in order to get over shyness, I had to force myself to do scary things. How did I get to be brave and am I still brave? I got to be brave knowing that without bravery I would wind up never understanding people and this was an anathema to me. The answer to the latter question is a simple, no. I don't have to be brave anymore; I'm not trying to develop my personality. Yet, living is adjusting ...we are all

changing, adjusting, overcoming something at some time, maybe much of the time sometimes, so,
yes, at those moments I still become a little brave...

A Short List of Some Brave Activities I Did

Singing solo at church.

Writing and giving a 20 minute talk called, Unitarianism from the Heart, at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in San Miguel de Allende.

Writing the Art Column for the newspaper in San Miguel.

Preparing for an exhibition called Danforth Shows the Mind.

Reading Power Performance for Singers and developing a firm sense of emotional control while singing a duet.

Participating in a Jungian Drama Workshop in San Miguel and revealing some of my childhood pain.

Interviewing fifty people about introversion, extroversion and shyness.

Find a counselor with experience in helping the severely shy.

Don't procrastinate and find one you really admire and respect.

What would I recommend to parents and educators?

The most critical part of anyone's social life is peer friends. I'd never had a peer friend with whom I'd been sincere, with whom I'd spoken from the heart. And so nobody spoke to me that way either, compounding my loneliness. But before I had Jane for my first friend, I underwent counseling. It was not a supreme act of bravery that got me to a psychologist...to get help, something I'd always been too ashamed to get. Rather I had hit bottom, and desperation gave me the courage.

Desperation made me know how badly I needed help in order to be able to understand people. My counselor taught me some basics about what people are like and this became extremely helpful.

These days when I tell people about my book, they say, "You're not shy!" And I explain, "No, I'm not anymore. My book tells how I overcame it." I can see them thinking, but usually they don't say anything else. Perhaps they don't know what to say when confronted with the topic. It's not too common to talk about it, so don't expect people to know much about it.

Mainly I recommend to parents and educators is the following advice: be aware of the symptoms and pain a child or adult can feel when they are afflicted by severe shyness and respond in the most compassionate manner possible. Failure to do so is to allow them to continue suffering without a voice.

A list of what helped me to overcome shyness

1. Getting professional help: 1984
2. Learning about personality types
3. Developing self-confidence
4. Learning to be warm and to like, respect and forgive myself
5. Learning about creativity 1990's directing Danforth Gallery
6. Learning to relax and be in the now with people
7. Learning how to make friends and to broach my pain
8. Learning to speak-up in everyday conversation
9. Learning self-expression
10. Learning my passion
11. Learning I am not different, thanks to Carl Jung

It should not be at all surprising that shy people don't speak up about their problems, but if they could, their most important message would be that shyness is a 24/7 hour affliction that has little in common with the shy feeling most people experience every once in a while, maybe at a party.

Approximately one in ten people suffer from persistent shyness and no health insurance plan covers treatment for it. My goal is to have severe shyness recognized as a medical condition that requires attention.

Recently many public venues have discussed characteristics of shyness, and while they are done by well-meaning persons, they are by professionals who do not personally suffer from severe shyness, and they don't seem to quite get it. A good example is the front cover article in a 2012 *Time* magazine.

The article is called "The Power of (shyness)" sic — the use of parenthesis in the title is perplexing, but it is chilling for the shy person to see the title because most of them are painfully aware they have little to no power. The image on the cover under the questionable title is of a small boy uneasily glancing outward, holding a mega horn by his side. Once shy readers read the article, it becomes even more uncomfortable for them to discover that it's about professionals who chiefly discuss introverts, and that the shy boy on the cover with the mega horn doesn't get to use it after all.

Mostly self-directed, I forced myself to overcome lifelong shyness during a twenty year process, doing much of it as the director of Danforth Gallery in Portland where I spent a lot of time being with hundreds of interesting and creative artists, several businesses and the public. Then for nine years I wrote *Brave, a Memoir of Overcoming Shyness*, itself an exercise in being comfortable with others and with myself.

Today I'm completely free of shyness. I now am able to employ all the energy I formerly expended on feeling uncomfortable around people to enjoy people, society and life. Gone are the harmful emotions of hurt, anger (self-directed anger because I couldn't speak –up), resentfulness (why me?), sadness, depression and loneliness. Shyness ought to be cured like any other affliction in order to lead meaningful, valuable and rewarding lives.

In 2001, I began *Brave* with the following that I called the "Curse of Shyness." Nine hundred pages, lots of editing and thirteen years later, it seems appropriate to include it, just the way I wrote it then, as the ending of this publication, to serve as an admonition that severe shyness must be overcome.

The Curse of Shyness

Being shy was like living in a cell with little air, no windows, no color, and no hope. My made-up fears flashed on a scary blank wall. No one else knew about it, and I was aware that I was too fearful to describe it to others. I knew it was my solitary phenomenon, my predicament, my fate. I did not know how to analyze why I had it, or where it had come from.

My parents would have helped had they known what was happening, but they did not. I didn't get assistance and time went on. I felt as if everything about me was frozen except for time, and I was thankful for it because at least it moved and varied the pressure. Times changed, locations changed, people changed, but my walls remained. I didn't get out. Then, after many attempts to be brave, a small window appeared! I got my first glimpse of sunlight, took a tiny breath of fresh air, and stood up a little straighter. I felt a slight bit in charge of myself and then crashed back into my cell. Again and again, a hundred times over, I tried to break out.

Fear of expressing myself kept me from being genuinely close with anyone and I was lonely. How many times I reproached myself for my shortcomings! I felt less than whole, like an aberration in the total scheme of things; nobody knew me simply because I was incapable of speaking up! It hurt while I was with people, and sometimes it hurt when I was alone. I was uncomfortable in school and in all social gatherings. The pain of shyness disrupted my entire learning and growth processes, slowing them down and stealing the joy that others around me seemed to experience.

Over time the walls became smaller, especially after I was rocked by an emotional confrontation at age forty-two and sought professional advice. By age fifty-two I could enjoy the full light of day, fill my lungs with air, think freely, and understand my strengths as well as my weaknesses. I learned to like myself, to give and receive the warmth of others, and, now at sixty-two, I have not slipped into the cell of shyness for five years.

There should be no shame in being shy! But no one talked with me about it, and I felt very ashamed. It goes without saying that because of the very problem itself, I could not initiate a dialogue about it to get help. Please bear in mind: modest shyness is one thing, but severe and persistent shyness is what I'm describing.

Some people express an aversion toward people who are quiet. My worst encounter with this took place when I was twelve, and a cousin at my grandmother's accused me of being the quietest and most boring person he had ever met. He was but a teenager, and may not have known better.

In his book, *Inner Works*, psychologist Robert Johnson, author of several books on the unconscious, refers to the awkward feeling one can have when he or she becomes "stuck" at a social gathering with a shy person. Apparently, it is still okay for authors to write about being "stuck" with a shy person. Is there a widespread prejudice that permits them to make negative remarks about a shy person that they probably wouldn't dare make about someone from an ethnic, racial or oppressed group?

List of Resources

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*

Lynne Henderson, *Improving Social Confidence and Reducing Shyness Using Compassion Focused Therapy*

Carl Jung, *Psychological Types*

Don Richard Riso, *Enneagram Transformations*

Helen Rivas-Rose, *Brave: A Painfully Shy Life*

Lenore Thomson, *Personality Type: An Owner's Manual, A Practical Guide to Understanding Yourself and Others Through Typology*

Phil Zimbardo, *Shyness: What It Is, What To Do About It*