

# Social Anxiety

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Being Comfortable  
in Your Own Skin

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Gary is single. He has never dated. He is perceived to be quiet and somewhat of a loner. While he was growing up, his parents always explained Gary's awkwardness with strangers by telling them that he was shy. "He's shy" was the explanation that became Gary's identity and his burden.

Gary hated school. He assumed that other kids would think he was boring, so he kept to himself. Lunchtime was the worst. Sitting alone, eating his homemade peanut butter sandwich, Gary would look around at the other kids sitting with their friends. It felt to Gary as if he sat in the center of a spotlight that highlighted his aloneness. Gary was so miserable that he frequently had stomachaches and begged to stay home.

After graduation, Gary got a job at a local retail store during the busy Christmas season. The company needed employees so desperately that basically all Gary had to do to be hired was turn in his application.

Trained to work as a cashier, Gary hates his job. As he passes the barcodes over the scanner, he keeps his eyes averted from the customers. On the few occasions he has looked up, he has read condemnation in their eyes. He feels that the customers are always looking at him, thinking he's too slow. If Gary makes a mistake while ringing up an order, he is often so embarrassed that he makes himself sick and is unable to work the next day.

On his lunch break at work, Gary feels like he's back in school. The other employees seem to enjoy eating and socializing while Gary eats alone. In his mind he rehearses joining in their conversations. He would love to be part of the group, but his parents' explanatory label—"He's shy"—begins to grip his heart. Controlled by fear, Gary sits by himself, convinced that no one would want to be friends with someone who is shy. Gary wishes he could learn to be comfortable in his own skin.

Sandra also struggles with social anxiety. She is a quiet young woman studying to become an attorney. She was a good student all through high school and college, always at the top of her class. She did well in her law school classes too, but she is struggling with the knowledge that she will have to pass trial law in order to graduate. As part of that curriculum students must present opening statements, examine and cross-examine witnesses, and give closing arguments in mock trial situations in front of their professors and fellow students.

Sandra wants to be a lawyer, but she doesn't think she can make it through trial law with her social anxiety. She is convinced that she will forget what she wants to say and that her professors and classmates will think she is stupid and inadequate. She imagines the group talking behind her back about her performance in the mock trial situations. Sandra is seriously considering dropping

out of law school. Sandra longs to be comfortable in her own skin, but she has almost given up hope.

## **Do You Fear?**

Are you afraid of:

- talking on the telephone?
- participating in small groups?
- eating or drinking in public places?
- talking to people in authority?
- giving a talk or report in front of a group?
- attending social events?
- working while being observed?
- speaking at a meeting?
- writing while being observed (e.g., signing a check, filling out a form)?
- interacting with clerks at the bank, grocery, dry cleaners, etc.?
- using a public restroom?
- entering a room when others are already seated?
- being the center of attention?
- expressing disagreement or disapproval to people you don't know well?
- making eye contact with people you don't know well?
- buying or returning items at department stores?
- giving a party?

- resisting a high-pressure salesperson?
- dealing with doctors' offices?
- attending church?
- dating?
- expressing your opinion?
- performing, such as playing a musical instrument or taking a test?<sup>1</sup>

If you answered “Yes” to a number of these, you probably consider yourself shy and might be labeled with social anxiety.

### **What Is Social Anxiety?**

Social anxiety refers to the tendency to be nervous, uncomfortable, or fearful in social situations, usually because of a fear about doing something embarrassing or foolish, making a bad impression, or being judged negatively by others.<sup>2</sup> It may be situation-specific (occurring only at work or only in social situations) or generalized. It can range in intensity from manageable to overwhelming. Social anxiety often comes with physical symptoms such as a racing heart, blushing, nausea, or poor concentration. In this minibook, we'll consider shyness and social anxiety as different ends of a continuum. The more intense the struggle, the more likely the label will be social anxiety.

## Fear

Fear can paralyze us. It paralyzed Cindy, who turned down repeated offers of a promotion at work because they involved running staff meetings. The job would have meant a significant salary increase much needed by this single mom, but Cindy turned down each promotion because she was terrified of speaking in front of people.

Cindy eventually left her job without ever taking the promotion—a sad ending to her story. But God promises his children that he hasn't given us a spirit of fear (2 Timothy 1:7). If that's true, there must be a way to get beyond fear. There must be hope for all the Cindys of the world. There must be hope for you. Fear has destroyed many lives, but yours does not have to be one of them.

If you identify with Cindy, Sandra, or Gary, most likely your fear of being judged by others has caused you to erect a fortress of emotional protection around yourself to keep rejection at bay. But most likely you've also discovered that what's inside your fortress isn't all that pleasant either. You've built a wall around a heart filled with loneliness, fear, hurtful memories, insecurity, and pain.

As you look inside your heart, maybe you wonder why you would want to build walls to protect all the stuff inside it. In fact, there are times when it seems like everything good is actually *outside* the fortress walls.

Nevertheless, your heart is vulnerable and tender. You are unwilling to risk being condemned by others so you hide behind your walls, afraid to trust anyone but yourself. You are the only one you feel safe with; the only one you have confidence in is yourself. But this is a bit ironic since self-confidence seems to be the very thing you lack in social situations.

Proverbs 29:25 says, “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.” Proverbs also teaches us that trusting in ourselves is foolish (Proverbs 28:26). So, as we search for solutions to the problem of shyness and social anxiety, we’re not looking for a new way to boost our self-confidence. Our safety will come from trusting in the Lord.

### **Trust in the Lord**

The safety you long for comes through trusting in the Lord. This is what he is like:

- He does no wrong (Deuteronomy 32:4).
- He is faithful to every promise he has made (Psalm 145:13).
- He spoke and it came to be (Psalm 33:9).
- He upholds the cause of the oppressed (Psalm 146:7).
- Wealth and honor come from him (1 Chronicles 29:12).

- He is merciful; he will not abandon those he loves (Deuteronomy 4:31).
- Everything in heaven and earth is his (1 Chronicles 29:11).
- His plans stand firm forever (Psalm 33:11).
- His works are perfect; all his ways are just (Deuteronomy 32:4).
- He is loving toward all he has made (Psalm 145:13).
- He satisfies the desires of every living thing (Psalm 145:16).
- He uses other people's evil for good (Genesis 50:20).
- He gives grace for trials (2 Corinthians 12:9).

This trustworthy, loving, all-powerful God invites *you* into fellowship through his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9). Don't worry about being rejected by him. Jesus says he will *never* drive away those who come to him (John 6:37). Don't be afraid that you will be condemned. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

We accept God's invitation to have a relationship with him by confessing our sins and trusting in Jesus' death on the cross to pay the penalty for all our sins. When we claim Christ as our Savior and Master, we enter a beautiful relationship that will last for all eternity. You will never be separated from his love

(Romans 8:38–39). He goes before you and holds you up by your right hand (Psalm 63:8; 73:23). He will strengthen and help you (Isaiah 41:10). You become his friend (John 15:9–17). You may have failed in every other relationship, but Jesus promises you a relationship with him without rejection or condemnation.

### **Lean Not on Your Own Understanding**

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).

As a shy person, you’ve been living life according to your own understanding. According to your understanding, it has been best to try to protect yourself from the negative opinions of others. According to your understanding, it has been best to stay within the emotional fortress you’ve erected. According to your understanding, it has been best to avoid any condemnation from those around you. And according to your understanding, it has been best not to be criticized or put down.

But the Bible counsels us, “Lean not on your own understanding.” God has called you into relationship with him. You can absolutely trust him.

God tells us that sin is the cause of the estrangement, isolation, fear, distrust, and insecurity that are so painful in human relationships. But Christ reversed the impact of man’s sin. Through his death on the cross,