Dear Alice,

I'm a graduate student who is still trying to cope with shyness. I have extreme difficulty talking to people—even to people I see and work with everyday. I know making friends takes time and patience, but I seem to be at a loss as to how to develop acquaintances too. I've always been antisocial, but I never wanted to be. Who does, right? But I just don't know how not to be.

I'm studying a profession that requires a lot of personal communication; so, it's making me nervous and depressed whenever I can't overcome my introvertedness. But it's not my career that worries me the most. I sense my emotional well-being deteriorating every time I feel myself lost around others. Is there anything I can do to overcome shyness? I've been reading articles about the antidepressant drug Prozac and its success on passive people?should I consider it? Or are there places I can go for therapy? Thanks.

-Want to break out of the shell!

Answer

Dear Want to break out of the shell!,

You are not alone in feeling shy?although it may feel that way sometimes. Shyness is a difficult concept to define, but rest assured, millions of people experience it all around the world. Shyness seems to be a form of social anxiety, where a person may experience a range of feelings from mild anxiety in the presence of others to a pronounced anxiety disorder. For shy people, it is anxiety producing to have to interact with others at all, and at the same time, the loneliness of limited relationships can be profoundly painful.

One way to describe shy individuals is that they are absorbed in themselves, worried about the effect they have on others and about how others feel about them. They become so absorbed in their own discomfort and feelings of inadequacy that they cannot focus on or feel toward others. This cycle further isolates shy people from the mainstream of warm, giving relationships, and exacerbates their loneliness and shyness.

The word "shy" can be used loosely in everyday conversation, and it's important to remember that people who may seem shy don't always have social problems. Everyone can be shy in certain situations they find uncomfortable. Also, some people are naturally quieter than others and prefer to interact with small groups of people. Shyness isn't necessarily a problem, but it
sounds as though it's become a problem for you. Regardless of whether you're loud or quiet, outgoing or reserved, you deserve to feel good about yourself.

Since shyness is now being recognized as a real social problem, there is considerable research being conducted toward identifying ways to help shy people. Shyness clinics incorporate methods of treatment ranging from building social and cognitive skills, to assertiveness training, techniques to reduce anxiety, and systematic desensitization. You may always be a little shy, but with professional help, you can learn behavior that will benefit your professional and personal life.

Plenty of resources are available to help you get there. Rather than using Prozac as a first step, you might first try your school or local counseling service. You've taken a big step by asking this question. Keep in mind that therapy could be a helpful option; and that if you're not sure how to start the conversation, your counselor will be able to begin the process. Lots of luck!

Alice!
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Emotional Health
Communication Concerns

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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)

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