

Shyness, Performance Anxiety, & Stage Freight

“Let me never be put to shame”

The Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation
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INTRODUCTION:

“**Social Anxiety Disorder**” and “**Social Phobia**” are two interchangeable diagnostic labels. Although they sound distinct, they both refer to the same struggle. Do not be put off by these clinical labels. They describe something that is quite common, but largely misunderstood and approached superficially.

Social Anxiety Defined: social anxiety is feeling nervous, fearful, and physically tense in situations that involve other people. (Every one of us can identify on some level with this experience.)

----- Spectrum -----

(from) being mildly Shy and Inhibited in new and unfamiliar settings

(to) a Pronounced and persistent and debilitating fear in just about **EVERY** social & performance situation.

Clarifying Question: Is Stage Freight/Performance Anxiety **essentially** (by nature) **different** than being Shy or Socially Anxious?

No: qualitatively and experientially they’re the same.

- A person who hates public speaking shares the same feelings and fears that a person who’s socially anxious/shy.
- **Performance Anxiety** (public speaking, playing an instrument, etc.) occurs in more specific and isolated context. [Some would say these specific phobias are symbolic of deeper and more pervasive social fears that are walled-off into certain activities.]
- **Social Anxiety** is more pervasive and diffuse and experienced in daily social situations.
- By nature...these struggles are all on the same spectrum.
- Therefore, we will be addressing this entire range of social & performance fears.

Consider this **Help & Hope** podcast inquiry (received spring 2012 to CCEF’s Website):

“Dear CCEF,

In social situations I feel painfully shy. Even if I want and try to open up to and be considerate of others, I can't help feeling this way and thus I always feel defensive when interacting with people. I can force myself to try to interact and speak to others, but it is forced and never out of a type of freedom or of enjoyment of the other person. How can I love and enjoy people when I constantly feel negatively scrutinized? Are these thoughts and feelings always supposed to be there? What does faith look like in my situation?”

Overview: This workshop is a basic orientation to social anxiety.

- 1) We'll attempt to describe the experience of someone who struggles with social anxiety.
- 2) We'll look at the underlying desires driving this struggle.
- 3) We'll discuss a commonly overlooked and unspoken experience that relates to self-esteem and insecurity.
- 4) We'll consider two helpful and orienting metaphors while emphasizing preparation and a game plan.

Contemplate: Being a Christian does not immunize us from this difficult struggle.

- God graciously & mercifully uses this struggle to remake us in Christ's likeness.
- This is part of the “*no good thing will God withhold*” for those he loves.

Section 1 (of 4)

The Experience: A Reflexive Fear of Humiliation And Despising the Shame

Experiential Question: What's it feel like for this person?

- A distinct, relentless, and reflexive fear of social and performance situations.
- Nearly automatic and instinctive: one's autonomic arousal is jump-started. (sweating, flushed, sick to their stomachs, racing heartbeat)
- Similar to a **panic attack**.
- This occurs moments, hours, or even days/weeks before the situation actually begins.

Example of man who prays in private...but never out loud in public.

William Cowper Example: (18th Century Christian poet and hymn writer) Suffered from extreme social anxiety. Read his description of what it's like. (from William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century by Gilbert Thomas, 1948):

*“Those whose spirits are formed like mine, to whom a **public exhibition of themselves**, on any occasion, is **mortal poison**, may have some idea of...my situation; others can have none.”*

Before his oral exam:

*“Every day, ‘for more than half a year together,’ [my] feelings were those ‘of a man when he **arrives at the place of execution.**”*

Key principle: We must take seriously a person’s anticipatory distress. The anticipation of social and performance situations is dreadful--like “*mortal poison*.” People either avoid these opportunities altogether or endure them with great distress.

Big Question: Why are social and performance situations so highly distressing?

Temperamentally (personality/disposition):

- Highly sensitive to stimuli.
- Many are introverts who quickly become emotionally flooded.
- Performance is compromised b/c they are overwhelmed.
- Teaching social skills is typically not necessary (although giving a few tools to use in specific contexts *may* be helpful).

Psychologically: The heart and mind in are active and noisy.

- Fearing and anticipating being sized up, judged, and negatively scrutinized by people I want to make a good impression on.
- Expectation: that I may appear dumb, unattractive, foolish, etc. Essentially the noise within (the dreadful anticipation) is a **fear of acting in a way that embarrasses or humiliates myself.**

Key Insight

Think of this as the “**Pre-mortem Analysis**”: Failing to make a good impression or humiliating myself is the anticipated and feared death. One’s name and reputation and identity are on the line.

Acknowledge Reality:

- Please do not overlook that we live in a dangerous & threatening world. You will be judged by those around you.

- We have **good reason** to be socially fearful.
- **But** Jesus shows us that it **makes more sense** and it is possible to **endure** and **ignore** this social anxiety (without having a nervous breakdown).

Hebrews 12: All of these faithful believers (described in chapter 11) personally knew shame and social reproach.

“²Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

The Pathway: It all starts as we set the eyes of our heart on something other than what’s going on inside physiologically or on what we fear socially. We must put our eyes only on Jesus.

Notice:

- Scripture does **NOT** lead us to focus merely on irrational beliefs about the danger of social situations.
- Remember, people are not safe.
- The pathway is relational...not solely cognitive.
- Jesus was weak and tempted even in this way—with the same temptations that I struggle with in social anxiety.
- Jesus was afflicted in the same ways that I am.

The Task: A Poem, in Six Books (1785): (*The Timepiece*) A poem by William Cowper:

*I was a stricken deer, that left the herd
 Long since; with many an arrow deep infix
 My panting side was charg’d, when I withdrew
 To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
 There was I found by one who had himself
Been hurt by th’ archers. In his side he bore,
 And in his hands and feet, the cruel scars.
 With gentle force soliciting the darts,
 He drew them forth, and heal’d, and bade me live.*

Cowper poetically describes how he saw that Jesus was hurt by people in the same ways that he was. Jesus has the mortal scars of being reproached, despised, and rejected.

Key Insight

- We who struggle with social anxiety fear humiliation and shame.
- Jesus experienced the **ultimate humiliation** and **shame**.
- It’s this Jesus to whom we look for help, comfort, and grace.

Historical Context: What is “the cross” that Hebrews refers to?

Hebrews 12:2c

“Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.”

Crucifixion represented a person’s utmost shame and humiliation.

- The power of a crucifixion was in the public display of a naked victim in a prominent place where all would see and despise the person and what he’d done.
- The felon was on display to be examined and judged and reproached.

Two Critical Questions:

1. **How does Jesus knowingly walk toward the shame and humiliation of the cross?**
2. **What does “*despising the shame*” mean?**

“*Despising shame*” means to be unmoved by shame...to ignore humiliation. The goal is to move in faithfulness in spite of a fear of shame and humiliation. The fear of shame still hurts, but becomes “background noise” that we can ignore.

Despising shame, in the same way that Jesus does, is one of the greatest gifts and fruits of the Spirit.

Key Insight

- So **growth** will look like a person **accepting** and **tolerating** a degree of anxiety while continuing to move towards people and social situations faithfully.

Section 2 (of 4)

Negative Scrutiny/Evaluation vs. Pleasing & Praise

At the Root of Social Anxiety: the heart of social fear is a pervasive yearning both to please others and to be praised by them.

Key Insight

Consider that the “fear of man” actually **imitates** and **corrupts** a good and childlike desire within each of us for an ultimate reward (a final & eternal honor).

The Answer: The *joy set before* Jesus is his Father’s honor and praise. It’s in seeking honor from his heavenly Father that Jesus is able to *despise the shame* of and endure the cross.

C.S. Lewis describes the innate desire to seek God’s praise. **The Weight of Glory** (THEOLOGY, November, 1941)

“[In] fact the most humblest, the most childlike, the most creaturely of pleasures...[the] specific pleasure of the inferior: the pleasure a beast before men, a child before its father, a pupil before his teacher, a creature before its Creator.”

We were created for praise—to find approval with God and to hear his commendation.

- The servant in the Parable of the Talents hears, “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*” (Matthew 25:21 & 23)
- Jesus hears at his baptism, “*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*”
- **Childlike Faith:** every child delights in being praised by his/her parents.

[PK] Promise Keepers® example: “*Fathers, turn to your sons and tell them how proud you are of them.*”

The Key: Jesus so treasures and sets his eyes on his Father’s evaluation of him and therefore is able to “count as small” how others evaluate him.

- **Faith** expresses itself in seeking and receiving praise & honor in God’s eyes, not in pining after and achieving praise in people’s eyes.
- This praise from God does not vainly turn us in on ourselves or infect us with the **poison of self-admiration**. For we are not capable of pleasing God **without God**. If we please our Father whom we were created to please—then it must be his doing.
- There is a holy satisfaction that turns any success back to praise and gratitude because “*if God is satisfied with the what we’ve done, then we may be satisfied as well*” (The Weight of Glory).
- **Repentance** then is turning from fearing the negative scrutiny of people and turning from seeking to please and to be praised by those around me.

Jesus’ Jaw-dropping Question:

“How can you believe, when you receive praise and glory from one another and do not seek the praise & glory that comes from the only God?” (John 5:44)

Jesus pins us to the mat.

As long as we are oriented by seeking to be something and someone in the eyes of one another we do not have the love of God within us...but rather self-love.

Jesus Nuances His Question:

“For they loved the praise and glory that comes from man more than the praise and glory that comes from God.” (John 12:43)

Jesus nails the root of social anxiety: a love of praise and glory from people more than from God our Creator. We must break and re-break this idol every day.

Section 3 (of 4)

Inadequacy & Insecurity vs. Self-Forgetfulness & Humility

The Other Root: insecurity and low self-esteem

- The Primary Goal in all social anxiety is to protect self-esteem.

Key Insight

Consider a quotation from What You Must Think Of Me: A firsthand account of one teenager's experience with social anxiety disorder (2007):

*“Many books about social anxiety disorder cover only the prettier aspects of the condition. Many selectively disregard its less discussed, more painful, even embarrassing side. Yet the problem runs deeper than the racing heart, gurgling stomach, shortness of breath, and avoidance of social interaction. Social anxiety has **everything to do with** extreme self-doubt, insecurity, and even a dislike of oneself that doesn't go away.”*

Growth and change in this struggle will be elusive if we avoid this part of the of social anxiety experience.

“Seven Deadly Sins”

(Sources or the Roots that lead to every other sin)

1. WRATH
2. GREED
3. SLOTH
- 4. PRIDE**
5. LUST
6. ENVY
7. GLUTTONY

The essence or the very nature of pride is **competitive** and **comparative**.

- Pride's not satisfied with what it has but only if it has more than the next person.
- It takes pleasure in being above others in a certain area.
- When pride is thwarted, despair, insecurity, and inadequacy follow.
- Staircase of Sand metaphor
- The *Alice In Wonderland Syndrome* (David Powlison): Alice is never quite the right size: she's either too small or too big.

- Pride either makes us too big, puffed up, and bloated—and looking down on people, or too small, deflated, crushed—and being intimidated by people.
- Pride makes people into rivals, competitors, and enemies, not peers, friends, or siblings.

For someone who struggles with social anxiety, **comparisons and measurements are constantly occurring** in social contexts. And what's at stake is a person's self-esteem.

Key Insight

Is raising my self-esteem the solution?

- No. No matter how many times we hear that self-esteem is the answer, it doesn't make it true. If we raise our self-esteem, we may be worse off than when we started.
- Scripturally, we never see a self-esteem emphasis or direction.

God addresses our low self-esteem (and he does so in a beautifully surprising and disarming manner)

Deuteronomy 7:6-8:

“⁶The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers...”

God does NOT approach low self-esteem the way we would.

He does NOT say:

- “I don't make junk.”
- “You need to stop being so rough on yourself and value yourself more.”

Rather, he completely takes the focus off of OUR worthiness and our abilities and places it squarely on HIS character and loving faithfulness.

- He has a heart for the unworthy
- He is faithful to his promise to Another.
- He sets his love on US.
- He is love.
- Mephibosheth example (Jonathan's son: see 1 Samuel 20:42 & 2 Samuel 9)

Jeremiah 9:23 (One of Paul's favorite passages)

“²³Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches.”

“Boast in”: to praise or glory within yourself (that which gives you inner confidence).

- Jeremiah warns us from finding this confidence within or based on anything to do with ourselves.
- **Self-admiration is poison.** It over-inflates our self-worth. And it never lasts.

For someone who struggles with social anxiety, no matter how well a conversation or performance goes—it NEVER LASTS. Each new moment and every new day we start over from ground zero. And every new interaction and performance has the ability to deflate—to humiliate—absolutely to erase past successes.

- On stage each day
- On trial every day

It never satisfies—never ends.

Freedom is found in humility (self-forgetfulness not self-esteem)

This is where true lies—not in high self-esteem which is pride. Humility frees us from obsessing with ourselves.

- Someone who struggles with social anxiety is turned in on himself.
- Freedom comes as one’s ego fades, becoming a non-issue, and grows dim on the radar.

Key Insight

Listen to another quotation by C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity. How would you know when you’d met **a truly humble man**? He says:

“Probably all you will think about him...is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap...who took a real interest in what...you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”

Humility that brings us relief from our restless, noisy, and unhappy souls and frees us from the self-consciousness that we’ve known all our lives.

Confidence is found outside of ourselves: (Jeremiah 9:24)

“²⁴but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”

Question: What specifically about God do we boast/glory in?

- Our heavenly Father practices and delights in “steadfast **love, justice, and righteousness.**”
- **We see God’s love, justice, and righteousness most clearly in the cross of Jesus.**
- We glory in God’s faithful and sacrificial and perfect love for us.
- We delight in and boast in God’s love for us seen most clearly in Christ’s death on the cross.
- We glory in the reality that in and through Christ we are God’s treasured possessions. I receive by faith the **evaluation** and **verdict** that Christ earned and deserved. And Christ received the evaluation and verdict that my performance deserved. This is what we boast in. This is what we glory in.

1st Corinthians 1:26-31

“²⁶For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.””

Don’t miss Paul quoting Jeremiah 9.

- When we see ourselves rightly—as no bodies, we stop trying to seek worthiness and confidence and good feelings about ourselves from within.
- We can be content with our weaknesses/inadequacies.
- This is grace-esteem (a John Piper phrase)
- We expect, looking for, and hoping in God’s love and his Spirit’s help amidst my inadequacies. He will provide.
- Our inadequacies are God-given weaknesses with which the Holy Spirit lovingly uses to remakes us in Christ’s likeness and to protect us from pride.

Section 4 (of 4)

Avoidance vs. Moving Upward & Outward in Service and Stewardship

Big Question: What picture/metaphor can I hold on to as I enter difficult social and performance situations?

Paul helps us with two freeing metaphors in 1st Corinthians 4. Paul says, “This is how I see myself...and this is how I want you to see me.”

1st Corinthians 4:1-2

“¹This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ & stewards of the mysteries of God. ²Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.”

We must have a Game Plan going into social and performance situations.

- We don't know exactly what's going to happen in a certain context but we must be oriented/prepared.

Key Insight

“Servants of Christ”

- We have only one Master—Christ himself.
- The primary aim is to please one Person.
- We do not see ourselves as trying to win a popularity contest. There's just one Person's “Well done!” that we're seeking.
- Self-counsel: “In this particular venue...I'm not here to please my ego, to be the life of the party, or to earn anyone else's approval either. When I walk out of this social context...and evaluate the previous hour or so...what might it look like to receive God's praise? What would serve him and bring him pleasure in this specific context?”
- If I'm tempted to isolate or to disengage from and avoid others (being a spectator, hiding, avoiding, and distancing) I know whom I'm serving. I'm serving myself. (Proverbs 18:1)
- Serving Christ means moving towards and engaging others. Growth and bearing fruit amidst this struggle moves us toward the people around us—toward loving engagement—into humble, sacrificial love.
- Love and self-consciousness are like the sun and the moon—they're seldom seen together.
- “But I don't know what to say!” but “I can still move towards someone in affectionate-kindness.”

We must ask the right questions:

Psalm 122 has a simple but powerful final line that orients us to the right questions. It says,

“For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, **I will seek your good.**”

- What might to “seek your good” look like?...to seek the good of the people right in this room or in the coming social engagement?
- How do I bless and serve these people as a “servant of Christ?”

We have just one particular purpose/assignment: Stewardship

We are “stewards of the mysteries of God”—stewards of the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

- My task and responsibility is to be faithful to the Lord and to be found trustworthy and true to my Lord in what he has called me to do and be in this setting amidst my own weaknesses.
- The essential questions on my mind must be:
 - “What does it mean to be a good steward here—in weakness?”
 - What is faithful doing of duty?

Concluding E-MAIL:

“Dear Aaron,

I had a moment today during a committee meeting when I was tempted to withdraw and fade away into the background during a discussion. Being fairly new to this developing committee, I suddenly felt out of place. Feelings of inadequacy and comparisons started, and I could feel myself sitting back, wanting desperately to slide down in my chair.

But a stronger nudging wouldn’t let me. I had flashbacks to one of our conversations when you related how you told yourself (during a faculty meeting) “this is where God put you - so get in the game.” This memory was followed immediately by a verse from my devotions today about being tempted.

While it may seem minimal to some, I felt confident in a much different way. Confidence that wasn’t based on my ability but on being held – if that makes sense. I actually did sit back and let out a little sigh – truly sensing God’s presence. I am glad we had that conversation and thankful for God’s faithfulness.”

One Final Question: should we actually pursue experiences and opportunities where we will knowingly place ourselves in weak and possibly humiliating positions?

- Yes. God does and will call us to love and serve people in ways that open us up to being exposed and humiliated and negatively scrutinized.
- Jesus’ life included being despised, esteemed not, and shameful scrutiny. We walk the same path that Jesus walked.

- We are eternally grateful that Jesus cares more about loving us than guarding against humiliation.
- Jesus moved towards us at great cost even as we hid our face from him...despised him...and esteemed him not.
- If we shy away from these opportunities, we miss chances to please and receive honor from our heavenly Father. We exclude ourselves from and avoid growth. And we run away from doing the things that we ought to do that God calls us to do.

Our Father will send help to strengthen us...as he did to Jesus. We have the same Father who invites us to cast our anxieties on him because he cares for us. We must do this daily and before and in every social interaction.

One Final Comment: Overcoming social anxiety can be very difficult without help. It's an affliction that requires multiple and lifelong treatments. But it's a struggle that God's ordained for many of us. And what God ordains is always good. He graciously will use this to shape us in Christ's likeness until we see him face to face.

Recommended Resources on Social Anxiety:

Baker, Amy. *Shyness and Social Anxiety: When Relationships Are Major Hurdles*. Faith Resources, (2007).

Carson, D.A. *The Cross and Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians*, (2004), Baker Books.

Keller, Timothy. *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, (2012), 10Publishing.

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Powlison, David. "Peace, be still": *Learning Psalm 131 by Heart*. *The Journal Of Biblical Counseling*, (Spring 2000).

Powlison, David. *Worry: Pursuing a Better Path to Peace*, (2004), P&R Publishing.

Welch, Edward. *What Do You Think of Me? Why Do I Care?: Answers to the Big Questions of Life*, (2011), New Growth Press.

Welch, Edward. *When People Are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man*, (1997), P&R Publishing.

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