

Shyness and Networking

Many of us were reared with the cautious adage, “Don’t talk to strangers,” but some have taken this well-intentioned parental precaution for avoiding schoolyard stalkers too literally and in the process have curbed their prospects for career advancement. Studies have upheld that the majority of jobs that people hold have been obtained through networking, yet shy and introverted people suffer a sense of uneasiness when it comes to networking, particularly with persons they don’t know - strangers. So how does the introverted job seeker break away from his dependency on classified ads and on-line job boards and tap into this powerful tool called networking?



The Scream, by Edvard Munch

The first thing to understand is that you are in the majority, because only 7% of the world’s population claims they never feel shy. The other 93% suffer varying degrees of shyness, ranging from mild to acute. ¹

Low self-esteem contributes to shyness, so it is not uncommon for an unemployed job seeker to suffer from a temporary occurrence of mild shyness.

As with any other malady, bookshelves abound with volumes of self-help publications dealing with social phobias, so before reclining on a therapist’s couch do a little homework to establish the cause and extent of your shyness. While shyness is usually a complex mix of biology, upbringing, traumatic experiences, and other factors, temporary setbacks can trigger short-term spells of mild shyness. If you sense only a mild transitory degree of shyness, chances are you can coach yourself through job search networking events.

Two of the more popular therapies are cognitive and behavioral:

- Cognitive therapy teaches us to pay attention to our thoughts during fearful situations, and coaches us to challenge these thoughts to see if they fit the reality of the situation. Surprisingly, we find that in many cases they do not. Shy people are too self-critical and have a tendency to think that everyone else is just as focused on their negative qualities as they are, while in reality most people are not paying such strict attention to your every move. So when we realize that the thoughts causing our anxiety do not match the reality of the situation, cognitive therapy teaches us to substitute more realistic thoughts in their place.
- As its name implies, behavioral therapy aims to change our behavior using a program that positively reinforces desired behavior, and negatively reinforces undesired behavior. In other words, we learn to identify objectionable behavior and replace it with a healthier behavior.

But no one knows us better than ourselves. If you know that your bouts with shyness are not the result of your recent job loss and you believe you suffer from acute shyness, talk to your doctor about professional help. This article is not intended to cure reclusive job seekers through psychological therapy.

What this article will do is coach the timid job hunter through networking using a few simple tactics.

► Pamper Yourself

Do whatever makes you feel great. This could be a fresh manicure, new hairstyle, splashing on your favorite scent, or dressing sharply. If you feel good about yourself, this confident attitude will transfer openly and fluently in your networking efforts.

► Rehearse

Particularly practice your opening line. Often this is the biggest barrier, but once in a conversation, even introverted people start to open up and chat more freely and more comfortably.



Don't memorize; just know the gist of your opening line and let it flow naturally. Committing what you are going to say to memory can trigger a panic attack should you freeze trying to recall the next word.

Consider joining Toastmasters International. *"From a humble beginning in 1924 at the YMCA in Santa Ana, California, Toastmasters International has grown to become a world leader in helping people become more competent and comfortable in front of an audience. The nonprofit organization now has nearly 235,000 members in 11,700 clubs in 92 countries, offering a proven - and enjoyable! - way to practice and hone communication and leadership skills."*²

► Begin with One-on-One Networking

Gain comfort through one-on-one networking before tackling those large events with hundreds of people.

Start with people you know because you have a pre-established comfort level with them and chances are, they understand the timid side of your personality and will be more likely to help you crawl out of that shell.

As comfort builds, proceed to "cold calls," a euphemism for one-on-one networking with strangers. These should be people with whom you want to network because you feel they can be a resource to you, so approach purely it from that angle - ask for advice - don't ask for a job. They will know why you are there, but engaging in open dialogue about yourself and your career aspirations without coming right out and asking if they have or know of a job should make the conversation flow more smoothly.

If you are uncomfortable picking up the phone and calling someone directly to introduce yourself and ask for a meeting, leverage on-line networking sites to establish virtual connections first; you will feel more at ease reaching out for a networking meeting after a few on-line chats.

► Graduate to Group Networking

Practice group networking at social events first; better to fumble bashfully and work out your inhibitions at a local book club, church social, or a neighborhood wine tasting than at a large and important industry convention in your field.

Begin by attending small group networking events - choose a number of attendees with which you are comfortable. For some, this may be as small as 3 or 4, while other reticent souls can handle a room of 20.

As comfort builds, register for those huge events with hundreds and hundreds of people.

Bring a friend for the first one or two large networking events to help you ease into these events.

Be yourself; don't try to emulate the gregarious behavior of all the extroverts in the room - it will look artificial on you.

When standing near small cliques engaged in conversation, listen carefully for tidbits of shared interests; finding a common thread will help you ease into the discussion rather than winging it with a topic that is not your strong point.

If breaking into a group conversation is intimidating, work the room for one-on-one opportunities. Remember that only 7% of the world's population claims they never feel shy, so odds are in your favor that the other person may be feeling just as uncomfortable as you and will appreciate you breaking the ice.

Still feel uncomfortable approaching someone and introducing yourself? Don't be afraid to be the lonesome person standing on the sidelines - given enough time, someone will come over to you and introduce themselves.



Feel awkward standing off to the side by yourself? Many networking conferences deluge participants with tons of pamphlets - grab a few and make believe you are skimming the material. Before long, someone will stroll by and strike up a conversation.

Lastly, if everything fails - withdraw and recharge. Retreat to the restroom and wash your face and wrists with cold water. The cold will restore your biological balance and reduce overheating induced by stress, and your skin temperature will actually drop. Before leaving the restroom, practice deep breathing to increase the flow of oxygen in your body.

► Don't Rule Out Holistic And Homeopathic Stress Relievers

Curtail caffeine. Cortisol, commonly known as the stress hormone, increases blood pressure and blood sugar in response to stressful situations, and reduces the body's immune responses. The combination of caffeine and stress raises cortisol much higher than stress alone so curb your intake of coffee, tea, caffeinated soft drinks, and chocolate.

Get enough rest and sleep.

Eat healthy, well balanced meals. Deficiencies in vitamins B and C, or calcium and magnesium can stress your body, so diet accordingly or talk to your doctor about taking supplements.

Talk to your doctor also about relaxing herbs, such as Valerian or Kava Kava.

Consider aromatherapy, a technique that uses our body's sense of smell to boost our mood, relieve stress, and invigorate. Essential oils such as lavender, chamomile, frankincense, juniper and others are said to induce calming effects that counterbalance anxiety.

Practice deep breathing to assure your body gets enough oxygen.

Grab a mat and take up yoga; this 3,000 year old practice unites our mind, body and spirit, and induces relaxation.

Listen to soft music in a serene setting for a mind-soothing experience.

Exercise regularly.

Practice imagery or visualization techniques, i.e., learning how to allay stress by picturing a peaceful setting.

Draw on humor to lighten your tension.

▶ **Follow these Rules of the Road for Better Success**

- Never apologize. Shy and inexperienced networkers often apologize because don't think they are worth someone's time; they view networking as an imposition instead of relationship building.
- Say the other person's name a few times during the conversation, but not so frequently as to make them feel uncomfortable. Using the other person's name will make you begin to feel as if you really know him and he knows you.
- Don't give into the fear of rejection; you will encounter people who will refuse to meet with you. Don't take it personally - move onto the next contact on your list.

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1 Royane Real Publishing Company.

2 From Toastmasters International website. <http://www.toastmasters.org>.