



Strategies for the Shy

Most people feel anxious in at least some social situations, and as many as 50% of people surveyed will describe themselves as shy¹. And, let's face it, science has the reputation of a solitary field, and attracts more introverts than, say, social work. (In fact, many girls, when asked why they choose not to go into math or science, say these fields are not social enough²). Yet there is a social fabric to science, and the ability to interact with others, both casually and professionally, is critical to the work of a scientist and her enjoyment of it. This is true throughout one's career: it is as important for the head of a lab to step out of her office and interact with her students as it is for the student to approach and interact with her colleagues and potential mentors.

Even though a large fraction of people self-identify as shy, most are not obviously shy to others. Only extreme cases of shyness are visible as such, like in the unusual situation of someone who bows her head and avoids eye contact in conversation. The reticence that shy people feel is often misinterpreted as disinterest or arrogance.

Even for the shy, not every social interaction leads to anxiety. One can be perfectly comfortable giving seminars and speaking with people one-on-one, but feel awkward at a dinner party or other social engagement in group conversation. It is important to identify which situations make you anxious and to work out ways in which you can navigate those situations as comfortably as possible. Here are some approaches that can help the shy feel more comfortable and get more out of daily social interactions.

- **Set achievable goals.** If you are going to a meeting, it may be too much to ask yourself to meet everyone, but you can set yourself the goal of meeting two people a day. Knowing how you will enter and end the conversation will make this task even easier.

er. Ask if this is their first time at the meeting or how the meeting has changed since they first attended it. End by introducing your companion to someone else, or by excusing yourself to meet others, while voicing your interest in staying in touch (make sure to note their contact information). During the conversation, aim to learn something personal about them, so that the next time you meet them, you have a starting point for conversation. It helps to keep a list of meeting participants to jog your memory at some future occasion.

er. Ask if this is their first time at the meeting or how the meeting has changed since they first attended it. End by introducing your companion to someone else, or by excusing yourself to meet others, while voicing your interest in staying in touch (make sure to note their contact information). During the conversation, aim to learn something personal about them, so that the next time you meet them, you have a starting point for conversation. It helps to keep a list of meeting participants to jog your memory at some future occasion.

- **Come prepared.** Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to give a seminar once you have made the powerpoint presentation? While powerpoint may be overkill for personal interactions, there is nothing wrong with deciding in advance what to talk about, what questions you want to ask, and so on.

Attending a seminar with questions already in mind is a lot easier than figuring out what you want to ask during the seminar itself. Similarly, if you are on a job interview, think about possible points of mutual interest before arriving. The more you do your homework, the less spontaneous you have to be, and the more spontaneous you seem. This is true

for interactions with students at all levels.

- **Get practice.** There are numerous options for learning and practicing social skills. The career counseling office at your university may offer sessions on successful networking. Take advantage of courses that offer the opportunity to be videotaped giving seminars. Or join Toastmasters³, a nonprofit organization that teaches public speaking and leadership skills.

- **Take advantage of friends and mentors.** Ask them to critique mock interviews, listen to practice talks, and introduce you to someone you want to meet. The best friends

Let's face it, science has the reputation of a solitary field, and attracts more introverts than, say, social work.

The more you do your homework, the less spontaneous you have to be, and the more spontaneous you seem.

The reticence that shy people feel is often misinterpreted as disinterest or arrogance.

and mentors are those who offer constructive comments and not just reassure you. Help your mentor be forthcoming by inviting critical comments.

- **Act the part.** When people spend time in a foreign country, they can find that speaking a new language and being surrounded by people who don't know them allow them to take on a new, more gregarious persona. The brain is plastic, and the more you act a part, the more it will become a part of you.
- **Schedule time to speak with others.** If it is hard to just introduce yourself to other people at a meeting, arrange in advance to meet with them at specified times. This is a good strategy even for the extrovert.
- **Volunteer to lead.** It's common to feel like you have nothing to say at a large table of scientists. If you come to that table with an agenda (leading a group discussion, finding out about the goals of the students at the table), you will surprise yourself with your ability to carry the conversation forward. For those who have career experiences to share, the WICB networking lunch is a wonderful

place to practice being a "table leader".

- **It's not all about you.** If about half of the world describes itself as shy, then it is as likely as not that the person you are trying to talk to is having an equally hard time talking to you. Just as you are wondering what this person thinks of you, so too is she wondering what you think of her. If you can do something to make the other person feel at ease, you will feel easier, too.
- **Take time for yourself.** When you are self-conscious, interactions can be exhausting. Reward yourself with needed alone time, whether to curl up with a good book or to spend several hours at the microscope.
- **Smile.** It will help you relax and signal to others that you value the time they are spending with you. ■

—Vivian Siegel

¹ Are You Shy? B. Carducci, P. Zimbardo. *Psychology Today*, Nov/Dec 1995.

² Presented at the Society for Research in Child Development by J. Eccles, April 9, 2005.

³ www.toastmasters.org

Buy 3, Get 1 FREE!*

accu-jet[®] motorized pipette controller

- Provides smooth, intuitive meniscus control for cell culture applications.
- Integral check valve and filter protect instrument from aspirated liquids; exhaust port vents vapors.
- Lightweight and comfortable; 8-hour charge life at full speed.
- Dual mode switch permits both powered and gravity dispensing – simple soft blowout!

The accu-jet[®] pipette controller features continuously variable pipetting speed and precise meniscus control for 0.1-100mL pipettes. Pressure-sensitive triggers control pipetting speed, and prevent meniscus "jumping", even with low-volume pipettes. Available through leading lab dealers in blue (#2026510), yellow (#2026511), mint (#2026512), or gray (#2026506).

BRANDTECH
SCIENTIFIC, INC.

*Product & offer details at:
www.brandtech.com
Toll-free 888-522-2726

