



Social Anxiety: Is Everybody Really Looking at Me?

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Being in the Spotlight

With school starting again, it is inevitable (and normal) to be thinking about what we want for ourselves in this upcoming year of our lives. In tandem, we may often be thinking of how we want to make sure we present ourselves to the world. Worry thoughts about how we look and who we are can sometimes become pervasive as we wonder just how many people are going to judge and critique our every move. It is at these points that it becomes important to ask yourself just how true it is that everybody is actually looking at you.



There exists a phenomenon in the world of social psychology known as the **spotlight effect**. This phenomenon is normal and common, and is almost expected when an individual enters a new social arena. It occurs when within the mind of an individual, that person assumes that in a room of many, they are the focus of everyone's gaze and attention and that all eyes are on them. Often, this is at the root of social anxiety that kids and teens experience at normative times like the first day of school, walking into an assembly, getting onto the bus, or even arriving at a party. The mind shifts into overdrive and tells us that everyone is looking directly at us and

making judgement after judgement of each aspect of our being. The catch is this – it can't possibly be true.

Step back and think about this for just one more moment. If each person in the room is falling victim to the fallacy that everyone in there is looking at them, then the reality of the situation is that far less people are looking at you than you think, since everyone is actually more than likely focused on (you guessed it) themselves. Becoming aware of the fact that our minds can easily reach this illogical conclusion is the first step in allowing this interpretation of events to **not** be the one that you settle on.

Safety Behaviors Can Backfire

Understanding the impact that the spotlight effect has on our psychology is important. When we are unaware of the inaccuracy of the thoughts that our mind sometimes tells us, we are more likely to engage in behaviors that are intended to relieve some of the discomfort that the thoughts create, but that may very well actually perpetuate the very feelings we are trying to avoid.

Consider, for example, that your 15-year-old son walks into a party that he was invited to. He feels unsure about his choice of sneaker, and fears that everyone will stare at him and judge him for wearing them. He arrives at the party and thinks to himself, "Everyone here is staring at me. I'd better hide." To avoid a situation in which he may open himself up to judgement from others, he now lands himself in the corner of the room, leaning up against the wall while staring down at his phone to scroll through his social media feeds – this way, he doesn't have to make active eye contact with anyone and inherently feels more safe. Now, others begin to notice that he is not participating and is instead hiding in the corner, thus drawing more attention to himself and inviting judgement and critique. **The very behavior intended to avoid judgement is the one that invites it.** The reality of this situation is that if he had thrown himself into the mix

despite it feeling difficult to do so up front, he likely would have avoided the critique and attention of others, which is what he'd intended to do in the first place.

Doing Something About It

So what can we do to help us and our children not fall victim to the idea that the spotlight is always on them?

The answer is that we must know that it happens. Awareness of the phenomenon is the missing link in being able to challenge the irrationality the spotlight effect creates. Often, we think we must stop having a thought all together for us to be skilled at thinking differently – this simply isn't true. What is true is that the thought of being in the spotlight is going to occur. Accept that, and understand that it will present itself as it usually does. The new skill comes in knowing that it will be there, and being ready to challenge it with more reasonable and skillful thinking that pushes through to a different interpretation of events, rather than just acquiescing to the idea that everyone is noticing us all of the time.



Once we have become aware that we might be falling into one of these thinking traps, the next step is to actively decide what to do about it. For this, we need to know whether or not the feeling we are experiencing is worth paying mind to.

To decide whether or not a feeling is worth your attention, try and figure out whether it is both **understandable** (i.e. does it make sense to feel this way?) and **justified** (i.e. given the current circumstances, is there actually a reason to be feeling this?). In social situations, more than likely it is understandable to feel nervous or shy. It makes sense to feel this way – who wouldn't feel nervous on their first

day of school, or when walking into a party? However, it is likely that the feeling is not as justified as we think. Since the majority of people are likely also feeling this way, it would stand to reason that the circumstances don't really call for nerves.

A feeling that is understandable, though not justified, is a cue to **act opposite to the urge** you are experiencing. Our young 15-year-old at the party, for example, had the urge to *avoid*. He felt nervous and decided that everyone was judging him, so his mind told him to get to the corner and hide. This urge to avoid provided temporary relief, but actually might have been more socially damaging in the long run. If he had sorted his feeling out in this other way, he might have noticed that his feeling was understandable, though not really justified. In this case, the opposite of *avoid* is *approach*.

When you act opposite to an urge, you are more than likely to experience relief that is brought on by a different choice than the one you'd have otherwise made. Doing so can help to rewire the neuronal connections around why we automatically decide to do what we usually do, and can help open up other alternatives in future situations.

We can never guarantee that any situation will turn out perfectly even when making these new and different choices, though it certainly ups our chances. One thing is certain though – if nothing changes, then nothing changes.

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