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### Struggling with Social Anxiety

Anytime I had to give a presentation for school, I would dread having to stand at the front of the room with thirty-something pairs of eyes staring and judging me. From the moment I found out I would have to present I would think of every horrible, mean thing each person would think or say about me. After exhaustively overthinking everything, I would stand up and head to the front of the classroom. I started to sweat, my hearts racing, hands shake. To the full class I'm sure I looked silly bright red and trembling. I tried to lock in on an object at the back of class to avoid eye contact with my peers. It is not uncommon for people to dislike public speaking like I do, however the physiological reaction that social anxiety causes when interacting with normal social environments is beyond simply not liking something. I have dealt with this anxiety all my life and often feel like I am missing important parts of life while feeling paralyzed. I hope to highlight some misconceptions about dealing with social anxiety as well as unrealized advantages. I hope by the end of this essay you will have a different perspective on people who struggle with an anxiety disorder.

When people see me, they probably assume I am shy, a loner, introverted, or just a rude person. I almost always have headphones in whenever I leave my apartment. I use them as a barrier against social interactions, or to avoid the feelings of fear and worthlessness that come with every exchange I have. Therefore, people who don't understand my reasons may think I am ignoring them. While at a local restaurant where I worked one day, I completed my ritual of putting in my headphones for the walk from my car to my station where I passed a few coworkers on my way in. I was later told that they were trying to speak to me, and I did not respond. This caused my coworkers to think I was ignoring them, and they assumed I was rude. I really liked everyone I worked with, and I always tried to socialize with them and build relationships. I would struggle to be successful with this because I always assume people do not like me. In a way it became a self-fulfilling prophecy as I tried to build relationships and fail, due to self-doubt so I stopped trying altogether. From my experience, people make a lot of assumptions about me based on only a little information they have. If they took time to get to know me, it would be a lot different. They would find out most of their assumptions were wrong.

In Addition, many people don't understand that when dealing with anxiety I can't just get over it or shut it off. I am aware that it is an overreaction and I'm not in any danger, but my brain disagrees with that. I have had plenty of people explain to me that public speaking is not a big deal and nothing bad will happen, as if I was not fully aware of that fact. For example, I usually try to use drive throughs or mobile ordering if I get coffee to avoid uncomfortable situations. One day when out walking in the city, I stopped to get coffee at a local shop. Once I ordered a line started to form behind me and I immediately went into a fight or flight response. I have to try my best to stay calm while my mind races with terrible possibilities about what the people behind me are thinking or might say. Once I get my drink, I walk to the table where all the lids

are stored and try to find the right one. At this point, I am panicking so much that I must remember to breathe and think slowly to myself that everything is okay and I'm going to be fine. I always find it funny when someone tells me not to worry about what other people think or to ignore the feeling I have when I am struggling in a crowded space. They think that it is some great advice I somehow have gone my whole life never hearing or trying. I wish it were something easy I could just shut off, believe me I have tried, and it does not work.

In addition, I often feel that a large part of life is being missed when I struggle with anxiety. Socializing and social events are a large part of life that for many are the reason they get up every morning and what they look forward to. I do like to socialize and spend time with friends. It just takes me longer to feel comfortable around someone new. Social events are harder for me to be a part of. The more people that are around me, the more nervous I become. An example that happened recently to me was at a wedding for my brother that I attended. I was sitting at a corner table for most of it, dreading the upcoming interactions that would come with such a large guest list. Once the music started and people moved to the dance floor, I was pulled along to participate. I could tell everyone was having fun dancing to the music and several guests had transformed their ties into headbands. I wanted to join in and enjoy the dancing. I just could not turn off my brain and let it happen. I was stuck, unable to stop the thoughts of worrying and dread. I think about that moment and ones like it frequently as they make me feel like I am missing out on an important part of my life. I think it is important to give myself some grace and others that are dealing with similar things as it is not our fault these things happen.

In contrast, I do think that there is some upside to being the quiet one. I have a unique perspective on things and a chance to observe people before they get to know who I am. I often get a chance to learn about people before I meet them. At my job whenever I work with someone I have not met, I like to see how they act before I decide what kind of relationship I want with them. I will observe how they interact with patients and team members to see if they are professional and compassionate. I like to know more information about someone than they know about me. I have had to use this several times at my job to see how new coworkers interact with our community. I can usually tell who is there to work and genuinely help people, and those that want a paycheck and don't care about the people we are helping. For example, while training a new employee at my work I would stay quiet and let them speak and they ended up telling stories of other places where they worked and how he had abused his position and escalated situations. This helped me know this person would need a lot of help to change his mind set and be more compassionate.

I had a class in my junior year of high school filled with people I had classes with three years prior. One day our teacher put us in groups for a project and told us to get to work. Once I found my group and started the introductions it was my turn to introduce myself. I got halfway through my first sentence when one of my group mates let out a surprised exclamation then proclaimed that they thought I was mute. Everyone in my group agreed they had never heard me speak in the three years I was at the school. We all thought it was funny, and I explained I did not really enjoy talking to people I do not know and have difficulty meeting new people. I ended up talking to my group a lot after our project was done and they were some of my closest friends during the rest of my high school years. I know people do not understand what others are going

through unless you tell them; however, I hope some people can be more understanding of those with different struggles.