



I'M SCARED OF
MEETING NEW
PEOPLE



I'm scared of meeting new people

New people are pretty scary, aren't they?

The problem is you don't know them. They might be more intelligent, more witty and more wealthy than you.

You might have nothing to say to them, and they might think you're booooooring.

That's all very scary, isn't it?

Maybe not.

What to do

Change your mind

New people aren't scary, it's your thoughts about them that are.

Stop the buck

You're the only one that can do anything about your fear.

Step outside yourself

You're not alone. Up to 5% of people have a social phobia.

Accommodate the bullies

Don't let the voices in your head stop you.

Label your sensations

Don't overthink. Label, then move on.

Relax

Practice bodily awareness to help calm you down.

Speak out

Talk to strangers. Take the chance they think you're a bit weird.

Change your mind

Think about this radical idea: meeting new people is not scary. The only thing that's scary is what you think about meeting new people.

Sound familiar? It's an ancient Stoic philosophy, neatly expressed by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*:

"There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so".

This means that we attribute our feelings to external factors, but it's really only our own minds which have the power to distress us.

For example, take this common worry:

'I'm scared of meeting my sister's friends because they're always more successful than me'.

If we reworded this more Stoically it would sound something like:

'I'm scared of meeting my sister's friends because I think their success makes them better than me.'

See the difference? Their success has no bearing on the way you feel. It's your evaluation of their success that upsets you.

Stop the buck

Why is this a good thing?

Because although you can't control other people's success (or any of their traits for that matter), you can control your feelings about it.

Make a list of all of the things which scare you about meeting new people, then reword your list Stoically, by asking yourself what you think these scary things mean.

Here are a few more examples:

'I'm intimidated by friends of friends because I have nothing to wear' becomes 'I'm scared of meeting new people because I think they'll judge me if I don't look good'.

'I don't like meeting strangers because they ask me questions about myself' becomes 'I hate talking about myself when I meet new people.'

By rewording your self-defeating anxieties in this way, either mentally or on paper, you can begin to take responsibility for your own happiness.

Your experience of meeting new people will no longer be defined by who you meet, but by your own thoughts about those people and situations.

And no matter how uncomfortable that realisation feels at first, it's incredibly empowering once you get to grips with it.

Step outside yourself

In films people romp around nightclubs like puppies in a litter, and conduct locker room banter as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

But as many as 5% of people have full blown social phobia, let alone a little shyness, and that number increases within highly interactive environments.

In 2009, psychologists Graham Russell and Steve Shaw documented clinically significant levels of social anxiety in 10% of university students.

Not exactly the freshers-gone-wild story you're sold when you're 17, is it?

So, leave your preconceptions at home when heading out to meet newbies, because the chances are you'll have more in common with them than you think.

Accommodate the bullies

Whatever you do, don't shy away from meeting new people or you'll start a vicious cycle spinning.

The more you shirk this discomfort, the more your social skills will diminish, which will make meeting new people more daunting, and make you even more inclined to shirk the discomfort.

Rational psychologist Steve Hayes explains the cycle by conceptualising your thoughts as bullies or, more specifically, the drunken jerks at the back of the bus you're driving.

They're big and scary, and keep shouting directions at you, threatening to hurt you if you don't do what they say.

So that's exactly what you do, because you believe that something bad will happen if you don't.

But the more you do what the bullies say, the more confidence you give them, and the more they dictate how you live your life.

Unfortunately, you can't get rid of the jerks at the back of the bus. All you can do is take a risk and drive anyway. Next time you're scared about what might happen when you meet new people, make a mental note of a few things:

You're scared of the unsubstantiated threats of your bullying thoughts, not the situation.

You can't make the situation better by reassuring yourself that the threats aren't real. It doesn't work.

Accept that the thoughts might be true – people might think you're boring/ugly/stupid, and drive the bus anyway.

Label your sensations

'That's all well and good,' you might say, 'but what about the physical symptoms of fear? I feel paralysed by them sometimes'. You've got a point.

Tolerating fear is one thing, but its physical effects – shortness of breath, muscle tightening, nausea – are sometimes so powerful that all the cognitive stuff goes out the window.

Notice what happens when you start to feel anxious. Does your mind say things like, 'why am I breathing so fast?', 'I feel like my heart's going to explode', 'What if I faint?' These are common analyses we make about the physical sensations of anxiety, and they do nothing but perpetuate their unpleasantness.

Try simply labelling sensations as they arise. When you feel your heart thumping in your chest, say 'heart rate quickened'.

When you feel your palms moisten say 'palms sweating', etc.

By refusing to analyse them, explain them away, or assess their severity, and simply noticing and labelling them, you give unpleasant sensations space to be.

You won't necessarily improve them, but you also won't make them worse by exacerbating them with all your attention.

Relax

Those of you who feel the symptoms of social anxiety to be unbearable may benefit from some relaxation techniques.

One of our favourites is bodily awareness, which you can practice regularly at home as a means of focussing your mind on your body, rather than on the anxiety-inducing monologue inside your head.

Lie down or sit down.

Breathe easily and naturally. Don't concentrate too hard on trying to breathe a certain way.

Focus on your head, notice how it feels. Tense your temples and brows for five seconds. Notice how this feels. Then relax.

Bring your attention to your hands. How do they feel? Notice the sensations. Do the fingers feel heavy? Clench your fists and relax.

Try this with each part of your body, repeating the process of noticing, tensing and relaxing.

Once you've practiced a few times, you can shorten the exercise as you like and cut areas out as you see fit.

You can experiment in different environments: on the train, walking down the street, at the dinner table.

Eventually you'll be able to instinctively tap into this discreet form of relaxation when you most need it.

Speak out

With your new 'drive the bus' mentality and your relaxation techniques, you can start putting your tolerance of threatening thoughts into practice.

Start casually interacting with strangers: engage shop assistants in banal observations about the weather, say 'bless you' to sneezers, tell bartenders you like their shoes/accent/sideburns.

If this inconsequential wittering makes you anxious, that's just a bonus – it'll help you get used to the real-feeling but ultimately irrational fear of social interaction.

In Oliver Burkeman's book, *The Antidote*, which places much emphasis on accepting discomfort in your life rather than fleeing from it, Burkeman stares down his bullying thoughts in spectacular fashion.

While travelling during rush hour on London's Central Line (the city's busiest underground route) he shouts out the name of each station as the train pulls up. His palms are sweating and he's shaking, because he's terrified of what people will think of him.

Curiously, he finds that his fellow commuters hardly react at all. A few people cast quizzical glances, but that's about it. Having taken the risk that his bullying thoughts were true, and that something bad could have happened, he took the plunge and found their threats to be empty.

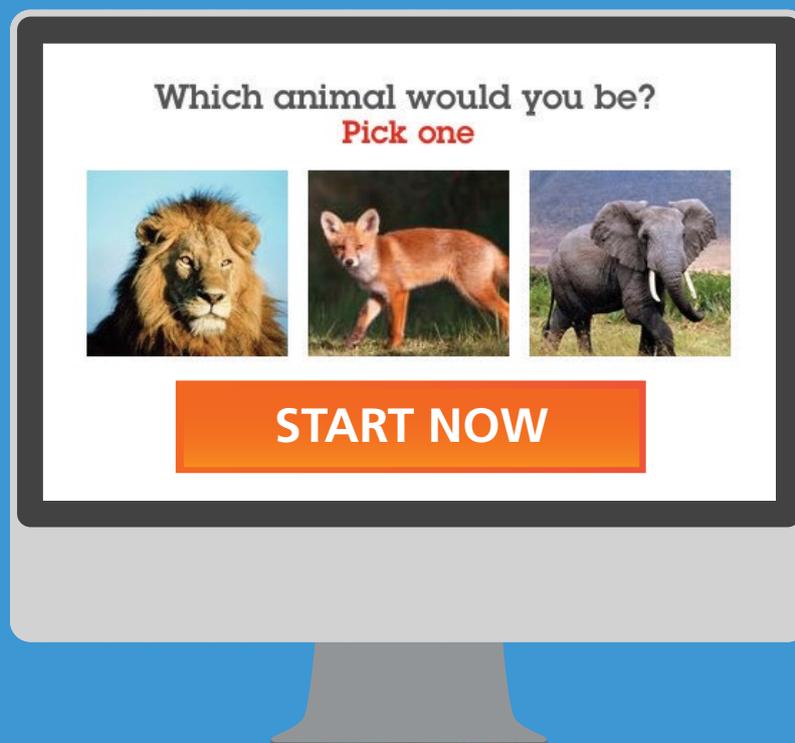
Make like Burkeman and wade into uncomfortable social situations, like a knight on horseback, and grit your teeth.

Sure it'll be difficult, but no-one ever learnt to play the guitar without shredding their fingers.

Continue your journey

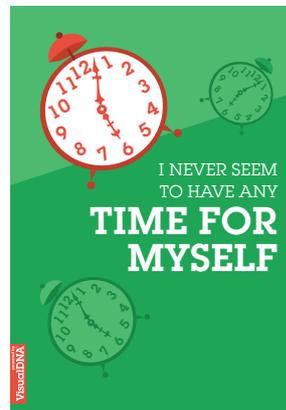
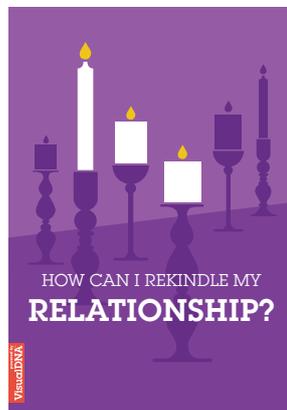
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