Chapter 6

Anxiety and Inhibition in Interpersonal Relations

Although the characteristics that describe the "well-adjusted" individual are always open to debate, few would argue that the ability to interact with others in a confident, skilled, and open manner is not among them. People who are not able to interact comfortably are at a distinct disadvantage as they go through life, being less likely to have rewarding interpersonal relationships and being plagued by anxiety and insecurity in their dealings with others.

Unfortunately, many people are troubled by feelings of social inadequacy. Although virtually everybody becomes nervous and uncertain in certain social situations, many people regularly find their interactions with others derailed by intense feelings of anxiety accompanied by a debilitating tendency to act in an inhibited, awkward, and reticent fashion. In fact, 40% of Americans label themselves as "shy," and 4% indicate that they feel shy almost all of the time (Zimbardo, 1977). Similarly, about a quarter of all college students report that they are uncomfortable dating or interacting with members of the other sex (Arkowitz, Hinton, Perl, & Himadi, 1978; Borkovec, Stone, O'Brien, & Kaloupek, 1974; Glass, Gottman, & Shmurak, 1976). Situations in which people speak before audiences are particularly likely to make them uncertain and anxious; the fear of public speaking is a very common fear (Bruskin Associates, 1973; Bryant & Trower, 1974; Geer, 1965), with at least 20% of American college students suffering from a dysfunctionally high level of apprehension about speaking in public (McCroskey, 1977).

Whether experienced on dates, during job interviews, while speaking in public, or while engaged in everyday conversations, social anxiety is a common, often debilitating reaction to interpersonal encounters. Given the importance of interpersonal relations to happiness and adjustment, behavioral scientists have devoted a great deal of attention in recent years to the problem of anxiety and inhibition in interpersonal encounters (see Buss, 1980; Jones, Cheek, & Briggs, 1986; Leary, 1983b).
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In this chapter we examine portions of this literature. We first introduce three models of social anxiety that have guided most research and treatment in the area. We then turn our attention to a newer social psychological theory that provides an alternative explanation for these sorts of social difficulties and encompasses all three of the earlier perspectives. We then discuss the behavioral difficulties that arise when people become nervous in interpersonal encounters, and we explore implications of theory and research for treating clients who experience excessive social anxiety.

Theories of Social Anxiety

Why do people often become nervous when they interact with others? What is it about even mundane conversations that makes so many people awkward and uncomfortable? Most explanations of social anxiety fall roughly into one of three theoretical perspectives, each of which we will discuss briefly.

Classical Conditioning

Most students of psychology are familiar with the story of "little Albert," a young boy who was the subject of John Watson's research on conditioning (Watson & Rayner, 1920). Using Albert as a subject, Watson showed that fears can be learned by pairing aversive, fear-producing stimuli with otherwise innocuous neutral objects. Watson conditioned little Albert to become afraid of a white rat (which initially he did not fear) by banging loudly on a steel bar with a hammer whenever Albert tried to touch the animal. After several pairings of the rat and the clanging bar, Albert reacted fearfully whenever the rat was present, even though Watson no longer banged on his noisemaker. In the terminology of classical conditioning, the rat had become a conditioned stimulus capable of evoking the conditioned response of fear.

Since this early demonstration, a great deal of research has shown that potent fears may be learned in such a fashion by both animals and humans (see Bandura, 1969, for a review). Although, for obvious ethical reasons, no research has attempted to condition socially based anxieties, it seems clear that people may begin to experience anxiety in certain social situations after having suffered aversive consequences in those situations in the past. For example, a man who previously had not been anxious about speaking in public may develop severe speech anxiety after giving one particularly terrible speech. Or a girl may become nervous in her dealings with boys after a traumatic incident in which a group of boys taunts her in front of her friends. Indeed, Zimbardo (1977) reported than many shy people are able to trace the onset of their anxiety and inhibition to a particular traumatic social event.

If social anxiety is conditioned when aversive experiences are paired with certain social stimuli, we would expect to be able to decondition social