

From the Authors of
Work Makes Me Nervous:
Overcome Anxiety and Build the Confidence to Succeed
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online booksellers, and www.socialanxiety.com)

Conversation

ANXIETY

Help for Those Who Fear Talking in Public

By Jonathan Berent, L.C.S.W., and Amy Lemley

“Is everything okay?”

When you really analyze it, can you think of a more meaningless question? People ask this all the time. What do you say? Do you tell the truth, or just toss off something like “fine”? Sometimes, I respond to this question with “If it wasn’t, would you really want to know?” The greeting itself characterizes the very often superficial level of “niceties” involved with conversation. Small talk has its place—though most people will admit they don’t enjoy it. For people with conversation anxiety, however, it can be excruciating. How much is too much to say? What should you ask in response? What if you don’t know what to say? What if you sound stupid? *What if you’re not perfect?*

These pressures tempt many people to avoid small talk altogether. But small talk matters—therefore, controlling the anxiety you have surrounding it is critical. Learning the simple social skill of cordial interaction My coauthor, Amy Lemley, and I recognize the value of small talk to our own work together. If I hadn’t had a spontaneous conversation on a basketball court in 1990 with a fellow player who happened to be a writer, who had a girlfriend (Amy) who was also a writer, we never would have begun working together and I never would have been involved in the networking process that led to my finding a literary agent. That would have really sucked! When I “explored” this conversation on the basketball court I was in my “Natural Child” mind state—a concept we will address later.

Recently I attended a wedding. It was in June. I was not looking forward to this because it took me away from my summer routine and had an impact on an entire weekend. Plus, it’s usually difficult to have any stimulating conversation at these events, and the loud music inhibits this possibility also. Actually the 10-piece band was great, but my ears are still ringing a bit.

There were about 250 people attending. I only knew the parents of the groom and my wife. During the cocktail hour, I said to my wife, “Can you imagine being here by yourself; who would you talk to?” Actually, she’s very social and would have no problem.

At the table where we were sitting I initiated a conversation with a man who held both an MD and a PHD. He was a well known psychopharmacologist. I was getting his “take” on everything from marijuana to SSRIs. While I disagreed with many of his beliefs, it was a stimulating conversation. It was rewarding. It was worth plowing through the small talk so we could move beyond it and really enjoy talking and connecting with one another.

I can’t begin to tell you how many times I have tried to initiate conversation, or have been involved in conversation, that is absurd, ridiculous, asinine, negative, or where my conversation partner was in a different dimension from me, or just an asshole. I’ve had so many conversations in so many venues where I thought the person was weird because of the abruptness with which the conversation did not develop or ended. While I may not want to invest social time where this type socializing, I do not fear it or take it personally because my conversation skills are intact.

If you experience conversation anxiety and want to get better at controlling it you need to practice. This fact is common sense. Logic and objectivity will tell you that diligent practice is necessary for any skills development. Your logic and objectivity is energy from your “adult” mind state. This state is your internal “computer.” If you do not practice because of your concern with “perfectionism” be clear that “perfectionism” is a sign of insecurity. What you need to invest in is a pursuit of excellence; a process and psychology that allows you to create a productive learning curve in general and specifically the ability to learn from mistakes!

But practicing alone is not enough. You need to balance your “mind states” as you practice. Anxiety is a disorder—but it is not a permanent flaw. Anxiety can be cured. Your fear can be managed. Your life can be changed. And you will be the one to change it.

This e-book will introduce you to the basic process for healing your conversation anxiety. You will learn what conversation anxiety is, you will establish the extent to which is affecting your life, and you will understand the physical and mental processes at work. You will also gain an understanding of a concept called Mind States Balance, which offers a method for reframing situations by adjusting your own interpretations of them. You can then follow up with comprehensive developmental training via our new book, *Work Makes Me Nervous: Overcome Anxiety and Develop the Confidence to Succeed* (John Wiley & Sons, 2010), available via booksellers such as www.barnesandnoble.com and www.amazon.com.

Self-Censorship = Selective Mutism

Now I want you to think about something very carefully. Take a long, slow, deep breath in and exhale slowly first. Identify a situation where you were in a social or interactive possibility and you wanted to say something or felt that you should have said something, but did not. When you make a decision not to, you are in essence censoring yourself. This may be because you did not want to experience embarrassment or humiliation. It may be because you worry about how you will be perceived or because of your concern that what you say has to be “just right” or “perfect.” The reality is that the censoring is the result of your internal critical script. It says, “Don’t talk” and “Don’t take the risk.”

In essence, in that particular situation you were *selectively mute—choosing not to speak*. Selective mutism is a vast, emerging problem (and clinical disorder) that impacts 6 out of 1,000 children and countless adults. It is an extremely misunderstood problem with very little effective help worldwide. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* defines this disorder as “a persistent failure to speak in specific social situations where speaking is expected despite speaking in other situations.” (To listen to a free webinar about selective mutism, visit www.socialanxiety.com.)

Selective mutism is a syndrome in which a person stops talking in certain instances because of performance anxiety and an underlying obsessive worry. The selective mute is capable of speaking—and may do so in some situations such as at home. But the reflex—and it does become an automatic reflex—is to detach from thoughts and feelings and to avoid being verbal. It is obsessive, overwhelming, all-consuming, and unhealthy. (To hear an audio interview with pro baseball player Kurt Rueter about his daughter with selective mutism, visit www.socialanxiety.com.)

The selective mutism sufferer talks very normally in some situations, but does not talk in other situations, particularly if they involve spontaneous interactions. Is this anxiety? Obviously! Also present is obsessive worry about the process of talking and the compulsion to not talk in situations where performance pressure is experienced. Believe me, selectively mute children often grow up to be adults with a variation of this disorder. If ever there were an indicator or precursor for public speaking anxiety, which is the #1 phobia in the world, this certainly is it! Go to my website www.socialanxiety.com and you can listen to families and adults who have experienced this challenge. Ask yourself now: “Is my conversation anxiety characterized by

obsessive worry about verbal interaction?” “When in the interactive situation to you fell almost addicted not to talk?” This is the “compulsion” to which I previously referred.

About Your Authors: A Productive Partnership

When it comes to conversation anxiety, no other coauthors can give you the perspective we can. Conversation anxiety—and related problems such as performance anxiety, workplace anxiety, social phobia, and social challenges—has been my specialty as a psychotherapist for 30 years.

The programs I have developed over the years are proven to work. You truly *can* overcome your conversation anxiety. And that’s where Amy comes in. Amy suffered from conversation anxiety—and has resolved it through the program I developed and present in both *Work Makes Me Nervous* and our previous book, *Beyond Shyness*. Her perspective throughout this book provides a unique way of nurturing you, helping you see your situation objectively so you know where you stand what you would like to change, and reminding you that it’s time to try something new. Both of us are here to ask you, “Why live another day in fear of talking with others?”

Amy puts it even more plainly. “Conversation anxiety is optional,” she says. “Once you understand what anxiety is and what triggers it, you can then choose to make a deeper commitment to your recovery through the in-depth learning program we present in *Work Makes Me Nervous*.”

Following the *Work Makes Me Nervous* program to the letter has made a lasting difference in her life. “When I began this program,” she says, “I knew that what I was doing—

feeling anxious, avoiding that anxiety, losing out on a fulfilling social life, squandering professional opportunities, and feeling terrible about myself—was robbing me of health and happiness.” Amy recognized that the only way to get out of her anxiety-ridden rut was, frankly—to get out of her anxiety-ridden rut! She told me something interesting: “A friend of mine always said, ‘If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.’ That’s where I stood, and that is where our readers stand now. If you want to stop feeling anxious before, during, and after conversations, you have to change.”

Both of us are here to tell you that you can.

The Many Faces of Conversation Anxiety

Carla had a great job in marketing services at a major electronics distributor. At 25, she had already earned an MBA and was poised for a promising career. Since birth, she had had a condition that scratched her vocal chords, leaving her with a deeply hoarse voice that people often mistook for laryngitis. Much of her time spent in marketing involved conference calls and face-to-face meetings. It seemed like any of the times she talked with a new contact, the person would hear her voice and express sympathy that Carla had a cold. “Sorry you’re sick.” “Hope you feel better soon.” Self-conscious about her voice, Carla began to avoid necessary conversations in favor of e-mail and texting. Eventually, her supervisor addressed this with her, explaining that in her position, it simply wasn’t acceptable not to talk in person. She considered leaving her job despite an economy in which good jobs were scarce and companies simply weren’t hiring in her field.

Saras was proud of her son. He was an elementary school math whiz who had been tapped for a prestigious gifted and talented program. She and her family had moved to the United States from India when Bidhan was only three, and it had amazed her how quickly her little boy had adapted. She had not fared as well. Although her command of English was excellent, her confidence was low. She isolated herself from people outside the Indian community in the city where she lived. When parent–teacher conferences came around, she made excuses why she could not keep her appointment. The school year was about to end, and she had yet to meet with the teacher.

Andrew was a PhD candidate in history at a Midwestern university who planned to become a professor once he completed his dissertation. Early in the program, he had excelled as a research assistant for two different internationally recognized scholars. Both of these professors had encouraged Andrew in his work and considered themselves his mentors. But Andrew’s bright star began to fade when he failed to complete his doctoral dissertation—a book-length research paper. Most candidates were ready to “defend” their dissertation before the department committee within three years of entering grad school. But Andrew’s work had stretched on for five years and he was at risk of being asked to leave the program. Andrew had begun avoiding conversations with the two professors who had been his champions for so long. He was angry at himself and embarrassed for the way he was behaving. What was the cause? He was terrified to complete his project and then have to face the committee of five professors who would formally ask him questions about it. And that fear was about to ruin his academic career.

Sixteen-year-old Chris was a high school golf team member who was shooting in the high 70s/low 80s by sophomore year. For years, he had been extremely shy in class, seldom talking and doing his best to make no eye contact with his teachers in the hope that they would not call on him. Outside of school, he became a great golf player, and by high school, he had overcome his shyness to the extent that he felt comfortable going out for the golf team. He had one good friend whom he spent time with outside school. When he would hang out with his team members, some of them would bully him and make fun of him for being “weird.” He became very good at detaching, or disconnecting from his feelings, doing all he could to behave as though this treatment didn’t bother him when deep inside it upset him terribly. But when his close friend turned against him, responding to peer pressure by joining in the bullying, Chris began to suffer depression and slipped once again into not talking when he was around the team. As a result of this depression, his playing began to suffer, and his grades dropped.

Although she was intellectually gifted, 14-year-old Karen spoke only one-word answers in class; outside class, she seldom spoke at all among her peers. He got lost from the group and was anxious and uncomfortable. Rather than turn to a security guard or other adult for help, she called her mother on the cell phone and was on with her for 15 minutes. Eventually, she mustered enough courage to go to security guard. She was able to verbalize her problem, but it was so difficult for her that she almost fainted. When she was reunited with the group, she was relieved, but it she was exhausted from her worry and she lacked insight regarding the others’ perceptions of her. She certainly didn’t want to think about it.

Elliot was a successful mortgage banker with an international firm. At 34, he had already achieved an excellent salary and a lifestyle to match. Yet he lived in fear of being called upon during meetings with the firm's clients. He even felt anxious when he was just among colleagues he saw every day. At the end of the year, he and his teammates were gathered in the conference room for the awarding of bonuses. Their boss announced it had been a great year, and to add to the celebration, he would draw a name out of a bowl and award one person an extra \$10,000. That's right—a \$10,000 drawing. What went through Elliot's mind? *"Please don't pick me. Not me. I do not want everyone looking at me and clapping while my boss shakes my hand to congratulate me. I don't want to have to say thanks in front of everybody."*

Social events. Family gatherings. Office meetings. School functions. Why does everyone else seem to be enjoying these situations? Why don't you? Be clear on what is difficult about it for you. If you back out at the last minute, that indicates avoidance due to anxiety—which can develop into a phobia. What is so terrible about that moment when someone has asked you a question—"What are your children up to?" or "Tell us about your trip" or "How is the new computer system working out?" or "What do this quarter's sales figures look like?" Or God forbid, you get a general question like "How are you doing?" or "Is everything okay?" You *know* what the answer is. All people expect you to say is "Fine." You can't get the answer wrong. *What are you afraid of?*

In a word, it's conversation. It's the back-and-forth that you can't stand: That moment when someone else has finished speaking and all eyes are on

YOU.

That's it, isn't it? You're afraid of conversation. And you've long since stopped asking yourself why. You may believe you really don't have anything to say. You may tell yourself you don't know what to say. You might think your conversation anxiety is a permanent personality flaw—"It's just the way I am." You may believe it is a personal failure—that you're "not good enough" or else you wouldn't respond this way. You have probably "detached" from your feelings just to be able to cope.

Yet you ordered this e-book. Deep down, you *know* it can be different. You don't *want* to live like this anymore. And you don't have to! Become familiar with anxiety symptoms and triggers through reading this e-book. As you identify passages and exercises that especially resonate with you, consider making a further investment in yourself: ***Work Makes Me Nervous*** is available at local bookstores or online (www.amazon.com or www.barnesandnoble.com).

The thought leader Malcolm Gladwell, author of books such as *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*, has identified three things that create good performance: (1) Luck. That's right—the random set of circumstances that lead us here or there. (2) Diligent, organized practice. Not so surprising, right? And (3) Sustaining that practice for a specific length of time. The key word in number 3 is "sustaining"—clearly, you can't just overcome your conversation anxiety for one

conversation. You are looking to make a lasting change in how you perform in life. Think of overcoming anxiety as a lifestyle change, like learning weight control. People who go on crash diets and lose lots of weight generally gain it back unless they learn an entirely new way of eating. Successful “dieters” establish a whole new relationship with food. In your case, you will want to establish a whole new relationship with the uncomfortable feelings that accompany conversational energy. That visceral (“physical”) reaction occurs just before the thoughts and emotions that characterize conversation anxiety.

Making a lifestyle change is an investment in yourself—an investment of time and energy that will earn interest over time and prove itself to be one of the most valuable efforts you’ve ever made. Think about those three things as they relate to your situation right now:

You had the luck (and the skill) to discover socialanxiety.com and decide to download this e-Book. That much is clear. What about number 2? Are you willing to devote yourself to understanding anxiety symptoms and triggers as they are presented in this book? And 3? Success is all yours if you are willing to sustain these efforts over time, building your skill and gaining confidence.

What does using this e-book involve? Get ready. Here’s a paradox—something that defies conventional thinking: Basically, our point is that you can overcome your fear of conversation by *having* a conversation! *This* conversation. That’s right, this e-book is just what you fear most: A conversation. But it’s a conversation that takes place **between only you and you**, completely in private, at your own pace. Throughout this e-book, you will participate in a series of questions and answers that will help you guide *yourself* away from fear and worry and toward freedom and full self-expression.

Does that mean you won't have to have any other conversations? Absolutely not. Learning to engage in conversation while managing your anxiety is the goal here. Every day, you have the chance to interact with people; armed with new information about the nature of conversation anxiety in general and yours specifically, you can experiment a little—with saying hello to a stranger, asking for directions or help, and so on. But you never have to reveal your “secret” to anyone unless you choose to. You don't need to tell anyone you suffer from conversation anxiety.

Please print out this e-book. It is designed to serve as an introductory handbook to the topic of conversation anxiety, and the exercises require a written response. Remember, it is for your eyes only, so be as honest as possible in working on each one. This is a conversation with yourself—and no one else. And your success depends on you.

The benefits of proactive conversation may include:

Quarterbacking (or piloting) your life—you are in charge

Relationship development

Constructive networking

Healthy communication

Career development

Conflict resolution

Problem solving

Enhanced social life

Enhanced academic performance

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Willingness to ask questions

Healthy self esteem.

The drawbacks of *avoiding* conversation may include having:

Defensive, overly vigilant attitude and behavior

Underdeveloped social skills

Handicapped communication

Inhibited relationships

Technology overdependence

Handicapped social life

Limited career growth

Limited academic performance

Increased potential for an avoidant personality disorder

Self-loathing

Depression

Chronic stress, which can to inappropriate use of substances

Avoidance

At its heart, conversation anxiety becomes about avoidance. Every time you back out of plans or make excuses or retreat into the shadows during a conversational opportunity, you are

exhibiting the classic sign of an anxiety sufferer: Avoidance. If you are aware of avoidant behavior at work, you would be doing yourself a favor if you obtained *Work Makes Me Nervous* and completed the 21-day self-guided program. And if your conversation anxiety causes you to avoid social situations, I strongly urge you to obtain *Beyond Shyness: How to Conquer Social Anxieties*, which expands on the concepts we introduced you to in this e-book, enhancing your ability to conquer your fears; also available at your local bookstore or through online retailers such as www.BarnesandNoble.com and www.Amazon.com, *Beyond Shyness* not only addresses adults with social anxiety, but also offers insights especially for parents of children and teens with such issues. Both books feature my extensively tested strategies for overcoming anxiety and building confidence and skill.

Avoidance as a response to conversation anxiety can become *selective mutism*, which is so poorly understood that many sufferers go untreated, a fact that characterizes the treatment of social anxiety treatment in general.

Professionals remain confused about how to treat selective mutism. Elizabeth, age 12, was a straight-A student; yet she never raised her hand in class. If her teachers called on her, she would struggle to give a forced one-word answer. When she was with her peers at school or in social situations, she would not talk at all. Her parents enabled her by ordering for her in restaurants and filling in the silences when they socialized with other adults and families. She would never talk about feelings and would get aggravated when she was pressed. After eight sessions of therapy she was actually talking to me on the phone, but her obsessive worry and compulsion to not talk remained very extreme. To help with her debilitating perfectionism, I suggested that her parents consult with a physician to arrange for medication to treat her obsessive

and compulsive characteristics. Their physician referred them to a psychiatrist who after one visit said to the parents, “She’s totally normal and she will talk when she’s ready.” Without treatment, however, I am pretty sure she will never be ready. This doctor’s professional ignorance may cost Elizabeth an entire life of conversation anxiety, debilitating stress, compromised relationships (or a lack of them), and career success. Sadly, I’ve worked with many individuals who are never “ready.” Check out some of the interviews at www.socialanxiety.com.

Another example of selective mutism and its costs is Brad. He had a lot of money in the bank from business deal. He was an expert in financial software programming. He was attractive and intelligent age 46. He had 2 children. He was recently divorced after 10 years of marriage. Other than his wife he had no other intimate relationships with women. His wife facilitated most, if not all, of the verbal communication between the two of them. After one year of separation he was a responsible and motivated father; lonely, somewhat depressed and dependent on his four or five beers a night for entertainment and mood control. He started dating through two on line services. He found that given his “profile” there was a lot of interest from the opposite sex as he was considered a “good catch”. After going on dates with 7 women there were no second dates. These women did not like the responsibility of having to carry 85 percent of the conversation; a dynamic that his wife used to do.

To what extent do you avoid the types of conversations that give you the strongest gut reaction? How do you justify that to yourself? What does it cost you personally?

Using Logic and Objectivity

Let's return for a second to that uh-oh question: "Is everything okay?" Try viewing the circumstances surrounding that question more objectively. If you answer with a perfunctory reply of "Fine, thanks," "Can't complain," "Doing well. How about you?" or any of the other standard responses, you and your conversation partner can move on to other topics, continue down the hallway at work, or conclude your cashier transaction—whatever it is you are doing at the time. You might freeze in that moment, allowing your obsessive worry to take over: "What? Don't I look fine?" "Can they tell I'm nervous?" "I want to tell the truth, but that would mean going on for 10 minutes about how 'not fine' I am right now."

In that moment, you may choose to say nothing at all because you are so distracted by your obsessive fear. And that too often awkward silence—more than whatever friendly, mundane answer you might have given—can leave others without much of an impression of you either way or possibly even with the impression that you are odd, rude, snobbish, unfriendly, and so forth. Which I expect is the total opposite of the impression your perfectionist self was longing to make!

It's a paradox: You want to avoid making a fool of yourself, essentially. So you make a fool of yourself. Yet it is an extremely hard habit to break, and if you continue to let it rule your day, it will likely get worse and it could even become a full-blown phobia.

When you get that "deer in the headlights" feeling as someone is about to ask you how you are, take a quick breath. Smile. Have an answer ready—a single word such as "fine" or "great" is all you need. If you like, you can add "How about you?" Try this. It is not as hard as it sounds, and it will get easier with every attempt.

And finally, get it into your head once and for all that everybody makes mistakes. (Visit www.youtube.com and search on “TV bloopers” if you’d like to see some humorous proof!).
Read it again: Everybody makes mistakes. The person you are talking with is focusing on his or her mistakes, not on yours. Cut yourself a break!

A Gut Reaction

Have you ever stopped to think about exactly what goes on when you notice a conversation—or even the thought of one—begins to make you anxious? For most people, it's a *visceral* response—a “gut reaction” of physical discomfort followed by a thought. The physical feeling precedes the mental response. It is an automatic reflex that happens before you become conscious of it. Bringing the process to a conscious level is an important part of gaining control of your conversation anxiety response.

You are going to learn to reverse that one-two punch. How? By doing your thinking in advance of your gut reaction. I will show you how to mentally prepare yourself for any conversational situation you are about to enter.

An essential part of overcoming conversation anxiety is identifying and connecting your anxious thoughts and emotions with the physical (“visceral”) sensations you experience as you have those thoughts and emotions. And vice versa: When you experience physical sensations, you must learn to connect those sensations with your thoughts and emotions. As part of this ongoing “conversation with yourself,” you will learn to make this connection.

When you pay attention, your patterns will probably become obvious. A client named Kyle, a high-level media executive supervising 200 people, was responsible for leading a division-wide Q&A session almost every week. This was a successful executive with a high six-figure salary; no one knew he suffered performance anxiety brought on by conversation anxiety. Five sessions into his therapeutic treatment, Kyle said something interesting: “For the first time, I was aware of the anxiety-related visceral sensations in detail. Before, I was never focusing on them. I was just focusing on how to get through the situation. Now, I can attach to those feelings

in the moment.” That was the beginning of Kyle’s taking control because you have to consciously feel that which you want to control. Kyle achieved this with the use of his BioCard (more about the BioCard later...).

Kyle then surprised me by beginning to chuckle. “It’s amusing how consistent my pattern of cold hands is. I had no idea I was so predictable.”

But predictability in this case is a good thing. By recognizing your symptoms, you can connect with them in real time. Once you attach to them, you can learn to disarm them. Kyle said something else that I found striking. “For the first time,” he told me, “I feel like I can really do this. I can be proactive and think things through before that automatic physical reaction happens.”

**Gut reaction + obsessive, distracting, worrisome thoughts
= conversation anxiety**

Neural Pathways

Remember that your mind and body operate from the same headquarters: Your brain. The neural pathways within your brain are responsible for retrieving information from the brain and expressing it verbally. Retrieving information from the brain and e-mailing or texting, while often an important process, involves different neural pathways. You need to practice to improve skills. There’s no way around this fact. To confront your conversation anxiety, you must set about retraining your mind and body so the anxiety response becomes a “ready, set, go” feeling you won’t want to avoid conversations.

Here's an example of accessing and using different neural pathways. Many years ago when I was a counselor in a summer camp, I accidentally put my hand through a glass door, which required stitches in my right hand. Now, this is the hand I use to shoot a basketball and much of my summer experience at that time was on the basketball court. Trying to be positive about the situation, I started to practice foul shots with my left hand. This was very challenging. But, after a couple of weeks, I was fairly good at it. I must admit, I did not continue with left-hand shooting after my right hand healed; however, it was a very interesting learning experience.

About the BioCard

Throughout this e-book, I will refer to a device called the BioCard. Although it is not an essential part of using this e-book, it will greatly enhance your learning process. This card is available to you at my cost: \$3 plus shipping and handling; it is a highly affordable and highly effective training aid. With the credit card-size device in hand, you are able to measure your hand temperature and associate it with your degree of stress or relaxation. Over time, you will learn (1) to identify the internal sensations of relaxation and (2) to differentiate between positive and negative stress. You can then link your conversation anxiety thinking with your physical response to anxiety triggers. The BioCard is simple to use, and because it is small, you can take it anywhere. When you choose to, you merely hold it between thumb and forefinger for 10 seconds, then check the color against the four-color key to determine your physical stress level (as indicated by the skin temperature of your hands). In developing this awareness, you can attach to the dynamic of hand temperature being cold or warm. This brings an unconscious adaptation into the consciousness by connecting thoughts and feelings to skin temperature.

Rather than merely “getting through” an anxiety-provoking conversation, you are then able to concentrate on it. We offer a step-by-step process for achieving this awareness in *Work Makes Me Nervous*

Whether you use the BioCard or not, your goal is to attach and become productively aware of the connection between the mental and the physical responses you experience during conversation.

Anxiety Symptoms and Triggers

What anxiety symptoms do you experience before or during a conversation? What types of conversation make you nervous? The answers to this question vary from person to person. One person may have a racing pulse or obsessive thoughts; another might have cold clammy hands or a desire to “flee the scene.” Some may have all those reactions—or different ones altogether. The type of conversation that causes one person anxiety may be something that another conversation anxiety sufferer considers energizing and fun. Yet the fears and feelings are much the same from person to person: “I’m afraid I’ll say something stupid.” “I’m scared I’ll make a bad impression.” “They can see I don’t fit in.” “I’m sure they can tell I’m nervous.” “I have to say just the right thing.” This is what some of my clients have said about their conversation anxiety:

“Whenever I meet new people—at a party, at work, wherever—I start to blush—and I can’t concentrate on what we’re talking about. Not only do I forget their names right away, but once the conversation ends, I can hardly remember what we talked about. I am that distracted by my worry that they can see I’m uncomfortable.”

“Two friends of mine and I formed a book club last year. I love to read, and getting together over lunch to talk about favorite books was fun. But over the last year, my friends have invited six other women to join our group. That is not at all what I had in mind. I no longer say anything at all in our club, and I often skip our meetings to avoid being put on the spot. It makes me sad because I really liked our small group. But I just can’t stand when my voice quivers—I’d rather miss out than risk having everyone see how nervous I am.”

“Every three months, it’s my turn at work to share with my work team the latest ‘tips and tricks’ I’ve learned for web design. I always have tons of new things to talk about. But when those meetings come around, I am so afraid that my mind will go blank. Sometimes it does! Everyone must think I’m stupid because I can’t do this simple thing. I know I seem unprepared and they know I’m nervous. I sometimes call in sick on the day of my presentation, even though my annual performance review reflects that I fail to meet this job requirement.”

Here are the most commonly reported symptoms of conversation anxiety:

Mind going blank

Stammering

Stuttering

Obsessive thoughts (“I will look stupid,” “I don’t fit in,” “They can tell I’m nervous,” etc.)

Racing pulse

Cold, clammy hands

Sweating

Blushing

Nausea

Rapid breathing

What other symptoms do you experience?

As you read the list, check off the ones you have experienced. Then, write each symptom down in the grid that follows. If possible, recall and write down a specific example where you had these symptoms. Tip: Return to this list from time to time. Even if only a few examples come to mind right now, you will definitely recall others as you read this book. Write 'em down! The more specific you can be about your conversation anxiety, the more quickly and successfully you can gain control of it.

Symptom	Specific Situation

Ask and Answer—here is a conversation to have with yourself about the Symptom/Situation Exercise you just completed. Take your time. Really focus on each question. Be as honest as possible. Remember, this is a private conversation with yourself, so you have nothing to lose.

This exercise is critical. When was the last time you left your home to go somewhere familiar? Think about this for a moment: for shopping, work, school, the gym, for a date, to see a movie? When you left your point of origin, whether you were walking, driving, or taking public transportation, you knew what streets to walk or drive down. You knew where to make turns, what landmarks to pass, what numbers to look for. You had a map in your mind, information your brain had processed, something that you may have taken for granted. You knew where you were going. If you didn't, you had to find the right information to reach your destination.

It's crucial that you know where you are going—you need a map for the resolution of your conversation anxiety. But first you must determine where you are. That's what this next exercise is about: Establishing a baseline that delineates your particular symptoms, what triggers them, and how they affect your life. In each instance, you'll see two examples Amy completed; that's just to get you started, and not to suggest that you yourself have the same symptoms. If you do, of course, then write them down.

1. What symptoms come up most often?

<i>1. Obsessive worry that I will make a mistake, look stupid, seem noticeably nervous</i>	<i>2. Uncomfortable, shallow breathing</i>

2. When you feel those symptoms, what goes through your mind? What do you say to yourself?

<i>1. "I've gotta get out of here before anyone sees what a nervous wreck I am."</i>
<i>2. "Everyone can see I am nervous and uncomfortable."</i>

3. What are the situations that cause you the most anxiety?

<i>1. Getting an e-mail from my boss asking if I've completed a task (especially if I have forgotten it.)</i>
<i>2.) Attending a party where I don't know anyone but my date.</i>

4. In the hours or days that follow an anxiety response to those situations, do you go back over them in your mind? What thoughts do you have?

<i>"This is just one more piece of evidence for her; she thinks I'm incompetent."</i>
<i>"I'd better stick by my date and not say anything. Otherwise I'll make a bad impression."</i>

5. Do you avoid some of the specific situations you have identified as triggers? Describe some of the times you have done so. What did you feel in the moment you decided to avoid them? Be as specific as possible and, if you can, zero in on one particular example.

<i>1. Yes. I was terrified of my performance review meeting; even though I was meeting my written goals, I was afraid my boss would spring something on me and I wouldn't have an answer. I had to go to the meeting, but afterward, I chose not to read my written review. In that moment, I told myself I simply didn't need to. Deep down, I judge myself for being "crazy enough" to avoid something everyone else would not think is a big deal. I feel worthless.</i>
<i>2. Sometimes, I make an excuse to avoid going on a date to a party. I feel bad about it because I don't want to seem like I am rejecting him."</i>

In this last example, Amy chose to “attach” to the negative feelings of conversation anxiety and its aftermath rather than the objective knowledge that her assessment had gone fine and she was “meeting expectations.” (Do you attach to your conversation something you do?)

Do You Hide Behind Technology or the Written Word?

These days, people communicate all day long without ever speaking a word aloud. It's as though they are tweeting with their toes, texting with their thumbs, typing out e-mails with their teeth, and IM-ing with their elbows while they tune out the world and listen to their own personal soundtrack through ear buds attached to an iPod.

Is that you? Have you ever stopped to think about why? A lot of times, a quick phone call or a brief in-person chat with a neighbor or colleague would be the most appropriate thing to do. You *know* that is what is called for given the situation. Yet I'll bet that more than once, you've turned to electronic gadgets to say what needed to be said. What is it you fear about opening up your mouth and speaking? What are you afraid of? That you won't know what to say? That you'll say the wrong word? That you won't understand what the other person is talking about? People I've worked with express the fear that their minds will go blank if they have to talk spontaneously with another person. Some are afraid of using bad grammar or the wrong word. Some are embarrassed about facial features such as buck teeth or a large nose; the idea of someone else looking right at them is too distracting for them to focus on the conversation.

Years ago, Amy taught in a prestigious university's summer camp for teen writers. One boy, an extremely talented writer, almost left camp due to conversation anxiety. Our most important classroom activity was "workshopping" student articles, which required each student to read his or her piece and then listen to criticism without interrupting. Charlie told our group that he simply couldn't do it—he just could not read his work in front of us. Why? He had a severe stutter. "I choose my words differently when I speak than when I write," he explained. "I have certain letters I avoid when I'm talking. When I'm writing, I can use any words I want to." Charlie's classmates told him that they cared more about him and his truly excellent work than about whether he stuttered or not. And they assured him that the entire camp felt the same way. By the end of our program, Charlie was able to put his conversation anxiety aside; he remained aware of his stutter, but it truly never stopped him again.

Stop to think for a second. Imagine if Charlie had made a different decision. What if he had gone home early? What if he had been too afraid to express himself even in his small group? It was a brave step for him to share his fears with the other kids and his teacher. But there was a huge payoff to doing so.

Ron, a vice president at an advertising firm, told me of his frustration with employees who avoid face-to-face interaction in favor of e-mail. E-mail is highly efficient most of the time; but occasionally, it's not the best way to communicate. "The back and forth takes a lot longer than just popping in and getting an answer," Ron says. "Over-relying on e-mail sometimes means my people are waiting for the quick answer they need to proceed with their tasks. That's frustrating to me because it interferes with productivity."

Amy is well aware of her impulse to use technology to avoid conversation. She seldom checks e-mail, telling herself that caller ID gives her enough information about who called, even to the point that her voice mailbox gets completely full and friends and clients cannot leave messages (talk about frustrating!). "When recording my current voice mail greeting," she says, "I could not even make myself say the typical 'If you'd like to leave a message, please do so after the tone.' When I tried, I stammered through the recording three or four times and simply could not do it. Instead, I say, somewhat pointedly, "If you *need* to leave a message, do so after the tone." Rude? Kinda. Passive-aggressive? Definitely.

Do you have telephone avoidance? Ask yourself why you find it so difficult to answer the phone. Try this exercise: Pretend you answer all your calls without screening them. As you move through these examples, come up with a simple thing you would say in response to each caller. What would your answers be?

A salesman calls.

Your neighbor calls to ask you to take in the paper while she is out of town.

Your mother calls in the middle of a major work project.

Your community association asks you to join a volunteer cleanup organization.

Dependence as Avoidance

Do you depend too heavily on people for things you know deep down you should handle yourself? Lila, who was single, was in a situation in which her neighbor's bamboo was spreading across their property line. Bamboo is extremely invasive, and almost impossible to remove once it establishes itself. Lila had broken two lawnmowers trying to stay ahead of it. It was time to talk to her neighbors about a solution. But she couldn't do it. She asked a friend to talk to the neighbor—which was odd, to say the least. This person was a total stranger to the neighbor and came off sounding demanding and accusatory. The neighbor felt no sense of obligation or cooperation because of that, and Lila continued to have a serious landscape issue—all because she had given in to her dependence rather than deal with her conversation anxiety.

Can you think of people you rely on excessively to handle things you really should be handling yourself? Why do you do that? What thoughts do you have that you want to detach from in that moment? What excuses do you make to yourself?

Historical Link Exercise

Right now, do a *historical link* exercise. Go back in time as far as you can in your own life and identify a situation where you felt embarrassed or rejected regarding conversation. How

old were you? Where were you? With whom? This memory is located within your Adapted Child mind state—the state of learned emotion. This is an example of a deep imprint with emotional ramifications that need to be resolved—which *Work Makes Me Nervous* makes possible.

What's the worst thing about conversation anxiety for you?

Personally? At work or school?

For the most part, you've probably conditioned yourself to accept that "this is just how I am." You have probably detached from the anger and frustration you would otherwise direct at yourself. You have also learned to avoid many of the conversational situations that make you anxious. "If I never ask a woman out on a date, I won't have to feel like women think I'm inexperienced." "If I never volunteer for a committee, then I won't have to suffer that awful feeling of not knowing what to say." You may even have convinced yourself that you don't *want* certain things in life because you are simply too afraid to encounter the anxiety feelings you work so hard to escape from.

So, no—despite the documented health risks of stress, which are not insignificant—you probably will not die of conversation anxiety. But if you think about it, you aren't really living either, not when your conversation anxiety keeps you from doing those things in life that secretly call to you. That point was clear to Ursula, a client of mine who was a successful quantitative

analyst. An excellent technician, she was afraid of conversations with others. She saw what was possible for her if she gained control of her anxiety: “I need to resolve this problem,” she said, “because my life will be richer.”

It’s time to shake things up a little. Don’t worry, this is still between you and you. And the exercise is basic. By the way, you can learn much more about how to use relaxation through self-regulation by reading *Work Makes Me Nervous: Overcome Your Anxiety and Develop the Confidence to Succeed* or *Beyond Shyness: How to Conquer Social Anxieties*. Both books go into significantly more detail, presenting a full program for learning to control social anxieties at work or school or in your social life. Both books are available at www.socialanxiety.com or via amazon.com and other retailers.

Okay. Ready? Imagine that you are casting off the burden of conversation anxiety right here, right now. This is just an exercise—we’re pretending, so stay with me here while we try it out. Cast off the anxiety. Take a slow, deep breath in...1...2...3...4... Then breath out slowly, imagining that, just for a moment, you are free of conversation anxiety. 4...3...2...1... Stay with that feeling. Picture yourself a year from now, feeling free to spend time with other people, to ask questions, to share personal stories, to request help, to give and receive compliments, to ask directions, to offer directions, to borrow things or offer to lend them, to send back food in a restaurant, to return defective products... No fear. No feeling that you seem stupid or don’t know what to say or look nervous. When that gut reaction begins, you welcome it as energy. *Work Makes Me Nervous* trains you to cause this transformation at will.

Imagine how life can be. You are that powerful person—proactive with conversation. You request a job interview or apply for a scholarship. You join a club or chair a committee. You look forward to those things and the flow of energy that arrives as you begin an interaction.

What scenes did you imagine? How did you see yourself? How did it feel to be the confident, capable person you know you can be? Make some notes about that. Don't hold back. No one will read this but you. It's important to stay with these images as long as possible. Don't detach! This is your life we are talking about! Again, we provide an example from Amy to get you started.

<i>I see myself smiling as I greet people during a network event. People are looking me in the eye and nodding in agreement as I talk. I am breathing comfortably and can focus on what I am saying and listen to the other people when they talk and I listen.</i>

Wouldn't you like to have that life? As you envisioned a life in which conversations were not something to dread but just a part of your day, you may have begun to get a sense of what

would make your investment worthwhile. You are investing yourself in learning about conversation anxiety and how to conquer it. It's time to ask yourself why. What motivates you? If you were "keeping your eyes on the prize," what would that prize be? If obstacles are what you see when you take your eyes off the goal, what is that goal for you? What was the feeling you imagined as you saw yourself moving through conversational situations comfortably and without anxiety? Is that feeling your prize or goal? What environments did you see yourself in? Your current workplace? A different position? Happy in your current relationships? In new relationships?

Stay with those feelings and images and write your thoughts about what motivates you. Be as general or as specific as you like. Answer as fully and completely as you can. (There was a funny line in the movie *American Beauty* in which a middle-aged man is explaining why he has begun working out by saying simply, "to look better naked." Can't argue with that. But others explaining why they want to exercise by saying it's "for the endorphin rush" or "to lose weight" or "to improve my health.")

The next step is to come up with a Conversation Anxiety Hierarchy. Write down 10 conversational situations that cause you anxiety and rank them one through ten—ten being the most difficult for you to handle—or perhaps even so difficult that you simply avoid it at all costs.

Adrenaline Control

Think further about your “gut reaction” to having a conversation. How does that gut reaction feel? Many people describe nervousness as an energy overload: They just want to run. Their minds may go blank. They begin hearing their critical inner script. They start to sweat or blush—or fear that they are doing so.

When a conversational opportunity presents itself—or you realize you will need to approach someone to talk about something specific—everyone’s body responds by increasing its energy flow. That energy is adrenaline. The obsessive thoughts that make up your critical inner script occur at the same time as that energy flow. And therein lies the problem. In your mind, that loop tape of “They can tell I’m nervous....I don’t know what to say...I will sound stupid...I have to be perfect” and the feeling of energy that comes with a moment in which you must take

action have become so twisted together that you can't separate your mind's reaction from your body's.

That energy is not going to go away. It is adrenaline—and not only does it have an evolutionary purpose (fight or flight), but it is also a valuable resource that you can access whenever you need to. Remember, you cannot get rid of the adrenaline. You should not “just get through it”—to truly master your conversation anxiety, you must learn to accept the adrenaline, to let your “gut reaction” be there without letting it intrude on your thoughts. Accepting this reaction, not suppressing it, is key. *Work Makes Me Nervous* presents an adrenaline control strategy that makes it possible to approach the hierarchy of conversation anxiety challenges methodically and effectively.

Attaching and Detaching

People with conversation anxiety learn quickly to disconnect from their thoughts and feelings—a response called “detachment.” This process creates repressed and recycling emotion that drives obsessive worry and anxiety. Think of detachment as defensive disconnection: disconnecting from uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. Attachment, on the other hand, is consciously connecting the mind to specific thoughts, issues, emotions, and physical sensations. Interestingly, once you attach, you can learn to control anxiety. In other words, you have to feel that which you want to control.

I recall developing a tension headache while driving. The reason I had a headache was that my muscles were tense. I was tense because I was thinking about stressful and negative things—how my plumber had failed to show, how my back pain had been inhibiting my

basketball playing, the gruesomely busy work week ahead, with no breaks scheduled, concern for a relative who was not well. So I said to myself I am going to consciously think about positive things; about 20 minutes later, my headache went away! Both the headache *and* the resolution to the headache were the result of **attachment**, meaning **conscious thinking**: actively connecting the mind to specific thoughts and situations.

Mind States Balance

In *Work Makes Me Nervous*, we present a concept I call Mind States Balance. This framework describes five mind states that operate within our personalities:

Nurturing Parent (NP): NP energy promotes growth, teaches, acknowledges, and provides support. “You’re doing your best,” “It’s okay to make mistakes.”

Critical Parent (CP): CP energy represents authority, evaluates, and passes judgment. “You’re doing it wrong,” “You’re doing it well,” “That was not your best work.”

Adult (A): A energy is logical and objective. “I have a meeting at 8 A.M.,” “I need two hours to prepare.”

Adapted Child (AC): AC energy is conforming, cooperating, compromising, and manipulating. “I have to do this right,” “I have to be perfect,” “I feel confident.”

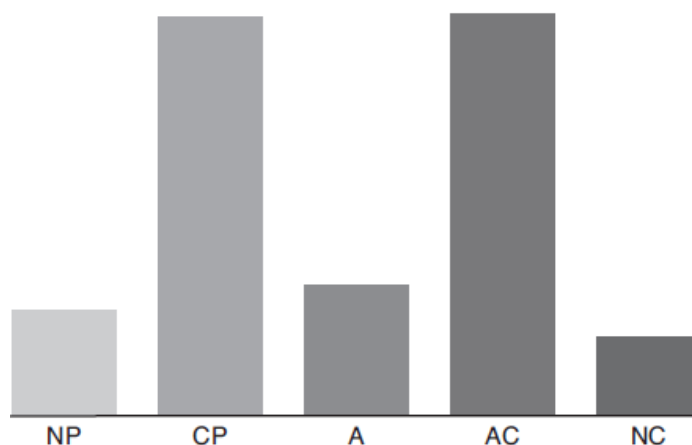
Natural Child (NC): NC energy is responsible for spontaneity, exploration, creativity, and joy. It is the truth of desire. “Just do it!” “Do whatever you want.”

Although one mind state or another may dominate during specific situations, all mind states are present all the time. When they are in balance, you are in control and can handle and even enjoy the kinds of conversations that once caused you anxiety. *Work Makes Me Nervous* presents a detailed developmental program through which you learn incrementally to balance your mind states in just seconds. Whether workplace conversations cause you anxiety or not, that

book can help you perfect the Mind States Balance strategy. In the meantime, our discussion here can point you in the right direction toward a more balanced, integrated mind.

Take a minute to look at and understand this bar graph.

The Mind States Unbalanced



All five mind states are depicted. In this graph, however, they are out of balance. See how the Critical Parent (CP) and Adapted Child (AC) tower over the Nurturing Parent (NP), Adult (A), and Natural Child (NC)? That is the imbalance you experience during conversation anxiety episodes: Your CP is saying things to you such as “Better to be quiet and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt!” “You’d better not mess up. Remember what happened last time.” And your AC is reacting to that message with something like, “I have to be

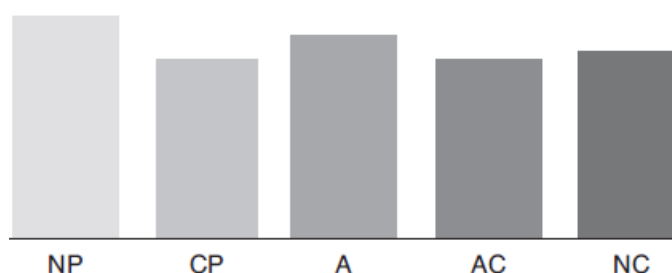
perfect. If I mess up, I'm worthless." The voices of the other three mind states are faint and impossible to make out when the twin towers are dominating.

Christopher experienced this problem. At 17, he was the point guard of his varsity basketball team. He took about seven shots in 20 games—despite a number of opportunities to do so. His thinking? "If I shoot, I could miss." His attitude affected the team's success and kept him from being the best ball player he could be. Remember: In life, you miss *all* the shots you don't take.

Should you try to resist the twin towers as a way of lowering those bars? No. That will not work. And you need all five mind states to function healthily. Mind States Balance requires raising the other three bars—increasing the volume on your Nurturing Parent, Adult, and Natural Child. If you do that, the twin towers will recede. You *can* learn how to balance your mind states. The 21-day developmental program we present in *Work Makes Me Nervous* provides advanced training in Mind States Balance.

Your goal is to raise the NP, A, and NC mind states. Look at the bottom graph and see what that would look like. What you are after, then, is a balanced mind states graph that would look like this:

The Mind States Balanced



Once again, notice how all five mind states are present. This is a dynamic system. When you increase your Nurturing Parent, Adult, and Natural Child, then the Critical Parent and Adapted Child naturally recede to a level that is appropriate for good mental health. Turn to *Work Makes Me Nervous* to learn how to do this successfully.

The Healthy Brain

Your brain is a remarkable organ—and it deserves special attention so that it performs optimally. You’ve probably heard the following advice before. But read them through again in a new context: that of maximizing your brain health and overall well-being. Healthy brain chemistry is extremely important in resolving conversation anxiety.

- Get eight hours of sleep each night
- Get at least 20 minutes of aerobic exercise such as walking each day—preferably outdoors.

- Eat a balanced diet, with a limited amount of refined sugar and saturated fat.
- Limit your alcohol intake.
- Avoid using substances.

Work Makes Me Nervous goes into great depth on achieving optimal brain health. The book also explores the use of pharmaceuticals to treat anxiety and includes an interview with an experienced psychiatrist and expert on the use of medication to improve social and performance anxiety.

You'll note that "limit your alcohol intake" is on the list. That no doubt means different things to different people. What we can say is true for everyone is that though it is tempting to "self-medicate" for anxiety using alcohol, it is decidedly not the best approach to true mental (and physical) health; drinking is okay, but not drinking to excess. Mike is one example of how drinking can get out of hand. Outside work, Mike enjoyed his relatively free single lifestyle. With plenty of money in his pocket, he frequented fine restaurants and bars in the Midwestern city where he lived. His work life, however, was anything but free. For a long time, Mike had felt nervous at work, particularly when it came to have conversations with a vice president whom he found intimidating. Even so, he made good money and was moving steadily up the career ladder. He was too ashamed and embarrassed that he had anxiety because he didn't understand what it was. That confusion led to drinking.

Left unchecked, his anxiety worsened over time and created "flaws" in his performance and health. But he didn't have a "character flaw." He had an anxiety challenge that caused a drinking problem and led to depression. Emotionally, he simply "checked out," drinking to ease his discomfort without admitting to himself that this "self-medicating" had become a serious

problem in and of itself. Clearly, his avoidance had made the problem worse over time. Yet he had never sought counseling or therapy until finally, in desperation, he came to me. His anxiety had grown exponentially, building on itself.

That is how stress works. The more it stays the same the more it accrues—like putting money in the bank to develop interest, but in this case the “interest” is negative. Mike’s belief that he had a character flaw resulted in his *detachment* from the reality of what was actually taking place. Mike was a very intelligent person who was very uneducated about anxiety. Once in treatment, Mike identified the issues that were causing him anxiety and learned the techniques for resolving his public speaking challenge in a relatively short period of time. That gave him the confidence to tackle his drinking issues successfully.

Using a Party as a Laboratory

My wife’s trainer and her husband were having a party at their house, a small cottage with a fabulous view right on the bay beach. Now, I really didn’t want to go. It wasn’t because I’m antisocial. It’s because I didn’t feel like expending the energy it would take to engage in conversation. It wasn’t because I’m a snob. I get along with all kinds of people. The thing is, as a therapist, I talk for a living, and when I’m on my own time, if I’m going to have conversation I would like it to be stimulating (which actually seldom happens). I don’t have any conversation anxiety at all, but I do sometimes sense how awkward it is to initiate a conversation.

The party was in a space of approximately 600 square feet. There were about 70 people attending. There was no entertainment other than some food and whatever interactions were to take place—the conversation was the “entertainment.” No ball game on television. No belly

dancers. And it is not my style to rely on a technology buddy—an iPhone, BlackBerry, or whatever, when nothing else catches my attention. (I've seen people turn to these devices a lot at social gatherings, but given that this house was right on the water, there was no cell phone reception).

When we walked in, our host gave us a 30-second-hello, then we were left alone. I didn't know anyone else attending other than her husband, whom I knew had two groups of friends, surfers and members of his martial arts Dojo. No one tried to initiate an interaction or conversation with me. As I mentioned, I wasn't that interested in expending conversational energy that night, so I took a few minutes to observe. It was really interesting to make a note of the different levels of eye contact (a very basic indication of interest) and try to determine if there would be any "connecting." In a situation like this, it's either connect and be part of the social process or hold up the wall, right?

Remember how I felt about going to this particular party? I didn't want to expend the energy on participating in conversation that night. Some people are just going to be passive as you try to chat. They don't want to bother to access the brain power required for conversation. Accept that. Do not obsess about "What's wrong with me?" For all you know, the people who clammed up on you did so because they had some conversation anxiety to wrestle with themselves!

This was a matter-of-fact social experience for me. I made the best of a necessary social situation that I really wasn't interested in. Sometimes you do have to do what you don't want to—and to be happy, I believe sometimes you do have to do what you want to but are afraid to do. Did people like me? Did we leave too early? Could anyone tell I didn't want to be there?

These were not questions that even came to my mind. My wife and I went to a party, we hung out for a while, met a few new people, and we went home. No big deal.

Do you obsess about such questions? If so, you would do well to explore self-esteem. *Work Makes Me Nervous* provides a framework for going deeper to explore the degree to which your self-esteem and social and performance anxiety reinforce each other.

As I mentioned, I am not someone who experiences conversation anxiety. But I do at times experience the burden of keeping up my end of the conversation, particularly when it is among unfamiliar people at a gathering like this. That is true for a lot of people. You hear it all the time, “I don’t like small talk” or, perhaps more honest, “I don’t know how to make small talk”—as in “I am afraid I will say something stupid or won’t have anything to say at all.” Many people have conversation anxiety besides you! Can you relate?

Take a few minutes now to envision the party I described: It’s a casual gathering at an attractive but compact beach house. You walk in, are greeted by the host, then there you stand. You look around the room. You see people smiling at each other, chatting and laughing. They have small plates of food. Some have glasses of wine. You spot the buffet table. You see the beachfront deck through the open French doors across the room.

Imagine yourself there. What do you feel? What is your “gut reaction”? When you get that visceral feeling, what thoughts come up? What do you tell yourself?

Picture someone making eye contact with you—not flirting or staring—just friendly, “hey, we’re both at the same party” eye contact. What is your gut reaction? What do you do?

Now I am a good conversationalist. I agreed with my wife beforehand that we were going to give this party about an hour and a half. Teamwork. It's a good thing. She would stay for hours because she loves conversation, but I had other things I'd rather do, so we compromised.

If your conversation anxiety affects you in social or networking gatherings such as that one, take some time to reflect on similar situations you've experienced. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Did you commit to attend the event then obsess about how to get out of it?
2. What was your "gut reaction" in the days and hours leading up to the event?
3. Imagine you're in conversation with a fellow guest. What are the best and worst-case scenarios you can think of? What are your "gut reactions" to each of these scenarios?
4. What emotions would come into play?
5. Truth time here. Would you avoid this situation? Why?
6. What are you afraid of?

At a Loss for Words? Turn It Around

People appreciate good listeners. A good way to practice your conversation anxiety management is to ask questions and let other people do the talking. Listen genuinely. One of my patients was a successful salesman who was coming to therapy for stress and anxiety management regarding his divorce. His social skills were extremely smooth. His sales strategy was impeccably productive. I asked him, "What was the singular most important characteristic that has made you a good salesperson?" His answer? "Getting people to talk about themselves." This is a wonderful strategy to employ. Practice some open-ended questions designed to prompt

responses to get the conversation started. If you receive only brief responses, don't give up (the person may be feeling a bit self-conscious answering...just like you might). Follow-up questions are also a critical part of good conversation. When you try this technique in your real-life laboratory, remember to truly focus on the person's answers. Let go of distractions rather than obsessing about by what you "should" say next. Make eye contact. Be open. Believe me, truly listening to another person is a gift to that person—one that will be well appreciated. Here are some examples that you might be able to work in to your conversation. Notice that these are all open-ended questions—not "yes or no" questions, which can leave you hanging:

In work-related networking situations:

1. What kind of work do you do?
2. How did you get into that?
3. What is a typical workday like for you?
4. When you have a chance to take a break during the day, what do you do to recharge?

In social situations:

1. How do you know the host?
2. Do you live in this area?
3. (to the host) Can I help with anything? Use this opportunity not as a way to avoid guests, but to give yourself an “excuse” to mingle by freshening drinks, helping to pass out food, and so on. Smile! Make eye contact!

A Final Word

By now, you realize the personal costs of conversation anxiety: the gut reactions that plague you and can lead to stress-related conditions and illnesses, the lack of connection with other people both personally and professionally, and fundamentally, the way it prevents you from feeling happy and fulfilled. You also know you do not have to feel this way. You can triumph over your conversation anxiety. Amy has done so using the techniques outlined in the 21-day plan in *Work Makes Me Nervous*. “I highly recommend investing time in following the 21-day plan,” she says. “Although the focus in that book is work, the skills you learn apply to both professional *and* personal situations.” Amy is a model for success; these techniques have cured her of her addiction to avoidance.

Tragically, people who do not address their conversation anxiety can suffer very serious consequences. Here is an extreme example. Edward, age 29, was an Ivy League graduate who seemed to have a bright future ahead. But his conversation anxiety and obsessive nature often left him paralyzed when it came to interacting with others—even though he truly desired to

connect. For example, on his daily walk with his dog, he would pass a young woman who was also walking her dog. He was attracted to her and really wanted to talk to her. He thought over and over what he would say, for weeks upon weeks. He told me he had to have the “perfect” thing to say or “it wouldn’t work.” He never had his conversation. This obsessive perfectionism and negative energy led to depression and substance abuse. His inability to connect via conversation created such a feeling of loneliness and desperation that he eventually committed suicide. His family is currently creating a foundation bearing his name that will eventually provide training to mental health professionals interested in treating social anxiety and selective mutism.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line? It’s simple. You can overcome conversation anxiety.

And now you know you are not alone. Conversation anxiety impacts countless numbers of people. It’s not the type of thing people talk about because of embarrassment and feelings of humiliation and shame—which are such uncomfortable feelings that many people detach from them simply as a means to cope. When conversation anxiety is resolved, your life will become richer, more dimensional, more productive, more meaningful than you ever thought possible.

You now have a basic understanding of your conversation anxiety symptoms and triggers. You’ve read many stories of people who suffered just as you have, only to move through the *Work Makes Me Nervous* 21-day program and beyond to lead rewarding, satisfying lives. We have helped you prepare a road map with which to set out on your journey to confidence in conversation. We wish you good health.