



The Cure for Self-Consciousness

By Martha Beck



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It's one word—one *little* word—but it has revelatory power. You step into the party feeling reasonably confident. True, your favorite little black dress feels somewhat tight, but it's still elegant, and the wind outside only tousled your hair a little. Then, just as you're preparing to mingle, it happens: You pass a mirror and glimpse your reflection—your horrifying, horrifying reflection. The dress isn't just tight; it fits like Luciano Pavarotti's diving suit. Your hair looks as though a crazed weasel nested, bore young, and died there. Aghast, you wobble off your high heels and sprain an ankle. All eyes are glued on you. All conversation focuses on your disgrace. Everyone begins texting hilarious descriptions of you from their cell phones.

In your dreams, baby.

I mean this both literally and figuratively. Most of us occasionally dream about being embarrassed in social settings. But even in waking life, many of us operate as if Simon Cowell is doing a play-by-play of our work, wardrobe and snack choices. One team of researchers has dubbed this phenomenon the "spotlight effect." In the beam of imaginary spotlights, many of us suffer untold shame and create smaller, weaker, less zestful lives than we deserve. Terrified that the neighbors might gossip, the critics might

sneer, the love letter might fall into the hands of evil bloggers, we never even allow our minds to explore what our hearts may be calling us to do. These efforts to avoid embarrassment often keep us from imagining, let alone fulfilling, the measure of our destiny. To claim it, we need to develop a mental dimmer switch.

Turning the Lights Down Low

Thomas Gilovich, PhD, Victoria Husted Medvec, PhD, and Kenneth Savitsky, PhD, the psychologists who coined the term spotlight effect, also devised numerous ways to measure it. In one experiment, they had college students enter a room with other students while wearing an "embarrassing" T-shirt. (The shirt bore the likeness of a certain singer, whom I won't identify here. I will say that for days after reading this study, I was medically unable to stop humming "Copacabana.") When the mortified students were asked to guess how many people in the room would remember the face on their T-shirt, they gave a number about twice as high as the number of students who actually remembered the shirt.

Other studies support what this one suggested: The spotlight effect makes most of us assume we're getting about twice as much attention as we actually are. When Lincoln said, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here," he was wrong—but only because he was president of the United States. If you are currently president, rest assured that millions will note and long remember if, say, you barf on the prime minister of Japan. However, if you are not president, you're probably pointlessly blinded by the glare of imaginary social judgments.

These judgments aren't limited just to times when we mess up. Our distorted perceptions mean we not only exaggerate the impact of our errors but also undersell our inspirations and contributions. For example:

- You modestly mumble an idea in a meeting, assuming that co-workers will be awestruck if they like it, appalled if they don't. Net effect: Nobody really hears the idea—until the annoying extrovert across the

table repeats it more loudly, and gets all the glory.

- You wear clothes a bit duller and more concealing than the ones you love, only to look back years later and wish you'd bared and dared more in your youth. (As one of my friends sighed about her self-conscious daughter, "If she only realized that at her age, you're beautiful even if you're not beautiful.")
- You sing, swing, and mamba only in the privacy of your home, never with other people. Repressing the urge to sing "Copacabana," you miss the joy of sharing silly or sultry abandon with the people you love—and the people you may never get to love because inhibition robs you of the confidence needed to form a bond.

These self-limiting behaviors have no positive side; contrary to what many assume, they rarely save us from doing things we'll later regret. In fact, Gilovich and Medvec have found in other studies that, in the long run, people most often regret the things they failed to try, rather than the things they bombed at. Trying yields either success or an opportunity to learn; not trying has no positive result besides avoiding mockery or envy that (research shows) wouldn't be nearly as big or bad as we fear.

How to Free Yourself from the Glare

1. Double everything.

Just knowing that the spotlight effect is real and ubiquitous can begin to liberate us from its inhibiting clutches. I find it very comforting to have an actual number associated with my shame-based illusions: Spotlight effect studies suggest that people typically pay about 50 percent as much attention to me as I think they are. The first time I actually stood under a spotlight, in a high school play, the director told me, "Small gestures look embarrassed, so they're embarrassing. If you're going to do something, and you don't want to look foolish, do it BIG." Now, thanks to Gilovich, Medvec and Savitsky, I know how big to make my actions—about twice as big as I think they should be.

I've been experimenting with this in many different circumstances: raising both my hands, instead of one, to ask a question of a lecturer I much admire; pausing twice as long for dramatic effect while telling a story to some friends; eating two servings of a fabulous dessert at a literary club luncheon. The result? I do seem to have attracted more attention, but rather than the disapproving judgment I expected, most people seem to feel pleased and liberated, made safer in their own skin by my willingness to live large in mine.

I believe this reaction is a major reason a lovely lady from Hawaii named Brook Lee once won the Miss Universe pageant. When asked what she'd do if she had no rules to follow, she replied, "I would eat everything in the whole world—twice!" That one word—"twice!"—struck a chord with me, the audience and the judges, landing Ms. Lee squarely beneath the spotlight she actually wanted. Why not join her by doubling the social behaviors you usually limit: the energy with which you communicate, the intensity of the colors you wear, the number of times you laugh, the clarity of the opinions you voice. You may think this will attract massive disapproval from others. Actually, you'll be lucky to attract more than a passing glance, and my experience (not to mention Ms. Lee's) suggests it will be more approving than not.

How to Free Yourself from the Glare

2. Think through your limits—not to them.

"You can't break that board by hitting it," my karate teacher told me. "Hit something 10 inches behind it. As far as you're concerned, the board doesn't even exist."

"But," I pointed out, "it does exist." (I am a trained observer.)

My sensei shrugged. "That's what you think."

Mentally noting that this man had been hit in the head many, many times, I proceeded to batter my hands

to smithereens, trying to break that unbreakable board. When every knuckle was swollen, tender and bleeding, I said, "My hands hurt."

"Yes," said my sensei. "Your mind is really damaging them."

You get the metaphor: We smash into barriers of shame, embarrassment, and regret because we pull our punches in myriad social situations. Stopping at what we think is the limit of embarrassing behavior, we let others claim the credit, the opportunity, the job, the person we love from afar.

The next time you feel performance anxiety in any form, remember that the negative attention you fear does not exist except in your mind—if this works with the hard, cold reality of my ice block, I guarantee it will work with something as vaporous as other people's opinions. Act as if there is no spotlight on you, even if there is one. Say, do, and be what you would if no one else were looking. It will be scary at first, but if you persist, there will come that liberating moment when you'll feel yourself sailing straight through your life's most inhibiting barriers without even feeling a bump.

How to Free Yourself from the Glare

3. Ask yourself the Universal Question.

Once, I had an intense, emotional cell phone discussion with a friend while riding in a taxi. At a certain point I fell into a strangled silence.

"What's wrong with you?" my friend asked. "Why aren't you talking?"

Covering my mouth with one hand, I whispered, "The driver can hear me."

At this point, my friend said something so lucid, so mind expanding, so simultaneously Socratic and Zenlike, that I memorized it on the spot. I've gained comfort by repeating it to myself in many other situations. I encourage you, too, to memorize this question and use it when you find yourself shrinking back from an imaginary spotlight. My friend said—and I quote:

"So?"

This brilliant interrogatory challenged me to consider the long-term consequences of being embarrassed (really, who cares?). It reminded me that failing to act almost always leaves me with more regret than taking embarrassing action. Here are a few instances where the Universal Question might help a person break through imprisoning inhibitions:

"If I say what I really think, people might disagree with me."

So?

"If I leave my drunken abusive husband, his crazy family will call me a bitch."

So?

"If I go windsurfing, I'll look like a klutz. Plus, people will see my cellulite."

So?

There are endless applications for the Universal Question. I suggest using it every time you feel yourself hesitating to do something that might deepen or broaden your life. The answer to the question "So?" is almost always "Well, when you put it that way..." It pushes us into the spotlight, showing us we can survive there and freeing us to act on our best instincts.

Today, remember that what you perceive as prudent social caution is probably limiting your life to about half its natural capacity; that if you did everything you long to do twice as often, twice as boldly, twice as openly, you wouldn't attract a shred more social pressure than you already think you're getting. Consider that vaulting well past the limits of your inhibitions will probably earn you more positive attention than negative judgment. More often than not, this will work out well. If it doesn't, remember the most

enlightening of questions: "So?" Little by little, you'll feel and see that the worst consequences of living in the light are less oppressive than the best advantages of hiding in the shadows. And you'll have little to fear from the rest of us, who will only be inspired by your daring as we sit, blinking and bedazzled, in the private spotlights of our own attention.

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