

Martha Beck's Cure for Self-Consciousness

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.

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.