

SHY BLADDER: THE PHOBIA YOUR FRIEND IS HIDING FROM YOU

By Mark Cunning June 6, 2017

A life shaped by Shy Bladder Syndrome illustrates a unique take on social anxiety.

MauiMark: We're all on here for a reason, right?

LocalSofia: I never thought of it that way, but yeah. Ugh, are we swapping secrets?

MauiMark: Why not? Let's be honest with each other. For once, let's air out our dirty laundry beforehand.

LocalSofia: OK, then. I had two kids before age 25. Two different fathers. Then another guy gave me herpes, the cold sores kind, not genital. Most guys can't deal with that.

MauiMark: That's no big deal.

LocalSofia: What?! I'm not dateable. Most guys run away so fast, especially after the herpes part.

MauiMark: I'm pee shy.

LocalSofia: ??

MauiMark: It's something that started when I was young and got worse as I got older. It's hard for me to relax enough to pee anywhere, except at home.

LocalSofia: Oh...have you seen a doctor about it?

MauiMark: Shy bladder is not a medical issue. It's in my head. It's not something a bottle of pills can fix. I just try to get through each day. I'm otherwise a generally happy guy. I'm lucky to be alive, right? And that's why I'm on this app.

LocalSofia: So you can't leave the house?

MauiMark: I can, but not for more than a few hours. And I better not have any liquids.

LocalSofia: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. ☺

MauiMark: So, when do you want to meet?

You have been blocked by this user.

It's called paruresis, folks. Also known as pee shy, shy bladder, bashful bladder, and choking at the bowl, it is considered a social phobia. According to paruresis.org, an estimated seven percent of Americans experience some form of the condition. Sufferers generally are unable to urinate in the presence of others.

Paruresis affects people in different ways, particularly in severity. Some have trouble urinating in public spaces such as the trough in a public restroom, and only occasionally. Others cannot pass urine anywhere except in their own home. Still others, the most serious cases, cannot get through life without perpetual catheterization.

What follows is my story. This was the trigger that created my fear of public restrooms. In third grade, I was a regular-size kid. Not smaller than normal, and not big enough to bully other kids. But on this day, I was bullied.

The bully was a kid named Tommy. To this day, it's a bad word. I don't like people named Tommy. Tom is fine; Tommy is not. He wasn't a big kid, either. I could have put a stop to it, but I didn't. We were in the bathroom at school. I unzipped at the center urinal and aimed into the back of the porcelain. I didn't make any unnecessary noise spraying directly into the water.

This is where life took a turn. Tommy approached from behind and pushed me forward, but not enough to make me fall into the urinal. It was just a joke, ha-ha. I kept the flow going. When I didn't react, he did it again. Then he kept pushing, over and over, until I did react. I paused my tinkle but didn't zip up. He pushed me again. I swung my arm around to push back, but Tommy was ready for it. He grabbed both of my arms and wrestled me toward the urinal. My dick was hanging out. The other boys just stood there. I was bent forward, my head aiming for the water. I wouldn't let this happen. I couldn't. I whipped my body to try to get away. Tommy gave me one final push, and my head smacked the porcelain. It thumped. I saw stars. Tommy just laughed and filed out of the bathroom with the other boys.

The knot on my head was huge. Would the teacher notice? I don't remember what happened after we left the bathroom. It didn't matter. The damage was done.

From that point forward, I would keep my distance from Tommy. I avoided his potential harassment by using the stalls, even for number ones. I don't remember when, but at some point in my young life I could no longer urinate with someone standing next to me. My acts of self-defense turned to fear. My fear turned to anxiety. And my anxiety would hamper my life for years.

Did you ever see the 2005 movie *Waiting...*? The character Calvin suffers from shy bladder. His trigger is nonviolent but life-changing. He's standing at the urinal when he notices the guy next to him staring at his penis. This shakes him to the core and prevents him from being able to use the urinals. It's just a movie, but the resulting struggle he experiences is an accurate depiction of the phobia.

I watched *Waiting...* for the first time with friends in college. It was an incredibly uncomfortable experience. Until then, I didn't know anyone had ever heard of shy bladder. I hadn't yet admitted to myself that it was a real problem, and I was unaware there was some chatter about it in popular culture.

We were in the living room gathered around the TV. Fictional Calvin began to explain his phobia: "I get this paranoid feeling that there are people outside the stall saying, 'What's taking him so long? Why can't he just piss like a normal person? I don't hear any pee!'"

Calvin explains his problem. Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDcEzaqplRk>

When I watched that scene, I froze. The movie was a comedy, but this was heartbreaking. I glanced around the room without turning my head. What were my friends thinking? Did they have any suspicions about me? Worse, had they already discussed my problem when I wasn't around?

I'm not sure I took a single breath during that scene. I don't know who spoke first, but it wasn't until commercial, and the subject was unrelated to the movie. The tension, my tension, was released like air from a balloon.

Now I needed to piss. I eyeballed the bathroom door and checked the positions of my friends. There were six of us: two on the couch, two in chairs, two on the floor. One floor guy was facing my bathroom door, the bastard. That was distracting enough. But throw in the scene we had just witnessed on TV, and my shy bladder was frozen in fear. My bathroom was still safe, but the conditions under which it was safe depended on the positions of people in the living room. I was looking at the bathroom in my own house as if it were my enemy, as if I were terrified of it. What a nightmare.

My immediate response was to cease drinking. Then I wondered where the night was headed. Would these guys leave soon? Where would I piss?

The answer to the latter question was simple: I could go to the gas station two blocks away, or run around back to the trees, or invent a reason to take a shower. Any of them would work, but which ones had I used recently? The goal was to spread out my excuses to fool the people around me. That is, if I was fooling them at all. Perhaps they were willing to let me figure out my problem without going through the embarrassment of publicizing it.

No need to panic. My bladder was full, but it wasn't yet urgent. Sometimes I worried that a visit to the ER was inevitable, but this wasn't one of those times. For now, I could wait patiently for an opportunity. And just like every day, every hour, every moment, I continued to navigate life with a shy bladder.