

Too frightened to urinate in public? You're not alone

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When Andrew Smith was a young man, he used to have to plan out every move he made during the day so he wasn't caught needing to pee while out of his home. When he was in public, a constant fear would tick over in the back of his mind: the risk that he'd need to use a public bathroom, and that he'd have to pee in a urinal – and wouldn't be able to.

"I've had a shy bladder all my life," the 73-year-old chair of the UK Paruresis Trust explains. Paruresis is the medical term for shy bladder syndrome – a paralyzing fear of peeing publicly that can in its milder stages cause men to stand uncomfortably next to others at urinals trying to pee, and at its worst can result in sufferers to be housebound for fear of needing to urinate in the presence of others.

"I avoid public bathrooms at all costs," says one 30-year-old sufferer from paruresis, who declined to be named for this story for fear of embarrassment. "When on a night out, I'll limit the amount I drink so to avoid having to pee. Bars and nightclubs are the worst, because they're so crowded."

The unnamed man, who often travels for his work, says he can "tolerate" public bathrooms in airports because they are less busy and have more cubicles where he can urinate in privacy. Others, who post on the UK Paruresis Trust's online forums, say they have made excuses to avoid social events, knowing they wouldn't be able to use the bathroom while there.

Though paruresis isn't talked about – a combination of embarrassment and old-fashioned British reserve – it is commonplace. "The figures are a bit rubbery, but the prevalence estimates you get for levels of inhibition and distress that gets to the point of being reasonably serious is around five to 10 percent," explains Nick Haslam, a professor of psychology at the University of Melbourne and author of the book *Psychology in the Bathroom*.

It's a form of what used to be called social phobia: a fear of doing things when potentially being observed by others – a distant cousin of the sweaty palms many people get when asked to speak in public. When someone needs to empty their bladder, a signal is sent to the brain to open sphincters that allow urine to flow. But for some men, social fear triggers a separate signal in the autonomous nervous system that prevents the sphincter from opening.

"The main concern is just being observed and judged negatively while engaged in this behavior," says Haslam. And bad bathroom design compounds the problem.

When architects and interior designers come to create buildings, they spend hours of labor and oodles of cash on creating gorgeous public places. What they don't do is give much care or attention to the non-earning bathrooms, says Andrew Smith. "You tend to get cramped, minimal toilets, and especially from the point of view of women, that's why you get inadequate numbers of cubicles." (There should be twice the number of cubicles in a women's bathroom as the total number of urinals in a men's bathroom, for what it's worth.)

The place that Smith and the UK Paruresis Trust recommend more than any other for those of a nervous disposition may surprise you: it's the local branch of Wetherspoons.

"We always design clean, bright, airy toilets where possible, trying to give plenty of circulation space and built to a template that we have developed over many years to make sure the toilets are easy to maintain and vandal-proof," explains Jon Randall, head of property at JD Wetherspoon.

One of the key components of that template is urinal partitions, as well as a "sensible width between urinals", says Randall – specifically done with privacy in mind.

"That makes a huge difference," says Smith. "Personal space boundaries lie at around three feet around you, and you suddenly discover when standing side-by-side at a urinal that the distance is much less than that."

It's the reason men will tend to pick an unoccupied urinal the furthest distance from any occupied urinal in a bathroom – a concept sketched out by a Canadian and American academic in a highly-cited research paper. However, for the most severe sufferers of paruresis, not even this unofficial urinal etiquette is enough.

Raymond Martin is the public face of the British Toilet Association. He spends his life lobbying councils and private companies to better design public toilets for users, and sits on the board of the British Standards Institute, which sets the recommended minimum standards for bathrooms. To tackle paruresis, he has established good minimum guidelines for bathrooms that include privacy boards anywhere from 18 to 20 inches to four-and-a-half feet tall between each urinal to protect men's modesty, and to try and let them pee in peace.

So far, he's only been moderately successful. "Cost is the issue," he admits. "There is no government legislation to provide public toilets, and there's no government funding." As Smith has previously outlined, private sector properties – with some exceptions – overlook bathroom design and try to cut costs. Cash for public bathrooms is allocated from a budgetary column called discretionary services, which includes park benches and hanging baskets. Discretionary budgets were among the first things slashed when the 2010 coalition government introduced its policy of austerity on local authorities, and any spare change left over is more likely to be used to plant dahlias rather than erect modesty boards between urinals. With the average public toilet costing around £15,000 a year to maintain, improvements can be slow to happen.

But not acting has an impact. If up to one in 10 men feel uncomfortable peeing in a public bathroom, they start – like Smith – to make alternative arrangements. Rather than visit the city center on a weekend and risk getting caught short, they'll spend their pennies on Amazon. "Most councils realize they need to put toilets in place. They want tourism, they have families, pregnant mums and kids. They want to bring all those people into the town to spend money and keep the whole commercial center going. It's their money that keeps the shops and cafes open."

Thankfully, an unusual savior is helping ease the pressure on men's bladders: the rise of [unisex toilets](#). "The majority of new toilets, both private and public, are individual, lockable cubicles now," says Martin. The personal revolution is a response not to increased awareness of paruresis, but a more prosaic problem: urinals smell. "The pipes build up uric salts and the ammonia leaches back into the room," explains Martin. "That's what causes the stink."

Good design is only one part of the anti-paruresis equation. Smith and the UK Paruresis Trust put plenty of work into convincing men that they're not alone in struggling to pee in public – and that they shouldn't worry in the first place. Since 2003, they've run workshops for a dozen men and women (who suffer from paruresis too, but at a lower rate than men) between the ages of 14 and 85. "It's the complete cross-section of society," Smith says. The courses, designed by psychologists, borrows heavily from the principles behind cognitive behavior therapy, the "talking cure".

"What is very common among guys who have got paruresis who are struggling to use urinals is they feel they're being noticed or even watched and being judged," says Smith. They're likely, if they're unable to start a flow within a few seconds, to zip up their trousers and walk out. "They think normal behavior is that you're able to start to pee instantly. They're unaware that's not the case."

Smith's workshops try to dispel that myth. Social bonding in pubs and restaurants, as well as group activities, allows people to recognize how widespread the problem is – and gets rid of the idea that they're somehow abnormal.

Through gradual desensitization, including visits to public bathrooms, participants are convinced that it's perfectly normal to want to pee in private.

Smith himself managed to shake his shy bladder syndrome in his forties. He was one of the lucky ones, not needing workshops, CBT or desensitization. However, he won't admit to overcoming his fear, nor of being "cured". "I tell people I'm on the shy end of the normal range," he says. Given how many of us paruresis seems to affect, it's something we could perhaps all do talking about more publicly.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/mind/men-secret-toilet-anxiety-common-think/>