

# Peeing in a Public Restroom Is Pretty Much My Worst Nightmare

Paruresis is very real — and very inconvenient.

By Mark Williams ~ October 29, 2015

"One plus one is one is two, one plus three is four," I muttered to myself while standing at a urinal.

As a guy with a bad case of paruresis, or shy bladder syndrome, this was not something I usually attempt, but this was a tiny bathroom in an East Village gay bar and waiting for a private stall made me look like I was, well, up to something.

Yet, I appeared more awkward as I stood at the urinal and I added odd numbers to myself. I had heard it helped others overcome performance anxiety. A line formed behind me and, convinced this tactic would work for me, I added numbers more furiously. But my bladder remained bashful. I tried other tactics I'd read about: recalling a favorite childhood memory, humming a tune, and using positive self-assurance.

"You can do this, it's not that hard," I told myself.

But, I couldn't.

I left the bathroom, embarrassed, then ran to a nearby Starbucks. It wasn't ideal, since knowing others would be waiting behind me puts me on edge too, but at least there was a door between us.

I've been self-conscious about going to the bathroom for as long as I can remember. I was never the type of kid who could pee on the side of the highway or in the woods. Family camping trips were particularly challenging, as I'd insist that my father walk me to the nearest toilet whenever I had to go.

"Just go behind a tree, like your brother...and your sisters," he shouted.

"I can't!" I fired back. "The bears and owls are watching me."

At home, I had to run the water. "You know that none of us are actually standing by the door listening to you, right?" asked my sister. But, I was convinced she was lying, like the time she told me I was adopted from a family of dwarves or how the Tooth Fairy wasn't actually real. In high school, I was the one who'd run home when I needed to use the bathroom. And, even if I was alone, the door had to be shut.

Living with roommates was a big challenge, especially when I was in my early twenties and six of us lived in a cramped apartment with one bathroom. When one of my roommates, a huge environmentalist, yelled at me for running the water and "killing the earth," I started listening to music. I was too lazy to change the CD every time, so I played a lot of Barry Manilow. It worked at the time, but now I can't hear his music without feeling an urge to use the bathroom.

Over the years, I've gone beyond worrying about using the bathroom in public to fearing not having access to one. My biggest fear when flying, or other modes of travel, is not having an aisle seat because I'm too anxious about the person sitting next to me falling asleep or refusing to let me up. The same goes for sporting events, theater shows, and the movies. When I'm in a restaurant or bar, the first thing I do is look for the restroom.

Even though I won't be able to use them, I feel better knowing where they are. When I finally felt brave enough to discuss this with my therapist, he suggested I had a repressed potty-training trauma.

"Nope, never forced you to sit there and use a potty," explained my mother. "I thought that would be pretty cruel, and I preferred to torture you in other ways."

When my therapist wasn't able to offer much help, I turned to a friend who also has a shy bladder. "We have to use the bathroom together," he suggested. I was taken aback by the idea, but he explained that his therapist recommended he use a urinal while standing next to someone he trusted, and it helped a lot.

"Okay," I reluctantly agreed, "But we're not crossing the streams."

We had a few drinks, and then headed for the bathroom. Thankfully, it was empty, but the moment still felt weird.

"Do I have to stand right next to you?" I asked.

"Yes. It's all about getting in each other's personal space and being okay with it."

Yet, I was far from okay. I imagined we were in a sitcom, like Joey and Chandler on *Friends*. I envisioned us as doing anything but taking part in this bizarre ritual. We laughed at the absurdity of the situation. We could get changed in the same locker room or use a communal shower area at the gym, but could not urinate while standing next to one another. I gave up and used the stall, and he soon followed suit.

More recently, my bathroom phobias nearly jeopardized my love life. My significant other, who I'd been with for eight months, proposed we move in together. A 37-year-old New York cynic who was perpetually single, I never expected something like this to happen, yet was excited by the idea.

"When do you think you'd be ready?" he wondered.

"I don't know, probably when I feel comfortable enough using the bathroom without having to run the water," I replied, then beat myself up for deflating the romance.

An empathetic and caring guy, he urged me to take my time, but on my first night in the apartment, I caused the toilet to overflow, which gave me a whole new set of anxieties. I was so mortified that I wanted to leave and go back to my old place or maybe spend a night alone in a hotel.

He assured me that it was okay, it was old plumbing and accidents happen, but it took me over a week to feel comfortable enough to use the bathroom again — and I still insist on running the water whenever I do.

<http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/health/a35271/fear-of-peeing-in-public-paruresis/>