

The psychology behind bathroom habits

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By Megan Ray Nichols



It's something we do every day, but most of us don't think twice about it...

It is, of course, using the lavatory. However, there is some curious psychology behind all the choices we make in that room, from which cubicle we choose, to whom we take there with us. Let's examine the brain basis behind bathroom habits.

Modern Privacy

The idea of using the toilet in private is a relatively new one. Until the 1800s, privacy in restroom facilities was nonexistent. The Romans and many other ancient civilizations maintained public baths anyone could use. The concept of privacy wasn't something that applied to bathing and lavatory use.

Much of this also ties into the fact that modern modesty has changed the way we think of the time we spend in the toilet. Controlling our bodily urges is something we learn early, and the idea that losing control is both humiliating and disgusting, is something ingrained in us from childhood. This has created a culture of privacy that leads to many of the behaviors we don't think twice about.

Paruresis and Anxiety

Are you one of the 220 million people around the globe that can't urinate if someone is watching, or even in the same room? This particular type of social anxiety disorder is defined by the DSM 5 — the guide used by psychiatrists and psychologists to help them generate a mental health diagnosis — and is called "paruresis". More colloquially it's known as "bashful bladder". In extreme cases, it can cause people to become agoraphobic because they can't use the toilet in public. In other situations, individuals who suffer from paruresis resort to the use of catheters to relieve themselves.

This condition has its foundation in anxiety. People who are pee-shy are often worried about being judged for their urination habits. They are unable to use public restrooms or any facility where there might be someone nearby who could judge them.

There is also a scientific name for people who are poop-shy: "parcopresis" - but it isn't usually as extreme as paruresis, because most people don't need to have bowel movements as frequently as they need to urinate. Thankfully, both of these forms of social anxiety can be treated with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and medication, just like any other form of anxiety.

Choosing a Stall

How do you select a cubicle when you're using a public toilet? Assuming you're bypassing any occupied cubicles, what thought processes go into finding the perfect place to relieve yourself? The toilet you choose will depend mainly on your gender. One survey found that men will want to use a centre stall 40 per cent of the time, while women will only choose the middle 29 per cent of the time.

When it comes to urinals, it seems to be an unspoken rule in the men's room that you never choose a urinal that is directly next to an occupied one. If the urinals are unoccupied, though, men will usually opt for the one closest to the door rather than venture further into the restroom.

If you want the cleanest cubicle in any given toilet facility, avoiding the middle one is usually your best bet. It is the one that most people, male or female, will choose given the opportunity, so it sees the most traffic and thus has more bacteria. It's also the stall that is most likely to be out of toilet paper. If you're shy about using the bathroom in public, the last thing you want to do is have to ask your stall-neighbor for some toilet paper!

Time on the Toilet

It's a bit of a running joke that women spend more time in the bathroom than men do, but this stereotype is backed up by the literature. One study found that women spend nearly twice as long on the toilet than their male counterparts. Preparation differences aside, the time difference has two primary reasons: restroom design and gender differences.

Men's toilets can accommodate more people at a time than women's. This is why there is usually a queue for the women's room but rarely a line for the men's. Urinals take up less space, which means more of them can be fitted in the room, with a stall or two in the back for defecation. Women's bathrooms have booths throughout, taking up more space and providing fewer facilities.

The stalls in the toilets also add to the amount of time women spend in there. Women generally have more doors to open and close, and more clothing to remove and replace when they need to do their business. It's a lot easier for men, leading to faster turnaround times.

Folding vs. Crumpling

Do you fold your toilet paper before you use it, or pull it off the roll and crumple it in your hand? If you're in the latter group, you're a minority. Nearly twice as many people fold their toilet paper before use than crumple it, though young people and men tend to crumple more than they fold. Spending an extended amount of time in the bathroom also increases the likelihood that you will crumple instead of fold.

Folders tend to be more meticulous and may even be perfectionists. Crumplers, on the other hand, tend to be more creative and impulsive — or they might be in a hurry. Even the most meticulous folders might crumple if they need to get out of the restroom quickly.

We don't care if you crumple or fold, as long as you hang the toilet roll correctly. The original patent for the toilet paper roll, which was filed in 1891, shows it hanging "over". Anyone who hangs it "under" is therefore wrong!

We don't spend much time thinking about the toilet unless the sink backs up or the loo overflows, but we spend a lot of time in this room every day. When it comes down to it, the most significant divisions in bathroom psychology are due to gender. What about you? Do you crumple or fold? Which stall would you choose in an empty restroom?

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