Getting over the awkwardness

A few months back, an attorney I know pulled me aside to impart some useful advice. He told me about a networking event he attended earlier in the week and suggested that I get some business cards. “They’ll come in handy at networking events,” he told me. “You should probably be going to two or three of those a week.”

I responded that I might go to two or three a semester. He paused as if waiting for me to follow that statement up with “totally kidding ...” I didn’t. After the uncomfortable silence fully set in, I explained how none of the events I’d seen in the past seven months really caught my eye. I hoped that would mitigate the disapproval.

That explanation was a lie. The truth is, I dread networking the same way I dread any forced social interaction.

I could list a million reasons why, but the primary one is that I am incredibly awkward in these types of settings and I haven’t done anything I’m terrible at since I swore off organized sports.

His last piece of useful advice was that if I didn’t start putting myself out there, I am going to be unemployed.

The thing is, he is probably right. Networking is an important professional tool. The reasons are endless: Most jobs are unposted. People typically land jobs through references. It’s important to keep yourself visible. You should make contacts before you need them, et cetera.

I do understand that. However, I feel like I’m saving a lot of people, including myself, from a very uncomfortable situation. That should count for something! I’m aware of my shortcomings and am accordingly unsurprised when I encounter classmates, Starbucks baristas or street performers who go out of their way to avoid interacting with me. I know that I have to get over this if I ever want to function in a professional capacity.

Interacting with people is a fact of life. Particularly since it has become clear that I do not possess the necessary skill set to be a hunter or gatherer.

No matter how easy avoidance is, civilized society owns me and I must play by its rules. In order to do this, I’ve taken a step back and focused in on a few of my more glaring weaknesses. Because admitting you have a problem is the first step.

At the most basic level, I am very uncomfortable with talking myself up. In order to deal with my discomfort, I become extremely self-deprecating; almost excessively so. The device comes into play more frequently when I am uncomfortable because it is one of the least frowned upon defense mechanisms I have at my disposal.

The problem is that when I’m meeting someone for the first time, they have no way of knowing that I am speaking almost entirely in hyperbole and sarcasm. Particularly when I use it poorly. While close friends and family understand that I am a fully functioning adult and appreciate the humor, someone who has just met me will likely find this rhetoric terrifying. It seems that when potential employers are thinking “why should we hire her?” the answer I’m hoping they settle on is either morbid curiosity or pity.

On the flip side of this, I occasionally talk myself up to epic proportions and pretend I’ve achieved accomplishments I have not. Anyone who catches on to the fact that I wasn’t actually the homecoming queen probably thinks I’m either insolent or a really bad liar. I’m sure there are more artful ways to talk yourself up, it’s just that I haven’t been able to think of any in between my time spent cleaning up highways and hand-carving toys for orphans.

I also have a tendency to fill every silence with incessant jabbering. In an unfamiliar situation, silence is intimidating. Because we’ve just met! And we should have a lot to talk about.

When I run out of small talk (I have about three minutes worth) it becomes an unpredictable free-for-all that has occasionally taken a turn for traumatizing. I have a tendency to begin a narrative without the foresight to know where it is going. Taking the focus off me can prove equally risky. The adage “there are no stupid questions” is false and I know this from firsthand experience.

In the moments where I’m not speaking, I manage to mess up the listening part as well. It is exceptionally important to actually hear what people say. Some people say it is the most important part of conversing. This can be easy to forget in the moment. In especially stressful conversations I tend to think about what I am going to say next, rather than listen to the person who is speaking at the time. For some reason I don’t ask the speaker to repeat herself, I simply answer and hope my response is sufficiently applicable. In the instances where the reply should be more substantial than “yeah,” I’ve played up a hearing problem and/or a tenuous grasp of English.

Having recognized and examined my past errors, I’d like to apologize to those I’ve talked over, made uncomfortable, inadvertently insulted or just plain confused. Considering it may be impossible to make amends directly, mostly because I’m certain you’ve blocked my phone number, I can only hope this testimonial helps others similarly situated and you never have to relive the experience.

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