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PSYCHOLOGY

Being Socially Awkward Is Actually Awesome, According to Science

Ty Tashiro

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Tashiro is the author most recently of [Awkward: The Science of Why We're Socially Awkward & Why That's Awesome](#).

When I think back to the Bumper Boat Debacle of 1984, I can see the trappings of an **awkward moment**: I was in middle school; there were unknown bystanders; and people were telling me, “It will be easy.” I was at a family reunion in Colorado resort when my cousins and I stumbled upon the ride, and they suggested we should give it a try. I felt a vague trepidation, but I also wanted to be a good sport, and so a few minutes later I was boarding one of the small, round boats.

As the attendant began explaining how to operate the things, I caught a glimpse of the Los Angeles Dodgers logo on his blue baseball cap and it

triggered my strange, encyclopedic memory for baseball statistics. My mind wandered into a vast matrix of strikeouts, earned-run-averages... until I heard the clang of the starting bell.

Despite the straightforward branding of the bumper boat experience, I was startled when I was blindsided by my cousin Jeff. The collision scrambled my mind and sparked a fight-or-flight response. I locked my sights on my cousin's boat, cranked the steering wheel and slammed my foot on the accelerator.

To my surprise, I never arrived at my target, but instead zoomed on a path of concentric circles. The small engine was surprisingly mighty. As my circles tightened, I felt the collective stare of the other kids intensify as they took notice of my unusual tactic. A panic flooded my mind and washed away common-sense solutions such as releasing the accelerator or straightening the steering wheel.

I thought I would die of embarrassment. So goes the life of an awkward person.

As I recalled this and other long-forgotten stories and combed through hundreds of social science findings for my new book, I discovered the hallmarks of an awkward disposition: Awkward people like myself have an unusual perspective. We overlook minor **social expectations**. And we then struggle to navigate routine social situations. But this unique perspective also reveals a surprising upside to being awkward. It may not be as bad as we tend to make it out to be.

Simon Baron-Cohen and his colleagues at Oxford University have found that **awkward** individuals have an unusually intense focus, which gravitates toward interests governed by rules, such as those of logic or math. Awkward people show an exuberance for taking things apart, obsessively studying the components, then systematically putting those parts together in a new way, which is why they are more likely to “nerd out” over fields like science, technology, engineering or mathematics

and are drawn to leisure interests like gaming, collecting or, say, baseball statistics.

Their passionate, intense interest becomes even more interesting when one considers that researchers find a significant association between awkwardness and specialized talent. For example, Pedro Vital and his collaborators at Kings College found that the best predictor of striking **talent** in children was not their I.Q., but rather the kind of intense focus that is characteristic of awkward people. Not all awkward people will exhibit striking talent. But when their sharp focus, passionate interest and unusual perspective combine with a dash of natural ability, their interaction creates exciting possibilities.

Yet this sharp focus and systematic thinking can be an awkward fit with the messiness of **social life**. People are not fixed elements. They have different personalities, hold a wide variety of expectations, and sometimes they change their minds for no good reason at all. (I personally found it extremely difficult to make sense of novel social situations in the same way that some of my classmates struggled to solve new problems on an algebra test.) Being awkward can feel like being a traveler in a foreign country when you are not quite proficient in the local language: Routine situations like ordering a cup of coffee or taking the bus can be stressful and slight pronunciation or grammatical deviations can produce blush-worthy moments.

But if you are a determined traveler, you eventually get your coffee or arrive at your desired destination. In the same way, many awkward people find workarounds to social life and achieve a gratifying sense of belonging. One workaround I relied upon as a kid was systematically studying how my socially adept peers navigated daily encounters, rehearsing those skills at home, then pushing myself to try them in new encounters. Another social hack I discovered was that nonsocial skills can become useful at social gatherings, so I taught myself how to **cook**, take good photos and pour a foamless beer from a keg.

Awkward people are neither better, nor worse than anyone else — they simply see the world differently and have to exert more **effort** to master

social graces that come intuitively to others. If you're awkward, then your sharply focused attention can get stuck or your intensity becomes difficult to corral. Sometimes this means that you get turned around, spin yourself in circles, and your dad squeezes into a bumper boat to tow you back to shore. But you learn from these missteps and discover that they often take on a humorous flavor as they age.

You also learn that being a little different is not a liability. Embracing your unique perspective and exuberance for uncommon things is the key to realizing your unique potential.

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