

# How to Avoid Taking Things Personally

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I was sitting alone in the middle of a restaurant when I realized I had a huge stain the shape of Idaho across the front of my blouse.

I felt self-conscious. Like everyone was looking at me and my expansive stain. The negative feelings intensified even as I finished up my errands by picking up the dry cleaning (yeah, pretty sure they wanted to pull the shirt off me right there and give it a good wash).

But the truth is, probably nobody noticed the stain. In fact, it's unlikely they even noticed me at all.

Human beings are like that. So often we feel self-conscious and insecure — as though everyone is looking at us — yet everybody else is too busy with their own business to consider us much at all. Researcher Thomas Gilovich and his colleagues call it the “spotlight effect.”

“Because we are so focused on our own behavior, it can be difficult to arrive at an accurate assessment of how much — or how little — our behavior is noticed by others. Indeed, close inspection reveals frequent disparities between the way we view our performance (and think others will view it) and the way it is actually seen by others,” reads the study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published in 2000.

In fact, even our best moments may go completely unnoticed and unappreciated. Yet even with this knowledge in mind, I was embarrassed about the stain. The self-consciousness caused me to act a little more withdrawn in the restaurant and to joke about it at the dry cleaners.

The belief that everyone is looking at us can cause us to act differently and even keep us from doing things that would otherwise be fun and healthy. For example, many people don't go to movies or meals alone because they feel self-conscious, as though everyone else will think they don't have any friends. Of course, most of us never even notice.

The spotlight effect may keep others from joining a party where they know few people, or participating in a group fundraiser for a charitable cause.

One way to manage this kind of self-consciousness is to stop taking things personally. We can create little reminders and habits during our days that prevent us from getting caught up in this kind of single-minded self-focus. Here are some ways to do it.

- **Remember, you've got it going on.**

No matter what happens, dig deep to rediscover your self-confidence. You are a human being, which makes you fallible, just like everyone else. But you also have incredible skills and talents and abilities. Focus on those when you think others are watching.

- **Shift focus — help someone else.**

When you are caught up in your own self-consciousness, it means we become worried about how others perceive us. Switch that up by finding a way to help others. Giving back will leave you feeling better about yourself and get you out of this self-absorbed mode that makes you think everyone is watching you.

- **Be compassionate to yourself and others.**

We all get our feelings hurt and we all make mistakes. Remember that when the actions of others inadvertently affect you. Choose compassion over anger and forgiveness over revenge. Then, you'll be free to move beyond your insecurity into something that feels better.

- **Be still, get curious, examine the thought.**

When I'm feeling particularly vulnerable and find myself smack dab in the middle of personalizing everything, I try to pause and become mindful of my thoughts. This approach can help us to identify and scrutinize the beliefs that leave us feeling insecure and replace them with something more productive.

## **Reference**

Gilovich, T., Medvec, V. H., & Savitsky, K. (2000). The Spotlight Effect in Social Judgment: An Egocentric Bias in Estimates of the Salience of One's Own Actions and Appearance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 78(2), 211-222.