

Why You Think People Are Watching You (But They Aren't!)

My muscles are not big. So, I went to a gym to exercise. When I entered, I noticed three guys with big muscles standing together laughing. I was sure they were laughing at my small arm-muscles, and I felt embarrassed. Later I wondered if they were really laughing at me or at some joke.

I recently read about a famous experiment that helped me understand my embarrassment. A researcher painted a brown scar that looked real on the cheek of a young woman named Maria and showed her the scar in a mirror. Then he told her to enter a small room and have a conversation with a young woman inside. After ten minutes, Maria came out. She told the researcher, "That person was not friendly. She kept looking at my scar, and she didn't want to talk to me."

But here is the secret: Maria did not have a scar. Just before Maria went into the room, the researcher said, "Oh, I need to put some more makeup on the scar so it will stay brown." However, he secretly cleaned the scar off.

Maria didn't know it was gone. Because she was worried about the scar, she imagined that the other person was being mean. The truth was that the other person was trying to have a normal conversation. The researchers repeated this with many different women and the results were almost always the same. Every time, the women thought they knew what the other person was thinking, but they were mistaken.

Experts call this the "spotlight effect." We often feel like everyone is watching us, so we worry about how we look or how we act. Actually, most people are too busy thinking about themselves!

The spotlight effect shows up in other situations too. In another experiment, researchers asked a student named Alex to wear an embarrassing t-shirt into a room full of people. Afterward, the researcher asked Alex, "How many people noticed your shirt?" Alex guessed that 50% of the people noticed. But when the researchers asked the people in the room, only 20% saw it.

Most people didn't notice the shirt at all. When researchers repeated this experiment, the results were very similar. Every time, the person with the embarrassing shirt believed that most of the volunteers noticed them, but only a small number actually did.

These studies teach us something important: other people are not watching us as much as we think. They are busy with their own lives and their own worries—just like us. So, the next time you feel embarrassed in class, at work, or in public, remember: the spotlight is probably only in your head.

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Comprehension Exercise

Directions: Write T (true) or F (false) next to each sentence.

- ___ 1. The author felt embarrassed at the gym because he thought three men were laughing at his t-shirt.
- ___ 2. Maria knew the researcher had wiped the scar off her cheek before she went into the room.
- ___ 3. The researchers repeated the "scar experiment" many times, and the results were usually the same each time.
- ___ 4. The "spotlight effect" means that we often worry that other people are noticing our appearance or behavior.
- ___ 5. In the t-shirt experiment, Alex correctly guessed the number of people who noticed his shirt.
- ___ 6. The author suggests that most people are too busy with their own thoughts to pay much attention to us.

Paraphrasing Exercise

Directions: Imagine that you have this conversation with a friend.

You: I just read this interesting article.

Friend: Oh yeah. What did it say?

Write what you would tell your friend. Include as many details as you can.

After you finish writing a first draft, you can re-read the article and revise your draft.

However, don't look at the article while you are writing. You can use some of these **key words** in your paraphrase.

Key Words

• muscles • gym • embarrassed • Maria • brown scar • mirror • not friendly • kept looking at my scar • secretly cleaned the scar off	• spotlight effect • Alex • embarrassing t-shirt • room full of people • guess 50% • only 20% • busy with their own lives • in your head
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Reflection Exercise

Directions: Write a reflection about the article. Try to write a paragraph with several sentences. In your reflection, your first sentence can be one of these:

- *I found some interesting/important information in this article.*
- *After reading this, I now would like to (learn more about /read more research about /...)*
- *There is some information in this article that I could apply to my life.*
- *I agree / disagree with the author about something.*
- *This article reminded me of (me/ my family/my friend).*
- *I was surprised by something in this article.*