

"Eight Simple Rules for the Social Agoraphobe"

Foreword: You might think things come naturally to you.

0. Don't entertain this notion for very long. You've trusted your instincts countless times up until this point and look where its gotten you. To become the person you want yourself to be, you'll need to start actively training yourself out of some behaviours that seem "natural".

0a. Do not forget that none of your behaviours really are "natural". Behaviours are simply the reactionary product of external influences and internal thought. By avoiding harmful influence and thought, your behaviours will gradually grow to resemble the ones that you want.

0ai. Do not dwell on identifying harmful influence and thought. No good can come of thinking about such depressing things. Instead, picture yourself behaving in a way that makes you happy. Imagine sitting in an empty room, hidden from the rest of the world.

0b. Do not imagine this process as analogous to working on a piece of art. You exist among ever watchful eyes that will pick you tissue from tendon if you show a sort of artistic pride in yourself. Try thinking of yourself as a tree hidden in a sea of trees, trying not to fall.

0bi. Do not think of yourself as a stunted, misshapen, starved-since-sprouthood-for-warm-sunshine-and-fertile-soil tree. Think of yourself as a normal, healthy tree, planted in a pleasant grove with lots of opportunities to mature in a positive way.

0c. Do not expect yourself to immediately become the person you want yourself to be. Rome was not built in a day.

0ci. Do not compare yourself to any Great Civilizations of History. This is only setting yourself up for disappointment.

0d. Do not let any of this worry you. We'll start with baby steps.

0di. Do not grow complacent with baby steps. Effort will probably be required at some point.

1. Dream often.

1a. Set your alarm to wake you many times before you must leave your bed. Frequently being woken up allows you to enter many dreams when most people might only enjoy one.

1b. Make the best of dreams. Your mind is the safest and most boundless playground that you'll ever have access to. No real harm can ever come to you inside a dream. It is only your reactions to dreams that may cause pain.

1bi. If you dream of people, speak to them.

1bii. If you dream of places, explore them.

1biii. If you dream of adversity, confront it.

1biv. If you dream of love and friendship, open your eyes.

1biv-2. Do not attempt to reconstruct, replicate, or otherwise chase after dream experiences. Dreams provide an entertaining and sometimes insightful glance into yourself, but they are not a place to find reality. Think of them as roses, pleasing to look at from afar but thorny and painful to hold close to your chest. If you find that in a dream you can lift off the ground and soar over your city, you don't go jumping off skyscrapers the next day with hopes that "maybe something like that could really happen", *do you?*

2. Go outside on a daily basis.

2a. Make appointments with people as an excuse to leave the house. Fresh air and morning sunlight are good for your health, and the fear of disappointing someone by not showing up will likely outweigh your reluctance to go out in public.

2ai. Write fake appointments on your calendar months in advance. You will forget they are not genuine but you will still reap the benefit of having a reason to go out.

2ai-2. In the mind-haze of morning, look over the list of the day's engagements. Vaguely wonder why "*Cameron (Next Door) Bday Party 8pm*" seems more significant, more real, and more frightening than "*Fred (Work) Coffee @ Starbucks 12pm*", "*Charlene (Residence) Book Signing @ Midway Bookstore 3pm*", or "*Trevor (Childhood) Catching Up @ Fairview Park 9am*". Assure yourself that you'll think on it when your head is clearer.

2aii. Leave your house with hours to spare before appointments. This will decrease anxiety about being late, as well as give you an opportunity for a walk (see **3.**).

2b. Dress appropriately before leaving your house.

2bi. Do not overthink the definition of “appropriately”. Your goal is to be sufficiently clothed and safe, not to make an impression (leave that to the romantics and the irrationally self-actualized (see **4a.**)). Terms like “sharp”, “trendy”, or “bold” are extremely subjective and can in the eyes of many just as well be “self-important”, “attention-seeking”, or “ridiculous”. Instead, aim for “muted”, “acceptable”, and “unremarkable”.

3. Always look both ways before crossing the street.

3a. While crossing the street, avert your eyes from the windows of the cars on either side of you. Focus on keeping a steady pace.

3ai. Do not think of how busy the schedules of the drivers who are waiting for you to pass must be. It is not your fault you have to cross the street.

3b. Do not think of how much quicker you could be getting there if you had a car.

3c. Do not think about which of your bones might be the first to shatter if a rogue motorist disregards the stop sign and slams into you at highway speeds.

3ci. Do not think about the way in which your blood might bloom out into the brown puddles that dot the road.

3cii. Do not think about which of your fellow pedestrians would be the first to stoop down to check your pulse, the first to turn their eyes away in abject disgust, the first to call an ambulance, the first to lose themselves in awe at the frailty of life, the first to lend a hand hoisting you out of the street, the first to walk over your rusty smear once the commotion has died down, the first to cross the street and never give a thought to the fact that a person quite recently ended on the same spot they are now passing over on their way to work, etc.

3cii-2. Do not imagine how annoyed these pedestrians would be at the inconvenience you’ve caused them, the precious time lost, the damage to their psyches caused by witnessing such a gruesome display, the specks of blood that they’ll later begrudgingly wipe off their

shoes (“Some nut walked out in front of traffic today,” one witness absently says to his lady, probably a repressed housewife who’s only half listening because of course she’s gotta get supper on the table for the kids, “Y’know, there’s something really wrong with people like that. Why can’t they just blow their brains out in the privacy of their own home like the rest of us?”), etc.

4. Always be polite around strangers.

4a. Do not, in any situation, stare. Nobody (you included) enjoys feeling like prey.

4b. If you happen to encounter someone interesting while walking, and by some freak perversion of probability they start a conversation with you, keep this conversation as short as possible to avoid embarrassing yourself.

4bi. Develop a sense of eyeball rhythm for use in casual conversation. Do not use your aversion to eye contact as an easy excuse to stare off into one region of empty space, they will think of you as bored, uninterested, brain stuck in the stratosphere, a hamster fond of opiates, and these qualities will promptly be filed away in a mental cabinet labeled in bold red “REASONS TO AVOID FURTHER INTERACTION”.

4bi-2. Carry a prop with you at all times. A coffee cup, even an empty one is an easy and accessible choice. Glance down at the cup, flick your eyes up to their face for a moment, forehead mouth chin mouth hair mouth, let your eyes wander *just for a second* out through a window, pretend to think that you see someone you know but of course you don’t, back down to the face, notice a zit on their cheek and let your vision go soft.

4bi-3. Do not forget that most other people are not perfect, at least not on the outside.

4bi-4. Lift your coffee cup to your mouth but keep your lips closed, nod slightly, breath an “mhm”, hope they are still talking. Maybe you’re hoping they aren’t. Hamster on opiates.

4bii. Do not rely on cop-out solutions to feeling watched such as hoods, sunglasses, masks, or comically large hats. You might think that *hey, putting what essentially amounts to ‘curtains over your eyes will help you feel safer since nobody can peer in and see what you’re doing/thinking,*

right? But how many of them are using the same tactic as you? Not very many? You'll stand out. You'll be stared at. You'll feel like prey.

4bii-2. Do not try and count the people around you wearing sunglasses.

4bii-3. Do not try to visually collect demographics about People Wearing Sunglasses In The Place You Currently Are. It won't help. Won't make them any less judgemental. Concentrate on what you're doing. Are you crossing a street (see **3.**)?

4c. In most situations, keep an approximation of a smile taped to your face.

5. Frequent cafes.

5a. Keep in your mind the balance between convenience and frequency of these visits to any given cafe. Factors such as price, bean quality, distance from Home, space, comfort, attractiveness, courtesy of staff, and ambient music selection are important to consider, but blind economic devotion to the maximization of these variables will cause you to only ever visit one single cafe, which will in turn inevitably lead to you gaining Regular status.

5ai. “Well, what’s wrong with being a Regular?” you might ask. You find a nice cozy place where the baristas aren’t awful looking (but don’t you start staring now, see **4a.**) and the coffee tastes good. You find that if you sit in the right spot you can catch the sunset through a gap in the buildings. One day you decide to forget about regular drip coffee and try one of the fancier drinks with a ridiculous name that you see every day up on that blackboard menu, and now one of the pretty baristas knows your name since they have to write it on your cup. Sometime in the next week she’s working again and she remembers your name and you notice a unique lilt in her voice when she reads you back the price and you almost forget how much you hate looking people in the eyes and she flashes a smile at you and you’re already dead. You might as well start making funeral arrangements right now because over the next few weeks you’re going to give yourself daily palpitations thinking about the ideal things you could say to her and when you finally decide to think you’re ready and you promise yourself that you’ll do it tomorrow (do what, exactly? you don’t know) and on the way there you see her across the street pre-uniform with some guy, taller than you, combed, actually seems to *want to* stand out in a crowd, saying something like “good luck with your shift I’ll see you when you’re done”, and you’re so scattered by it

and distracted by your own runaway thoughts wondering how you let this happen again that you forget to look both ways before crossing the street and WHAM (see **3c.**).

5b. Do not assume that any given group of people in the cafe are laughing at you, unless you've done something truly horrible. Think of all the horrible things you've done and assess the probability that these people are aware of them.

5c. Keep your head down when sitting in such a public place. Indulging in people-watching is fine up to a point, but be wary of who may see you and interpret your apparent tasklessness as an invitation to sit down and "shoot the breeze".

5ci. Do not panic when some well-coiffed, moderately dressed, stubbled forgotten acquaintance from a previous employment or university class (you know it must be something more immediate than that, don't you?) takes such an opportunity and sits across from you with his own coffee. Stay calm, heave the corners of your mouth into a smile, and try your best to recall his name (it starts with C or K, you're sure of it), and why in the world he might remember you fondly.

5ci-2. Tailor your body language to that of reservation and protection. Postural details as simple as crossed legs, folded arms, slight downward incline of the chin, frequent glances away, and a general absence of feigned congenial interest will do wonders to subconsciously let these people know that they shouldn't be talking to you.

5ci-3. When you lose the thread of the conversation and he appears to be looking at you with a question in his eyes, "oh, yeah" is a safe bet for your response. People like it when people agree with them.

5ci-4. Notice that he is becoming more excited. Pick up a few scattered references to a large social gathering and hear a few names you're sure you recognize from somewhere. Assure yourself that you'll think on it later. Ignore thoughts to the contrary.

5ci-5. Always wait until you've finished up with the conversation, said farewells, promised to keep in touch, and watched your acquaintance leave the cafe before deflating in relief and allowing your mouth to sink back into linearity. Try not to overworry about anything that might have been said during the course of the conversation and how their opinion of you might have been lessened, you probably will never see them again anyways.

5ci-6. Do not think about how strange it was for him to end the conversation with “see you there.” Trying to understand the idiosyncrasies of other people is just asking for frustration.

6. Be able to recognize when you’ve done a good day’s work.

6a. Don’t push yourself too hard. A long afternoon of being in public is tiring for even the strongest agoraphobe. Unexpected social encounters magnify this exhaustion further.

6b. Be sure to take the streets devoid of any public transit stations on your route home from cafes. At this time of day, many people are leaving work and therefore returning to this neighbourhood. The chances of someone recognizing you is exponentially higher than in the morning.

6c. Think calm thoughts when you see a group of social-looking people your age loitering in the driveway next to yours. Remember you have no obligation to talk to them. Try imagining an immense, empty, white room.

6ci. Take deep breaths when you notice that one of them is approaching you. Refer to **4.** and **5bi.** Set your mind on the task of diffusing the conversation as quick as possible.

6ci-2. Hope that your heart palpitations aren’t having a noticeable effect when you recognize that this man is in fact the forgotten acquaintance from the cafe.

6ci-3. Run through all of the possible explanations for why he’s turned up at your house. Try applying Occam’s Razor.

6ci-3(a). Did he hide outside the cafe (perhaps behind a bush) to see which direction you were heading, before taking a public transit bus to meet you here and continue your earlier conversation?

6ci-3(b). Were you so rude and inconsiderate and vile in your earlier conversation that he has recruited his friends to intimidate you from ever going out in public again?

6ci-4. Hear the name Cameron from one of the people not approaching you. Feel the mental jigsaw coming together.

6ci-3(c). Does he *live* here? As in, “*Cameron (Next Door) Birthday Party 8pm*” *lives* here? That effort we talked about earlier (see **0di.**)? You’ll need that now.

7. Know how to improvise.

7* Attempt to disguise your earlier look of confusion as the wind-up to a sneeze. Fail miserably. Hear Cameron saying that these are his friends from home. Wonder where his home might be if it's not here. Shake hands with all of Cameron's home-friends. Dart your eyes between each of them as if you're trying to memorize their faces. Don't really look at their faces though, that's what a normal person would do (see **4a.**) Remember to keep trying to smiling. Pray their names don't need to be remembered later because you've already forgotten them. Hear the stocky one with a crewcut comment on your shoes, which are black with white laces. Look down at your shoes and back up to him. Approximate a smile of gratitude with softness in the eyes. Remember that you have to breathe. Sharply inhale and try to say "Well it was good meeting you guys" but miss the last couple words. Decide to cut your losses and just walk away. Hear Crewcut say that people will be coming over at 8pm. Turn around, make a big show of feigned exasperation and say that you completely forgot to buy any alcohol and therefore can't attend. Be told they have enough to share with you, being a neighbour and all. Say all of your nice clothes are in the wash. Hear them laugh and say that what you're wearing now is fine. Look at them. Attempt to smile for a few moments before choking out "alrightseeyouateight". Get inside your house before you scream.

7? Collapse onto your bed upon entering your room. Remember what you once read about meditation online and then dismissed as overly spiritual self-help. Close your eyes and count to ten. Mess up the rhythm at seven and start over a few times. Tell yourself that this won't be too bad. Assure yourself that it's just right next door, and that you can leave whenever you want if it's unpleasant. Feel that this is what progress might feel like. Check your phone and see that you still have an hour before the party begins. Think of how offended Cameron must be that you've forgotten to wish him a happy birthday both times you've seen him today. Hope he might forgive you. Wonder whether you deserve that.

7~ Approach Cameron's door at 8:45. Tell yourself this is late enough to avoid seeming visibly prompt. Hesitate before you knock and decide to wait until 8:47. Tell yourself this is a random enough time to avoid seeming visibly concerned with even multiples of 5. Do not worry about how stupid and paranoid this makes you. Finally knock and be invited in by Crewcut. Enter the house and be immediately swallowed by sound and light. Remember a few faces. Remember no names. Notice that everyone here is holding a drink. Remember your 'sub-rule' about this, was it **4ai-2** or **4bi-3**? Remember that Cameron

offered you beer earlier. Scan the room for what you recall to be his face and find nothing. Maybe if you'd actually *looked him in the eye* today you'd know what to look for, don't you think? Make your way into a living room and remember that Crewcut may have been talking to you earlier and that you've quite rudely walked away. Look around and fail to see him. Feel a palpitation when you realize you're still wearing your jacket in a room full of shirts. Feel sweat on your back. Wonder if it's because of the anxiety or the heat. Remind yourself that this is meant to be fun. Don't remind yourself that it's your own fault it's not.

7‡ Hide in a bathroom after failing to find Cameron for ten minutes. Breathe deeply and stare at your reflection in the vanity. Notice with some irony that it doesn't hurt when it's your own eyes you're staring into. Stay like that for a few minutes to regain composure. Ask the face in the mirror if you're going to really go out there and be a regular sociable person for a change. Remind yourself that the fact that you're asking yourself this is proof that the answer is probably no. Go out and try to be a regular sociable person for a change.

7± Ask a group of people who look younger than you what they do for a living. Feel all of their eyes crawling over you and try not to grimace. Hear them all answer, counterclockwise in a circle, and hear the question rallied back to you. Painted yourself into a corner now haven't you? Describe, like a blabbering idiot, some amalgamated lie about freelance writing, stockbroking, and data entry. See their looks change to bemused, unimpressed, and mocking (although they're probably all just bored). You were expecting them to look impressed; for this to have a good result? Remember who and what the fuck you are. Excuse yourself to get a drink and say that you'll be right back.

7€ See Cameron in the kitchen while trying to pour a glass of water from his tap. Try to get his attention before noticing he is intently speaking to a pale and oddly familiar blonde girl. Act like you weren't trying to get his attention and then realize with horror that you've gotten his attention. Be asked if you're having a good time and assure him he throws a great party. Be poured an obscene amount of clear alcohol into a red cup. Bring the cup to your nose and try to discern the nature of the liquid. Shudder and grimace when your nose is invaded by what smells like dragshow-strength nail polish remover. Shudder and cough when you take a sip and taste something that can only be described by you at this moment as industrial. Be introduced to Samantha, a blonde girl that Cameron seems to know quite well. Say a few

words of greetings to the girl and realize within a few seconds that Cameron has literally disappeared. Feel the quicksand creeping up past your neck. Ask her what she does for a living. Almost do a spit take (are you a fucking cartoon character? Get a hold of yourself.) when she replies that she is a model, or at least a part time model. Learn that she mainly makes money working at a cafe. Ask which one, and be told that it's the one you used to frequent. Feel your chest constrict. Try your best to listen to the actual words she's saying.

7... For the remainder of the conversation, repeatedly remind yourself that what either of you are saying does not matter. As a creature of bafflingly reclusive habit, know that this conversation is a railroad terminating off a cliffside. Know that Samantha does not think you're funny (see **0ci.**). Know that Samantha won't think about you tomorrow (see **0ci.**). Know that you have a problem (see **0bi.**). Know that you've been trying to fix the problem of other people by burrowing yourself into the ground and that the walls of your hollow have long since collapsed in onto you (see **0b.**). Know that failure isn't *an* option anymore, it is *the* option (see **0ci.**). Know that everyone in the room is looking at you, either directly, peripherally, or metaphysically (see **4a.**). Try your best to smile (see **4b.**). When the noise gets to be too much, imagine a large empty room (see **0ai.**). Nod in agreement to questions (see **5ci-3.**). Don't aim to be too interesting with your questions or responses (see **2bi.** *God* this is getting tiring, don't you think?). Despite how painful this is, resist the urge to imagine preferable alternatives (do not see **3c.**).

7! Breathe. Remember to breathe. Take a sip of that clear industrial-tasting alcohol that Cameron poured you (see **4bi-4.**). If Samantha asks you if you want to go somewhere less crowded, say yes too quickly. Think about the possible subtext of her question. Think about the unintended subtext of your answer. Think about where you're going. Be led by Samantha into some kind of basement. Comment on how it's much quieter and less loud down here. Feel stupid about your word choice and take another sip of the clear industrial-tasting alcohol (see **4bi-4.**). Hear her say that she prefers it that way. Hear her say that large groups of people give her a lot of stress. Feel a mixture of relief and fear rushing through you. Feel a desire to tell her all about yourself and how true that is for you as well. Plug your mouth with your glass and take another sip (although let's be honest, they're more like gulps at this point) of your clear industrial-tasting alcohol (see **4bi-4**) to stop yourself from spouting some social one-downmanship. Listen as much as you can, agree with everything she's saying and then think about how you're not even in the

cockpit right now, not actively *trying* to agree, smile, laugh, make small jokes, etc; despite not having reminded yourself of **4bi-4**. in several minutes (must be at least five since you've been down here right?) you look down and see that the red solo cup that Cameron gave you full-to-the-brim with clear industrial-tasting alcohol has transformed into a simple empty red solo cup that Cameron gave you. Swing your attention back to Samantha and think really think for the first time tonight just how goddamn pretty she is and feel a darkness welling up in you as you remember the thorns that adorn every rose but dammit you aren't afraid of some little plant's evolutionarily developed defence mechanisms no matter how metaphorical they may be and after a few seconds of the deepest self-searching that you might have ever done in your entire life have a glimmer of realization that you might actually have the courage to look her in the eyes and feel all the words floating around in your skull that - once put together in the right order - would make quite a romantic little observation about the party and life and everything else and this is the moment it all changes it all blooms if only you could keep your head steady and if you can just get your eyes just for a couple seconds focus on

Ω. Always leave parties without saying goodbye to anyone.

Ωa. See Cameron smoking a cigarette on his front lawn. Approach him without planing what to say. Maybe apologize.

Ωai. Say that the fresh air is nice. Mean that being in there was too hot. Hear him agree. See him look up at the stars. Do that. Wonder out loud about how the stars can stand being up there all the time with everyone staring at them every night, never changing or trying to hide. Hear him laugh. Feel your face get hot with embarrassment.

Ωaii. Say that you're feeling exhausted and are going to go to bed. Hear Cameron tell you to wait. Stop. Turn around. Sense oncoming scorn through numbed thoughts. Regret, in order, everything you've said for the past 4 hours.

Ωaii-2. Hear him ask you to keep in touch. Say that you will.

Ωaii-3. Hear him say that he's serious. Say you know.

Ωa_{ii}-4. Hear him say he could tell you didn't want to be there tonight. Hear him say he could tell in the cafe that you weren't really listening to him. Deny it. Hear him deny your denial. Stand there in silence for a few seconds.

Ωa_{ii}-5. Apologize for seeming like you didn't want to be there. Be interrupted.

Ωa_{ii}-6. Hear him make an impassioned plea for you to start trusting other people.

Ωa_{ii}-7. Hear him try and convince you that he was happy you came.

Ωa_{ii}-8. Hear him lie about how his friends actually liked you.

Ωa_{ii}-9. Hear him ask if you got Samantha's number.

Ωa_{ii}-10. Hear him make - for some reason that you could never fathom no matter how much time you thought about it - a real effort to actually help you.

Ωa_{iii}. See Cameron hand his phone to you. Hear him ask you to enter yourself into his contacts. Hear him say he wants to hang out sometime. Hear a note of honesty that you don't usually hear around goodbyes. Resist the urge to type random a random number instead of your own.

Ωa_{iii}-2. Type your real number.

Ωa_{iv}. Trust someone. Imagine a rose with no thorns.

Ωa_{iv}-2. Feel it all welling up and know any attempt to express it would result in an altogether messy and embarrassing display.

Ωa_v. Say goodbye.

Ωa_{vi}. Say thank you.

Ωb. Go back into your house.

Ωb_i. Go into your room.

Ωb_{ii}. Lie down without taking your clothes off.

Ωb_{iii}. Close your eyes.

Ωb_{iv}. Feel hot tears pooling in your bottom eyelids.

Ωb_v. Without really trying to, smile.

Ωb_v-2. Think about how ridiculous you look.

