

Blushing anxiety could become a thing of the past

February 14 2017, by Pepita Smyth

Researchers at Murdoch University have been the first to investigate the underlying psychological mechanisms that leads to a fear of blushing.

This research could greatly reduce the number of sufferers opting for nerve destroying surgery to treat blushing.

For some people the fear of blushing, also known as Erythrophobia, is so intense they occasionally resort to neurosurgery in the hope that cutting the nerves that triggers the blushing will cure their ailment.

The surgery has limited effectiveness and nasty side effects, which can include excessive sweating – instead of blushing.

Blushing is hardwired as an automatic response to emotional cues because of its adaptive survival function. Fear of blushing is characterised by an extreme concern about blushing in front of others, and is associated with negative automatic thoughts about the [social costs](#) of blushing.

One of the key findings of the study – lead by Professor Peter Drummond and Sally Gatt from the School of Psychology and Exercise Science at Murdoch – found a greater need to focus on treating the anxiety behind blushing rather than the blush itself.

"This is the first time that blushing and the underlying psychological mechanisms behind developing and maintaining fear of blushing have

been examined. It lays the first step for further research and more importantly clinical therapeutic research to treat Erythrophobia," Ms Gatt said, who conducted the research project during her Master of Applied Psychology degree at Murdoch.

"Often people with Erythrophobia focus on finding a cure for the blush, rather than lessening the fear about blushing.

"If more is understood about the underlying psychological mechanisms of this anxiety, effective targeted therapeutic treatment could be possible."

In the research paper, published by the Australian Psychological Society, Professor Drummond and Ms Gatt revealed that beliefs about feeling unlike others, and a strong need to conceal private thoughts and feelings to evade public criticism, may be particularly important for triggering a fear of blushing.

"People who fear blushing appear to have a strong automatic association between blushing and negative social outcomes, and explicit expectations about the social costs of blushing," said Gatt.

"The current findings indicate additional strong associations between fear of blushing and beliefs about feeling different from other people, and a compelling need to hide private thoughts and feelings to avoid social disapproval."

Gatt, now a Clinical Psychologist, said addressing these beliefs in schema-based therapy could assist with managing a fear of blushing.

The study also discovered a chronic fear of blushing can vary in intensity depending on context and life events, and often stems from negative childhood experiences.

"The unhealthy philosophies that underlie fear of blushing could be triggered by traumatic experiences, like being humiliated or ridiculed for blushing or – like other forms of social anxiety – might stem from parental childrearing attitudes and practices," Gatt added.

"This [fear](#) often seems to be out of step with the actual intensity of blushing. Childhood experiences that promote [psychological mechanisms](#) increase social interaction anxiety which, in turn, increases anxiety about the costs of blushing."

Provided by Murdoch University

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