

The cringe factor

[**SELF**] It's a normal human instinct to care about what other people think – especially in embarrassing situations. But do you care too much? Then it might be time to cheat-sheet what usually comes with age and experience, says **Eleanor Tucker**

The other day, I was talking to a group of fellow mums by the school gates. One of them asked me something, and instead of words coming out of my mouth in reply, the sweet I'd been sucking popped out instead. It slid down my chin, leaving a syrupy trail, then made a tinkling noise as it smashed on the ground. They all looked at me with a mixture of concern and fascination. And I'll admit it, I was embarrassed.

It was only later that I realised that the incident, registered as 'moderate' on the cringe scale, would have been worthy of a house move 15 years ago. I started to wonder what has made me (slightly) less able to be embarrassed as I've got older? 'Embarrassment is invariably driven by fear; a fear of looking stupid, not being liked, or being different from other people,' explains personal development coach Cheryl Goldenberg of The Pickle Shed. 'When you are young, you want to fit in and be part of the crowd. But as we get older,

most people learn to trust their judgement and follow their instincts, even if they risk falling flat on their face.'

So is it age or experience? 'Both,' says Goldenberg. 'As we mature, our confidence grows. Once we've experienced embarrassment, we get stronger and more resilient. At first, we feel like we're going to 'die of embarrassment,' then we realise it's just uncomfortable rather than terminal, and we become more comfortable in our own skin.'

Learning to care less

This got me thinking. If experience is part of not feeling embarrassed when you exit the restaurant loos with your skirt tucked into your knickers, then can we *learn* to be less bothered, instead of waiting to become a 'couldn't care less' 80-year-old, who smokes cigars and wears a pirate hat to the post office?

I asked Barbara Markway, co-author of *Dying Of Embarrassment: Help For Social Anxiety & Social Phobia* (New Harbinger, £10.24). 'As we grow older

and grow up, we learn that the probability of negative outcomes is less than expected. We may also discover that the severity of the outcome is less than we feared. This allows our internal alarm system to relax. And we may learn coping strategies that help us tolerate the unpleasant feelings that can accompany embarrassment.'

As I work from home, I rarely have to put myself in professional situations where I'd be worried about being embarrassed, like speaking in front of a large group. However, I do have a two-year-old, which, when it comes to public humiliation, is the equivalent of undressing on a train during rush hour. And sure enough, it wasn't long before I was able to put Markway's insights to use. I was on a bus with the toddler in question, Phoebe, when she asked, loudly and clearly, if the woman opposite us was 'a man or a lady'. The whole bus went quiet and I felt a rush of colour to my cheeks. Then I thought about the probability of a negative >>>



>>> outcome – unlikely, as we were getting off at the next stop, and the poor woman didn't look like she wanted to take either of us on. As for a coping strategy, I opted for distraction: after answering Phoebe quietly, I pointed out everything and anything from the window while my blushes subsided.

I felt in control, and as if I'd somehow gained about 10 years of embarrassment experience. But what if you are not over 30, or not experienced in dealing with face-reddening experiences – which can be anything from dropping a bottle of red wine on the cream carpet of somebody you don't know very well, to fluffing the lines of your presentation at work? What tips would an embarrassment expert have for someone starting out in the cringe-worthy moment-collecting experience that is life? Or my life, anyway.

Don't beat yourself up

'Be gentle to yourself,' Markway says, 'and don't beat yourself up for feeling embarrassed. It happens, and it can be painful, so give yourself the kindness that you would give a good friend. Realise that we all make mistakes, some of which will be embarrassing social blunders. It's part of our shared humanity. And it helps to acknowledge this and realise you're not alone.'

This is all well and good, but I wish I had the confidence of someone truly

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immune to embarrassment. So I spoke to Viv Groskop, comedian and author of *I Laughed, I Cried: How One Woman Took On Stand-Up And (Almost) Ruined Her Life* (Orion, £11.99), to discover what goes on in the mind of someone who is pretty much the same age as me, and also a mother, but somehow capable of dealing with the kind of experiences that would have the rest of us moving away to live on a small island off the coast of Alaska. For ever.

'I have done so many embarrassing things in front of audiences,' Groskop recalls. 'I once danced to some theme music as I came on stage, only to realise that the sound man thought it was an actual dance and he shouldn't turn the music off. So I just kept going until I eventually ran out of dance moves. I have always been relatively 'unembarrassable' and doing stand-up has made me even more so.'

How does she do it? 'Embarrassment just gets in the way of learning things and connecting with people; it's a distraction,' she points out. 'It's about shame and self-consciousness. The latter is easier to shake off: you just have to put yourself into the kind of situations you fear. Shame, however, is more complicated. More than hatred, jealousy or anger, shame is the one emotion people want to avoid. It's part of life though, and you have to accept that it crops up. But it doesn't have to cripple you or stop you from doing the things you want to do.'

Feeling inspired, I decided to test my school gate audience again soon after. It was 8.30am, and my son and I were playing zombies in the car. This was normally a game that I would stop at the gates, but this time, I decided to simply carry on, right into the playground. I hadn't had a coffee at that point either, so it was true method acting, and I really went for it. Most of the mothers couldn't work out what on earth I was doing as I walked in, stiff-limbed and moaning, preceded by my guffawing five-year-old. I am clearly not a very good actress.

But it was the 'exposure' Groskop had talked about: I was putting myself in a situation I feared – not hugely, but I wouldn't have done it under normal circumstances. And it was OK. In fact, it was fun – although I was a little embarrassed by some of the looks I was getting. But that's not a bad thing, says Markway. 'Evolution suggests that embarrassment is linked to sharing the values of "the pack". Caring about what others think is a survival strategy that is hard-wired into us.'

So have I got the right balance now: caring a bit but not too much? It would be great to be 'unembarrassable', like Groskop, but I'll stick with caring a bit, and adopt this Ellen Degeneres quote as my new mantra: 'What other people think of me is none of my business.'

For more on Cheryl Goldenberg, see thepickledshed.co.uk

EMBARRASSMENT: HOW TO NIP IT IN THE BUD

Personal development coach Cheryl Goldenberg suggests two ways to head blushes off at the pass:

Knowledge is power, so practise, practise and practise **when you need to deal with a big event that's out of your comfort zone. Practise in front of a mirror, with friends or even with the help of an expert. A professional voice or job interview coach might be your greatest ally when you're facing an important situation that makes you feel anxious.**

Remember a time when you felt super-confident and good about yourself. **Where were you? What were you doing? Who were you with? Once you've immersed yourself in the feeling, spend a whole day with it and discover the joy of living with confidence. Whenever it begins to flag, just take yourself back to that moment and relive it again.**