

Everyone was looking at their own shoes

A short book about feeling watched and judged in public
when most people are busy with themselves

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit, which is walking into a room, a café, a gym, a meeting, a bar, a bus, and feeling that the room has turned to look at you. Not a room of friends. A room of strangers or near-strangers who, as far as you can tell, are noticing what you're wearing, how you're walking, that you're on your own, that you said the wrong thing, that there's a mark on your jumper, and who are filing all of it away and coming to a view. You plan your route across the floor. You practise the sentence. You take the long way round to avoid the group by the door. And afterwards, on the way home, you go over it and find the bits they must have seen.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the feeling makes sense from the inside. You can see yourself very clearly, and it's hard to believe that everyone else can't. The second is that the feeling is wrong in a particular, measurable way. There's a body of research, thirty years of it, on how much people think others notice them against how much others actually notice, and the gap is large and runs in one direction. People notice you less than you think, remember less than you think, and judge you less harshly than you think, and the reason is that they're doing what you're doing, which is watching themselves. The third is practical. You can check this in any room in about a minute, and once you've checked it a few times the room changes. Chapters 19 to 22 cover how.

This book isn't going to tell you to stop caring what people think. Caring what people think is most of what makes people bearable to be around. It's about the audience that isn't there.

Three cautions.

If the feeling is more than uncomfortable, if it stops you doing everyday things, if you avoid shops or phone calls or eating with other people because of it, or if it's been like that for months, then the NHS describes that as social anxiety, and says it's common and treatable and that a GP is the person to see. You can also refer yourself to an NHS talking therapies service without going through a GP. This book can sit beside that. It isn't a substitute for it.

If people do look at you, because of a visible difference, a disability, a wheelchair, your skin, then some of what follows applies and some of it doesn't, and I'm not going to tell you it's all in your head. Chapter 23 is written for you, and the rest of the book should be read with that chapter in mind.

And if your problem is less the room than getting to it, the invitation you turned down because of nerves, then the book for you is *Go anyway*, in this series. This one starts once you're through the door.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The café, the bar and the meeting

It's a café with a window table free. You want the window table. You've got a book and forty minutes and a coffee you've already ordered, and the table is over there, past six other tables with people at them. You stand with the cup and you look at the route. You'll have to walk past the couple, and the man with the laptop, and the two women who are laughing at something, and then sit down on your own, in the window, where the street can see you too. You take a table by the wall instead. It's fine. You didn't want the window that much.

Or it's a bar, and your friends are at the far end, and between you and them is the whole length of the room, and you know exactly how you walk when you're being watched, which is badly. Or it's a meeting, and you have a point to make, and you've made it four times in your head and each time you've heard how it sounds, and by the time there's a gap in the talk the point has been made by someone else, worse, and everyone nodded. Or it's the kerb outside the bus stop, where your foot went sideways and you did a small, ridiculous hop, and for the rest of the afternoon your face is hot.

These are invented, but I'd guess one of them is close. Some words. **The room** is anywhere the feeling arrives, and it's usually a public place with strangers or near-strangers in it. **The audience** is the imagined set of people in the room who are noticing you, remembering you and coming to a view. **The beam** is the feeling of being lit and looked at, the heat on the skin, the awareness of your own arms. **The headcount** is your estimate, when the beam is on, of how many people saw. **The mark** is the thing you believe is on

show, the stain, the haircut, the flush, the wobble on the kerb. **The run-up** is the practising before the room, the route, the sentence, the outfit checked twice. **The sting** is afterwards, on the way home, when you go over it. And **the shoe count** is an exercise, which chapter 19 is about, that takes a minute and answers the headcount with a number.

Before you go on, do one thing. The next time the beam comes on in a room, before you do anything else, make the headcount. How many people in here noticed. Write it down, or say it to yourself as a number. Then, slowly, look at the room and count how many people are actually looking at you, right now, and how many are looking at their phone, their coffee, their friend, their own shoes. Write that down too. You'll want both numbers in chapter 3.

Why the audience feels real

Nobody invents an audience for fun. The feeling that a room is watching you comes from somewhere, and before this book starts arguing with it, it's worth being fair about what it's made of.

Some of it is true. People do look at other people. You've looked at someone's shoes on a train. You've noticed the person who tripped and you've noticed the person eating alone, and for a second you had a thought about them. Rooms aren't blind. And some of it is memory. Most people carry a few occasions when they really were looked at, the school corridor, the presentation that went wrong, the remark somebody made about a coat, and the audience is built partly from those. It's a reasonable guess that what happened once will happen again.

Some of it is the body. The beam doesn't arrive as a thought, it arrives as heat in the face and a sudden awareness of what your hands are doing. That's very convincing. A feeling with a pulse in it doesn't seem like an estimate. It seems like a report.

And some of it is doing a job. If you believe you're being watched, you'll check the jumper before you leave and you won't say the half-formed thing in the meeting, and both of those look like protection. The audience keeps you tidy. Underneath, there's a set of beliefs, and they're the chapters that follow. That everyone noticed. That they'll remember. That they judged. That you'd have noticed if it were them. That you can feel them looking, so they must be. That the mark is what they see. That being noticed would

be bad. That confident people don't get this and you're just not one of them. That it's how you are and can't change. That rehearsing helps. That the sting afterwards is a fair report of how it went.

Each of those has something true in it, and each of them does the same job, which is to keep the audience in the room. This book isn't going to say the room never looks. It's going to look at the size of the gap between what you think the room sees and what it actually sees, because that gap has been measured, and then it's going to give you a way of measuring it yourself.

"Everyone noticed"

Start with the headcount. You walked in with the mark, or you made the hop at the kerb, or you sat at the wrong table, and the number that came to you was high. Half the room. Most of the room. The number arrived without you working it out, which is part of why it feels right.

In 2000, Thomas Gilovich, Victoria Medvec and Kenneth Savitsky published a set of studies on exactly this number. They called what they found the spotlight effect. In the first two studies, they asked students to put on a T-shirt with a large picture on the front, in one version a singer chosen to be embarrassing to be seen in, and walk into a room where other students were already working.

Afterwards, the wearer was asked how many people in the room would be able to say who was on the shirt. Then the people in the room were asked. The wearers overestimated. An earlier book in this series read the paper in full and reported the numbers, which were that wearers expected about forty-six per cent of the room to have noticed, and about twenty-three per cent had. Roughly double.

The authors' explanation, which they tested in their fourth and fifth studies, is the one this whole book leans on. You start from your own experience, which is rich, because you've been thinking about the shirt since you put it on, and then you adjust for the fact that other people haven't. You do adjust. You just don't adjust enough, because you can't feel how little the shirt means to someone who's reading. The headcount isn't a count. It's your own attention, scaled down a bit and handed to the room.

Now go back to the two numbers from chapter 1. If you did the exercise, you've got a headcount and a shoe count, and I'd expect the same shape, a headcount well above what you saw when you looked. That's one room and one minute and it proves nothing on its own. But it's the same finding, and you got it yourself, which is worth more than mine.

"Everyone heard that"

Clothes are one thing. You might accept that nobody's reading your jumper, and still be sure that they heard what you said, because saying something is different. It goes out into the room. In the meeting, the point you made that didn't land, or the joke that got a small silence, or the question that turned out to have been answered on the previous slide, those have witnesses. Everyone heard.

The same paper has a study about this. Its third study put people in a group discussion and afterwards asked each of them how prominent their own contributions had been to the others, both the good ones and the bad ones. Then it asked the others. Both were overestimated. The remark you were pleased with stood out less than you thought, and so did the one you'd like back. The listeners weren't rating your contributions at all, mostly. They were thinking about their own.

That last part is the bit worth sitting with, because it's what a meeting is. Everyone in the room is composing their own point, or worrying that they haven't got one, or replaying the thing they said ten minutes ago. Your remark arrived into six other people's private meetings and was heard by six people who were busy. The silence after the joke was six people each deciding whether to laugh and looking to see if anyone else had, which takes about a second and feels like a minute if you're the one who told it.

I'm not saying nothing you say is heard. If you say something genuinely awful, people notice, and chapter 6 is about what they do with it. I'm saying that the volume of your own voice in your own head is not the volume at which it reached the room. The discussion study found the gap for good remarks too, which matters, because it means the fix isn't to say less. It's to stop assuming the room kept a transcript.

"They'll remember it"

Suppose some of them did notice. The person at the next table looked up when you did the hop. Somebody clocked the jumper. The next belief is that noticing is filing, and that the person who saw the mark now has it, and that the next time they see you it'll be the first thing they think of.

Memory for strangers doesn't work like that, and the evidence for how poorly it works is odd enough to be worth telling. Daniel Levin, Daniel Simons, Bonnie Angelone and Christopher Chabris published a paper in 2002 following up an earlier finding, which was that if a stranger stops you to ask directions and then, while something briefly blocks your view, is swapped for a different stranger, a good proportion of people carry on the conversation without noticing. The 2002 paper found the same thing across several situations, and found that the people who did notice the swap were better afterwards at picking the two strangers out of a photographic line-up. In plain words, a lot of people don't hold enough of a stranger's face to notice when it's been replaced mid-sentence.

That's someone you're talking to, who has your full attention, or what passes for it. The person at the next table in the café had a fraction of that. They looked up because there was movement, they saw a person do a small hop, and their attention went back to their phone. The T-shirt observers in chapter 3 mostly couldn't say who was on the shirt when asked minutes later. What you're imagining, a stranger carrying your mark around for a week, would need a kind of memory that people don't have for people they don't know.

There's an exception, and it's real. People who know you do remember things about you, and chapter 23 covers the small town and the office where the room isn't strangers. But the ordinary public room is strangers, and the honest description of what a stranger keeps of you is nearly nothing, and what they keep of the mark is less than that.

"They judged me"

The heaviest version of the audience isn't that they noticed or that they'll remember. It's that they came to a view. The person who saw you eating alone thought something about you. The one who heard the joke that didn't land decided something. And the thing they decided is roughly the thing you're afraid of, that you're odd, or sad, or not very good.

Kenneth Savitsky, Nicholas Epley and Thomas Gilovich ran four studies in 2001 on this, published under the question of whether others judge us as harshly as we think. People who imagined committing a social blunder, or who actually failed at an intellectual task in front of others, or who were described to others in an embarrassing way, were asked how harshly they'd be judged, and the people doing the judging were asked what they thought. The actors expected worse than they got, across all four. The authors put it down partly to the actors being fixed on their own misfortune, and partly to their not thinking about all the other things an onlooker weighs, the situation, the pressure, the fact that anyone might have done the same.

The following year, the same three authors published a paper that reconciles this with something that looks like the opposite, which is that people are in fact quite quick to judge others by their behaviour, a tendency researchers call the correspondence bias. If observers are harsh, why do actors overestimate the harshness? Because, they found, observers soften when they can easily

imagine being in the actor's shoes, and actors don't take that softening into account. They called it empathy neglect. You forget that the person watching you trip has tripped.

So the view they came to, if they came to one, is milder than yours. And it's worth adding that the view you imagine them holding is usually your own. The earlier book *It wasn't about you* covers what happens when you read a stranger's face as a verdict on you, and the short version is that the view is usually yours, projected outward and read back. The room didn't judge you. You judged you, in the room.

"I'd have noticed, if it were them"

Here's the objection that keeps the audience alive after the last four chapters. Fine, people don't notice much. But I do. I notice the person who trips, the person eating alone, the coat that doesn't go. I'm a watcher. So the room is full of people like me, and they're watching.

Erica Boothby, Margaret Clark and John Bargh published six studies in 2017 on this exact belief, and gave it a name, the invisibility cloak illusion. People believe that they observe others more than others observe them. They believe it about strangers in the same room and about friends they're talking to. It's not the general sense most people have of being a bit better than average at things, because the authors checked for that, and it isn't explained by believing you simply have more thoughts than other people. It's specific. Everyone thinks they're the watcher.

The authors make the point that has to be made. On average, that can't be true. Every act of watching has a person being watched, and if every person in the room believes they're doing more watching than being watched, most of them are wrong. Which is you, most of the time. You are watched about as much as you watch, which chapter 3 suggests isn't much, and you believe you're watched less than that, which is what the cloak means, and the belief holds even when they made people focus on a feature of their own appearance. That last result matters for the mark and comes back in chapter 9.

Now turn the objection round, because it does something useful. You're right that you notice the person who trips. What did you do with it? Try to recall, honestly, the last stranger you saw trip, or eat alone, or wear something that didn't go. Recall their face. Recall what you concluded about them as a person and how long you held it. If you're like the people in these studies, you noticed, had a half-thought, and were back inside your own head within a few seconds, and you don't have the face. That's what you're doing to them. It's what they're doing to you. Chapter 20 turns this into a method.

"I can feel them looking"

The beam isn't an idea. It's a physical thing, heat in the face, a stiffness in the walk, an awareness of your arms that makes them hard to use. And a physical thing seems like evidence. If I can feel them looking, they must be looking. Nobody blushes at nothing.

Two findings bear on this. The first is from 1998, from Gilovich, Savitsky and Medvec again, on what they called the illusion of transparency. People believe their inner states leak out more than they do. In their studies, people telling lies overestimated how detectable the lies were, and people hiding disgust at a drink overestimated how visible the disgust was. An earlier book in this series used this finding for nerves at a party, and I'm using it here for the beam, because it's the same mechanism. What you feel from inside is vivid, and you assume it's showing at the same strength. It's showing at a fraction of it.

The second is from Warren Mansell and David Clark, published in 1999, who studied people high and low in social anxiety before and after giving a speech. Among their results was a pattern in the correlations, which was that the more anxious people seemed to be using their bodily sensations, the heart, the heat, to estimate how anxious they looked and how well they came across, and were wrong in both directions, overestimating the first and underestimating the second. This was in people at the anxious end, and I'll come back to what that end looks like in chapter 13. But the mechanism is ordinary. The body is being used as a mirror, and it's a bad one.

Once after the dentist I'd guess you've had a numb lip, and been sure it was hanging, visibly, in a way everyone could see, and checked in a window and found your face looked exactly as usual. The numbness was real. The hanging wasn't. The beam is like that. The feeling is genuine and comes with a body, and the thing it seems to report, a room of eyes, is a separate claim, and the way to test it is the way you'd test the lip, which is to look, and chapter 19 is that.

"The stain, the haircut, the wrong shoes"

The mark is the audience's favourite thing. A mark on the jumper. A haircut that went shorter than you asked. Shoes that are wrong for the room. The mark is different from the general beam because it's specific, and you can point to it, and so, you assume, can everyone else. All morning it has been the most visible thing about you.

To you. The mark is salient because you've been looking at it, in the mirror and then in your mind, since you noticed it. Nobody else has that history with it. When someone sees you at eleven, they see a person in a jumper. They don't see the jumper against yesterday's jumper, or the hair against last week's hair, because they don't hold yesterday's version of you at all, and chapter 5 is about how little they hold. The haircut is a change. To see a change you need the before, and the room hasn't got it.

The 2004 paper by Nicholas Epley, Boaz Keysar, Leaf Van Boven and Thomas Gilovich, which an earlier book in this series used for reading other people's minds, describes how people work out what someone else sees. You start from what you see and adjust, in steps, and you stop at the first answer that seems plausible. With the mark, the first plausible answer is still a room that sees the mark, because you're adjusting from a morning spent looking at it. There's a paper from 2002 by Gilovich, Justin Kruger and Medvec on people overestimating how much the day-to-day variation in their appearance shows, which I couldn't read beyond the title and so won't quote, but the title is the point.

And Boothby's sixth study from chapter 7 tested the mark directly. Making people focus on a feature of their own appearance raised their belief that others were attending to that specific feature. It didn't change the wider finding that they were, overall, less observed than they believed. Both at once. When you fix on the mark, you become sure the room has fixed on it, and the room goes on doing what it was doing, which is not looking at you. The practical move is small and is in chapter 19. Before you go in, say what the mark is. Then count how many people look at it.

"Being noticed would be bad"

Suppose for a moment that somebody does notice. The person at the next table looks up and sees you properly, on your own with a book by the window. Somebody at the meeting really does register your point. The audience's last defence is that this is the bad outcome, that to be seen is to be marked down, so the aim is to get through the room unseen.

Most noticing isn't judgement. It's just noticing. And where research has looked at what people actually think of us once they've paid us attention, the finding runs the other way from what the beam predicts. Erica Boothby and colleagues published a set of studies in 2018 on what they called the liking gap, which an earlier book in this series, *Ring them first*, used for friendships. After conversations, people underestimated how much the other person had liked them and enjoyed their company. It held for strangers in a laboratory, for students getting to know the people they lived with, and for members of the public at a workshop, and among the students it lasted for months. People who had paid you real attention, enough to talk to you, came away thinking better of you than you thought they did.

That's conversation, which is more than a glance across a café, and I'm extending it. But the shape is the same as chapter 6. The view people take, when they take one, is milder and warmer than the one you write for them. Being seen by a stranger is not the same as being marked by one, and being seen by someone who then talks to you is on average a good thing that you'll misremember as a bad one.

Try to think of the last time you noticed someone in a room, really noticed, and what you felt. Sometimes it was a small unkindness, I'll grant. Mostly it was nothing much, or a flicker of interest, or a flicker of liking, the person with the good coat, the person laughing at their book. You are, to other people, sometimes the person laughing at their book. The audience never allows for that.

"Eating alone looks sad"

There's one room that deserves its own chapter, which is the one you're in on your own. The café table for one, the cinema seat for one, the restaurant, the gig, the walk round the gallery. Here the audience has a specific verdict ready. On your own means nobody to be with. And so the thing you'd like to do, you don't, or you do it with a phone held up as a reason.

Rebecca Ratner and Rebecca Hamilton published a paper in 2015 called *Inhibited from bowling alone*, on exactly this. They found that people hold back from enjoyable public activities alone, cinema, restaurants, because they expect other people to draw conclusions about how socially connected they are. And they found something I think is more useful than that. People overestimated how much their own enjoyment of the activity would depend on having someone with them. When the activity was made to look more purposeful, or when the expected number of observers was reduced, interest in doing it alone went up. The block wasn't the activity. It was the imagined room.

Their participants were being asked about consumer choices, and I'm carrying the result across to your café, which is an extension. But it lines up with everything so far. The verdict you expect, which is chapter 6, is harsher than the one people reach. The headcount, which is chapter 3, is higher than the real one. And the imagined enjoyment gap, that it won't be as nice alone, is the piece that's yours to test, because you can simply go and see.

Here's an invented example. Dan eats at the Italian place near his flat on his own on a Thursday because his flatmate's away, and sits with a book, and spends the first ten minutes with the beam on, sure the waiter has clocked him as someone with nobody. By the main course he's stopped noticing, because the book's good and the food's good. When he thinks about it afterwards, the only person in the restaurant he can describe is the waiter. He can't tell you who was at the other tables, and he's not sure anyone was looking at him, and he'd go again. The point of the example is the last part. Chapter 21 has it as a method.

"Confident people don't feel this"

At some point in this you'll have thought about someone who doesn't get the beam. They walk to the bar as though the bar's theirs. They say the thing in the meeting without a run-up. You put this down to a quality they have and you don't, and the word for the quality is confidence, and the audience's last line is that confidence is something people are issued with.

I'd question that in two ways. First, the spotlight studies weren't done on a nervous subgroup. They were done on ordinary students, whoever turned up, and the effect appeared across them. Overestimating how much you're noticed is what people do, not what a certain kind of person does. The confident-looking person at the bar, if you put a T-shirt on them, would overestimate the headcount too. That's my extension from the samples rather than a finding, and I'll say so, but it's the plain reading of who was tested.

Second, confidence isn't a possession. It's a description, from outside, of what someone's attention is doing. The person crossing the bar without apparent trouble is, I'd guess, mostly looking at their friends at the far end, or thinking about what they'll order. Their attention is out in the room. Yours, on the same walk, is on your own walk. From the outside, one looks confident and one doesn't. From the inside, the difference is where you're pointing.

That's better news than it sounds, because where you're pointing is something you can change on the spot, and chapters 19 and 20 are about pointing it outward. It's worse news for the belief, because the belief lets you off. If confidence were issued, there'd be nothing

to do but wait for it. An earlier book, *You wouldn't say it to a friend*, deals with the sentence you say to yourself about not being that sort of person, and the same applies here. You aren't a sort of person. You're a person whose attention, in rooms, goes inward, and this book is a set of reasons and ways to send it out.

"It's just how I am"

The last belief that holds the audience in place is the flat one. This is how I am. I've always been like this. Some people feel watched and I'm one of them and there's no more to be said.

Some of that is fair, and I want to be honest about the end of the spectrum before I argue with the middle. Jane Spurr and Lusia Stopa reviewed the research in 2002 on what's called self-focused attention in social anxiety, using a model from David Clark and Adrian Wells. In that model, attention turned inward is a maintaining factor. It increases access to negative thoughts and feelings, gets in the way of doing the thing you're doing, and stops you seeing the external information that might contradict the fear. People at that end build a picture of how they look from inside, often as though seen from outside, and it's inaccurate. That's the clinical end, and if you recognised yourself in the preface's list, it's worth taking that seriously and reading chapter 23.

But look at what the model says the mechanism is. It's attention. Not a trait, not a type of person, but where attention goes in the room. Susan Bögels and Warren Mansell reviewed the same area in 2004 and found reasonable evidence for treatments that work directly on attention, along with a list of the mechanisms they thought responsible, of which reduced self-focused attention was one. They also said better-controlled studies were needed, and I'll leave the treatment claims there, because this isn't a treatment book. The point I'm taking is smaller. The thing that keeps the beam on is described, by people who study the hardest cases, as something that moves.

So the belief is half right. You do turn attention inward in rooms, and you've done it for years, and that's a fact about you. The other half, that it can't be otherwise, isn't what the research says, even at the severe end. And in the ordinary middle, where I'm assuming most readers are, attention moves with a nudge, which is what the shoe count is.

"If I rehearse it, I'll be fine"

The run-up feels like the sensible response to all this. If the room's going to watch, prepare. Walk the route in your head before you walk it. Say the sentence four times so it comes out right. Check the jumper twice. A person who prepares is a person who's less likely to be caught out, and less caught out means less beam.

I think the run-up does the opposite, and here's why. The beam is built from your own attention, and the run-up is an hour of attention spent on yourself before you get to the room. Every rehearsal of the walk makes the walk bigger in your head, and by the time you do it you have a rich, detailed sense of yourself walking, which is exactly the anchor chapter 3 described. The people in the T-shirt study had been thinking about the shirt for a few minutes. You've been thinking about your walk since lunch. The adjustment has further to go and gets no further.

Spurr and Stopa's review describes the self-image at the anxious end as a picture built from inside, often from an observer's point of view, and inaccurate. The run-up is where that picture gets painted. You're not rehearsing the room. You're rehearsing yourself in it, from the outside, which is a view you don't have. This is my reading of what the run-up does, not a finding, and I'd only add that I've never met a rehearsed sentence in a meeting that came out better for the fourth rehearsal.

The alternative isn't no preparation. It's preparing the thing rather than the appearance. If you have a point to make, know the point, one sentence, and know what you want to happen after it. If you're

going to the café, know what you're going to read. Then the route and the walk and the sentence's delivery are left to be done rather than performed, and when you're doing rather than performing, the attention is on the thing, and the thing is out in the room, which is where you want it.

"It was a disaster"

Then there's the way home. The sting. You did the thing, the walk, the sentence, the meal alone, and on the way back it comes up again and again, and each time it's slightly worse. The hop at the kerb is now a fall. The small silence after the joke is now a long one. And the sting presents itself as the fair report, the one you were too flustered to write at the time.

It isn't fair, and there's a reason. Go back to Savitsky, Epley and Gilovich in chapter 6. Part of why actors expected harsher judgement than they got was that they were fixed on their own misfortune and failed to weigh the situational things an onlooker weighs. That's a description of the sting. On the way home, you have the moment and nothing else. The onlooker, at the time, had the moment plus the pavement, plus the fact that they'd hopped at kerbs, plus whatever they were thinking about before you appeared, and gave the moment about a second before their own life resumed. You're giving it the whole bus ride.

I'd put it this way. The sting is a second run of the beam, with the room removed and you left in. It feels like review, but the reviewer only has one witness, and the witness was the person under the light. It's the least reliable account of the moment available. The reliable account is the shoe count, if you did one, and if you didn't, it's the fact that you can't picture a single onlooker's face, which is the strongest evidence you have that they can't picture yours.

If the sting has become a habit of its own, hours of it, days of it, then the book you want is It's already over, in this series, which is about replaying mistakes. Here I'll only say what to do with the sting in the moment, which is to answer it with the numbers. What was the headcount. What was the shoe count. What did you actually see when you looked. Three facts, said plainly, and then the book or the window.

What the audience costs you

The audience seems cheap. A few nerves before a room, a flush at a kerb, a bit of a run-up. Nobody is hurt. Nothing is spent. It's worth setting out what it actually costs, because the price is paid in small coins and never added up.

It costs the window table. Not once, but every time, so that the good seat is always someone else's. It costs the class you didn't join, the exercise class, the language class, the evening course, because a room of strangers doing something new is the beam at full strength. It costs the point in the meeting, and the one after that, until people assume you haven't got points. It costs the gig on your own, the film on your own, the restaurant on a Thursday when the flatmate's away. It costs the long way round, the route past the wall tables, the door that avoids the group.

It costs the outfit you'd have liked to wear and the haircut you'd have liked to try, because both are marks, and it costs the small unplanned things, the dance at the wedding, the wave to someone across a street who might not be who you think.

And it costs attention, which is the price underneath the others. In every room where the beam is on, a large share of what you've got is pointed at yourself. The café you went to for the coffee and the book, you spent partly on monitoring your own arms. The meeting you went to for the decision, you spent partly on your own voice. The evening out with friends had a walk to the bar in it that took more of you than the conversation did. Add the run-up before and the sting after, and the room has swallowed an evening.

None of this is dramatic. That's why it goes unnoticed. But if you added up, over a year, the tables not sat at and the things not said and the hours of run-up and sting, you'd find that an audience that doesn't exist has been charging rent, and that you've been paying it in the currency you have least of, which is attention that could have gone on the room.

What it does to the room

There's a cost you don't pay, or don't only pay, and it's the one the beam never shows you. It goes to the people in the room, and particularly to the ones you'd like to be noticed by.

Spurr and Stopa's review makes a point that's easy to skip. Self-focused attention stops you taking in external information, including the information that would contradict the fear. Turn that round. When your attention is on your own walk across the bar, it isn't on your friends at the far end, and it isn't on the person at the next table who looked up and half-smiled. You go to rooms hoping to be received well, and the beam makes sure you can't see it when you are. The smile you were looking for was there and you were looking at your shoes.

Mansell and Clark's correlations from chapter 8 had a second half. The more anxious speakers didn't only overestimate how anxious they looked. They underestimated how well they'd come across. What the room actually thought of them was better than they believed, and they didn't collect it. That's my reading of a correlation from one study at the anxious end, but the everyday version is familiar enough. You leave the party sure it went badly, and later a friend mentions that someone liked you, and it's news.

And self-focus shows, though not the way you fear. Not as the mark. A person whose attention is inward reads, from outside, as slightly absent. Not looking at people. Not quite following. Hard to catch the eye of. I'm interpreting rather than reporting, but I'd guess you've met the version of this in someone else, the person at

the table who seems somewhere else, and I'd guess you didn't think they were odd. You thought they didn't want to talk to you. That's what the beam does to the room. It makes the person under it look uninterested in everyone else, when the truth is they're desperate to be interested and can't get their attention free to do it.

So the room isn't watching you, mostly, and where it is, it's kinder than you think, and where your attention is on yourself, the room gets a version of you that's looking away. The next chapter is about what the room is actually doing, and then the methods start.

What the room is actually doing

Take the café from chapter 1 and look at it from the ceiling. There's the couple, who are in the middle of a conversation about whether to go to his mother's on Sunday, and the man with the laptop, who's on a call with his camera off and is trying to look as though he's typing, and the two women laughing, who are laughing at a message one of them got, and three people alone with phones, and one with a book. You walk in. What happens.

The couple don't look up, because the mother question is live. The man with the laptop sees movement and his eyes flick and go back to the screen, because he's being asked something on the call. One of the two women glances over because you passed close to her bag, sees a person, and turns back, and the other never looked. The three with phones are with their phones, and the earlier book *Look up* is about how completely a phone takes a person out of a room. The one with the book might be the person most likely to notice you, and they're the person you'd have minded least.

Boothby, Clark and Bargh open their 2017 paper with the coffee shop, the waiting room and the bus, and their point is the one this whole book has been circling. Each of those people is, to some degree, watching the room. And each of them believes, wrongly, that they're watching more than they're watched. Which means each of them is also under their own beam. The man with the laptop is sure the room can tell he's not really typing. One of the women is sure her laugh was too loud. The person with the book is

wondering whether sitting alone with a book looks affected. Every person in the room is the main event of their own afternoon and a passing shape in everyone else's.

It's like being in a cinema and worrying that the audience is watching you instead of the film. They're watching the film. Every one of them is the film. The room, from the ceiling, is a set of people each looking at their own shoes, and you walked through it worried about yours.

The shoe count

The method is a count. You did one in chapter 1. Here's the full version, and it takes about a minute.

Before you go in, or as the beam comes on, make the headcount.

Ask yourself how many people in this room have noticed you, or will notice the mark, and pick a number. Say it or write it. Don't skip this part, because the whole method rests on comparing your estimate to what you see, and if you don't fix the estimate first you'll adjust it afterwards and learn nothing.

Then look. Not a glance with your head down. Look at the room, slowly, one person at a time, and put each one in a column.

Looking at me. Looking at something else. Phone, friend, screen, food, window, their own hands. Be honest in both directions. If someone is looking at you, count them. Then write the number in each column. Two numbers, a headcount and a shoe count, and the difference between them is the size of the audience that wasn't there.

Do it for a fortnight in different rooms. The café, the bus, the meeting, the gym, the queue. Keep the numbers somewhere, a note on the phone is fine. What I'd expect, from the research and from the shape of the thing, is that the headcount comes down on its own after a few days, because it's hard to keep estimating half the room when the count keeps saying one or none. That's the point. You're not arguing yourself out of the beam. You're measuring it until the estimate corrects.

Two things to know. The count will sometimes find someone looking. That's not the method failing. Someone looks at anyone who moves, and the question was never whether one person looks but whether the room does. And the count does something on its own, apart from the numbers, which is that for the minute you're doing it your attention is out on the room, where chapter 17 said it should be. You can't count shoes while monitoring your own arms. That minute is the beam turned off, and it's available in any room, for nothing.

From the other chair

The second method is memory, and it's done at home. It answers chapter 7, the belief that you're a watcher and so is everyone else, by checking what you, the watcher, actually kept.

Tonight, recall the strangers you saw today. Not friends or colleagues. The people on the bus, in the shop, in the café, on the pavement. Try to picture three of them clearly enough to describe. Face, clothes, what they were doing. Most people get one, vaguely, and often it's the one who did something unusual, and even then the face is thin and the clothes are a guess. You spent the day in rooms full of people and you have almost none of them. That's what they have of you.

Then recall a stumble. The last stranger you saw trip on a kerb, or drop something, or say a wrong thing in a shop. Recall what you thought, and for how long. If you're honest, it was a half-second of something, a small flinch of sympathy or a small flicker of amusement, and then your own day came back. Recall whether you'd know them again. You wouldn't. You're the onlooker Savitsky's actors were afraid of, and this is what the onlooker does.

And catch yourself watching. For a day, notice each time your eyes rest on a stranger. Notice how long. Notice what you conclude. The answer, I'd expect, is a second or two and nothing much, and the point of noticing is that the room does exactly this to you. Boothby's finding was that everyone thinks they're the exception,

the one who sees more than they're seen. Once you've watched yourself watching, that's hard to keep believing. You see about as much as you're seen, and both are close to nothing.

This method is quieter than the count and does a different job. The count corrects the headcount. This corrects the idea that there's a room full of people like you, with your attention, pointed at you. There's a room full of people like you, with their attention pointed at themselves, which is a different room altogether.

The small try

The third method is to do the thing. One thing, once, from the list in chapter 16. Sit at the window table. Go to the class. Say the point in the meeting without the run-up. Wear the jumper. Eat at the Italian place on a Thursday. Not all of them, and not as a programme. One, this week, chosen because it's the one you'd most like back.

Do it with the numbers. Before, make the headcount. During, at some point, do the shoe count. After, write three facts. Not how it felt. What happened. Who looked, for how long, and what you did. If you can't name a face from the room, write that, because it's the most useful fact of the three.

Then, later, check the enjoyment. Ratner and Hamilton's people overestimated how much a companion would add to a film or a meal. Ask yourself, the day after, whether the coffee was worse for the window or the meal for the empty chair. If it was, that's real, and you've learned something about yourself that isn't about the audience. If it wasn't, and I'd expect it mostly wasn't, then the thing you'd been avoiding for the room's sake turns out to have been fine, and the room, when you counted it, wasn't there.

I want to be clear about what this isn't. It isn't a course of treatment and it isn't a ladder of harder and harder rooms. If doing one ordinary thing in public feels far beyond you, that's the preface's caution and chapter 23, and a GP is a better next step than a

jumper. For the ordinary reader, the small try is one thing, this week, done with a count, and its only aim is to give you a fact you got yourself.

Dan, from chapter 11, is the small try. He went, the beam came on, he counted, it went off, he can't describe the other tables, he'd go again. That's the whole method. It doesn't cure anything. It replaces an estimate with a count and a fear with a fact, and after a few of those the room is a different place to walk into.

The decision

Here's the decision, and it's small. When I feel the beam, I count the shoes.

That's the rule. Not never feel watched, which isn't a thing you can decide, and not stop caring, which you shouldn't. The rule is about what you do in the second after the heat arrives in your face. The old response was to look down, walk faster, monitor your arms, and start the sting early. The new one is to make the headcount, look at the room, and count. It takes a minute and you can do it in any room in the world.

It helps to have three plans in the when-then form, which Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran found, in a review of many studies, to be reliably better than an intention on its own. When I walk into a room and the beam comes on, then I'll pick a number and count. When I catch myself in a run-up, rehearsing the walk or the sentence, then I'll write the one point I want to make and stop rehearsing. When the sting starts on the way home, then I'll say the headcount and the shoe count out loud and let it go at that. Write them down. The rule does most of the work, but the plans are what get it done in the room.

What to expect, and this is my expectation rather than a finding. The first few counts will feel absurd, because you're standing in a café looking at people, and the beam will insist that this makes it worse. It doesn't, because looking at people is what everyone in the room is not doing, and nobody notices you doing it. After a week, the headcount starts arriving lower. After a fortnight, in some

rooms, the beam doesn't come on at all, and you'll notice that after the fact. In some rooms it still will, the meeting especially, and that's fine, because the rule doesn't need the beam to stop. It needs you to count.

Phillippa Lally and colleagues, following people forming a daily habit, found that it took weeks for a new response to become automatic, with wide variation between people, and that missing a day didn't set the process back much. This is a response to a feeling rather than a daily task, so I'm borrowing loosely. But the shape is the same. It'll be deliberate for a while, and then one day you'll walk in and count without deciding to, and not long after that you'll walk in and not need to.

Real stares, small towns, work, teenagers, old bullies, the internet and the child who shouts

Everything so far assumes an ordinary public room of strangers. Some rooms aren't that, and some readers aren't in the ordinary case. Each in turn.

If people do look at you. A visible difference, a scar, a condition that shows, a wheelchair, a skin colour that's rare where you live, a body that people have opinions about. Then the shoe count will sometimes find people looking, and I'm not going to tell you it's in your head, because it isn't. What I'd say is narrower. Chapter 5 and chapter 6 still hold. A stranger who looks doesn't keep you and mostly doesn't judge the way you fear, and the looks that are unkind are a minority of looks, even when looks are common. The count is still worth doing, because the beam will still tell you the whole room and the count will tell you who. For the wider question of living with being looked at, the charity Changing Faces exists for people with a visible difference, and I'll point you there rather than pretend this book covers it.

The small town. Where the room isn't strangers, memory is real. People do know you, and will mention the haircut. But chapter 6 still applies, and so does chapter 7. They noticed and they're not thinking about it. They're thinking about themselves, and what they'll say to you is a sentence, not a verdict.

Work. People at work do notice, and do remember, and there are meetings where the point you make matters. The rule there is chapter 14. Prepare the point, not the delivery. And the shoe count

in a meeting is worth doing once, because what you'll find is six people looking at the slides, the table, or their own notes, composing their own point.

Teenagers. If you're one, or you have one, the beam is at its strongest at that age and the research on the spotlight effect was mostly done on people not much older. The count works the same. If it's your child, don't tell them nobody's looking, because at school some people are. Tell them the two numbers, and let them do the count themselves.

If you learned the watching somewhere. Some people were watched, in a school corridor, by a parent, in a house where every move was commented on, and the audience is that room carried into every other one. That's real and the count won't undo it on its own. What I'd say is that the count still gives you today's room, which isn't that one, and if the old room is still loud, that's a thing to tell a GP or a therapist rather than a thing to count your way out of.

Online. The one place where the room can see and can comment, and does, at length, from a distance. The count doesn't work there because there is no room to look at. What I'd say is that the same people are watching themselves online too, and that the numbers on a post are not the numbers of people who thought about it. The earlier book *You only saw the good bits* covers the other side of this, comparing your life to theirs.

The child who shouts, the partner who dances. The beam can come on for someone else. Your child does something loud in the shop, your partner dances at the wedding, and the heat is in your

face. Everything in the book applies, moved one seat along. The room noticed for a second, kept nothing, and has a child who shouts too.

And when it's more than a habit. The NHS lists the signs of social anxiety. Worrying about everyday activities such as meeting strangers, starting conversations, speaking on the phone, working or shopping. Avoiding or worrying a lot about social activities such as group conversations, eating with company and parties. Always worrying about doing something you think is embarrassing. Finding it difficult to do things when others are watching, and feeling as though you're being watched and judged all the time. If that's you, and it's affecting your life, the NHS says to see a GP, and that you can refer yourself to an NHS talking therapies service directly. This book can keep you company through it, and Go anyway is the companion for the invitations. Neither is the treatment.

When the beam came back

It'll come back. You'll have had a fortnight of counts and lower headcounts and a window table, and then there'll be a Tuesday, a meeting that went badly or a kerb, and the beam will be on at full strength and you'll walk out with your head down and the sting going all the way home. And the thought will be that you've gone backwards, that the counting was a trick that's stopped working, that this is how you are after all.

One bad Tuesday isn't the audience back. It's a Tuesday. Lally and colleagues found that missing a day didn't undo a habit that was forming, and while I'm extending that from a daily task to a response, I'd extend it further and say a bad week doesn't either. The counts you did are still true. The room you counted still had nobody in it looking at you. A day when you didn't count doesn't change what the counts said.

Ask which belief came back, because it'll be one of the chapters. Usually it's chapter 3, the headcount, arriving high and unchallenged because you didn't stop to count. Sometimes it's chapter 15, the sting, running unopposed on the way home. Occasionally it's chapter 6, the sense that this time they really did judge, and the answer to that is the same as it was, that you can't picture a single face. Find the chapter, reread the two pages, and that's the whole repair.

Then count late. If you didn't count in the room, count now, from memory, honestly. How many people can you actually recall looking at you. Write the number. It's nearly always lower than the

headcount that's been running all afternoon, and writing it is the rule, done late, which counts. Then, next room, count on time. Don't make the lapse into a verdict on the method or on yourself. The beam comes back for everyone. What's changed is that you now have something to do when it does.

The café, again

It's the same café, a few weeks on, and the window table's free. You've got the coffee and the book. You look at the route, past the couple and the laptop and the two women, and the heat starts, and you make the headcount, and it's two, which is lower than it used to be. Then you look. The couple are talking. The laptop man is on a call. One of the women glances at you because you've passed her bag, and is back with her friend before you've finished the thought. Nobody else. The shoe count is one, for a second.

You sit at the window. The beam's still faintly on for a minute, and you count the street, and it's people walking past looking at their phones and at the pavement and at nothing. Then the book's good, and you forget to monitor your arms, and forty minutes go. On the way home there's no sting, because there was nothing to review, and what you can recall of the room is the coffee and the chapter and the woman's bag.

That's all. The room was what it always was. What changed is that you counted it, and having counted it a few times you couldn't keep believing the number the beam gave you. There's a walk to a bar somewhere in your future, and a meeting with a point in it, and a class you might join, and in each of them the beam will come on, because it does, and you'll count, because you've decided to.

Do one thing. This week, walk into one room where the beam comes on, make the headcount, and count the shoes. That's the whole of it. Everyone was looking at their own.

Notes

These notes give the sources behind the claims in each chapter, and say where I'm giving my own interpretation. The book isn't medical or psychological advice. If feeling watched is affecting your everyday life, a GP or an NHS talking therapies service is the place to go. The examples throughout, the café with the window table, the walk to the bar, the meeting with the rehearsed sentence, the kerb by the bus stop, the jumper with the mark, the gym, the haircut, and Dan at the Italian place, are invented to illustrate and aren't drawn from real people.

Studies were checked on 26 September 2026 by reading their published abstracts. None was read in full today, and none carried a retraction or correction notice at that date. Most of the research here was done with university students in the United States, and it describes averages across groups, not what any one person in any one room will think.

Chapter 1. No sources. The terms are the book's own.

Chapter 3. Gilovich, Medvec and Savitsky, "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* 78, 2000, pages 211 to 222. The figures of about forty-six per cent predicted and twenty-three per cent actual come from an earlier book in this series, *You knew the answer*, which read the paper in full. They weren't re-read for this book. The claim about the headcount being attention scaled down is my description of the authors' anchoring-and-adjustment account.

Chapter 4. Gilovich, Medvec and Savitsky, as above, study 3. The description of what the other people in a meeting are doing is mine.

Chapter 5. Levin, Simons, Angelone and Chabris, "Memory for centrally attended changing objects in an incidental real-world change detection paradigm", *British Journal of Psychology* 93, 2002, pages 289 to 302. The original 1998 study by Simons and Levin isn't cited because I couldn't verify it directly. The extension from a conversation partner to a person at the next table is mine.

Chapter 6. Savitsky, Epley and Gilovich, "Do others judge us as harshly as we think? Overestimating the impact of our failures, shortcomings, and mishaps", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, 2001, pages 44 to 56. Also used in earlier books in this series for a different point. Epley, Savitsky and Gilovich, "Empathy neglect: reconciling the spotlight effect and the correspondence bias", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, 2002, pages 300 to 312. The earlier book referred to is *It wasn't about you*.

Chapter 7. Boothby, Clark and Bargh, "The invisibility cloak illusion: people (incorrectly) believe they observe others more than others observe them", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 112, 2017, pages 589 to 606. Six studies. The recall exercise is mine.

Chapter 8. Gilovich, Savitsky and Medvec, "The illusion of transparency: biased assessments of others' ability to read one's emotional states", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, 1998, pages 332 to 346. Also used in *Go anyway* and *They can't read*

your mind. Mansell and Clark, "How do I appear to others? Social anxiety and processing of the observable self", Behaviour Research and Therapy 37, 1999, pages 419 to 434. The finding about using bodily sensations is from correlations in the abstract, in people high in social anxiety. The numb lip is mine.

Chapter 9. Epley, Keysar, Van Boven and Gilovich, "Perspective taking as egocentric anchoring and adjustment", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 87, 2004, pages 327 to 339. Boothby, Clark and Bargh, as above, study 6. Gilovich, Kruger and Medvec, "The spotlight effect revisited: overestimating the manifest variability of our actions and appearance", Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2002, pages 93 to 99, is named by title only, because no abstract was available to me.

Chapter 10. Boothby, Cooney, Sandstrom and Clark, "The liking gap in conversations: do people like us more than we think?", Psychological Science 29, 2018, pages 1742 to 1756. Also used in Ring them first. The extension from conversations to a glance across a café is mine and is said to be.

Chapter 11. Ratner and Hamilton, "Inhibited from bowling alone", Journal of Consumer Research 42, 2015. The participants were making consumer choices, and the extension to the reader's café is mine. Dan is invented.

Chapter 12. No new sources. The claim that the spotlight effect is general rather than a trait is my reading of the samples in Gilovich, Medvec and Savitsky 2000, and the account of confidence as attention is mine. The earlier book referred to is You wouldn't say it to a friend.

Chapter 13. Spurr and Stopa, "Self-focused attention in social phobia and social anxiety", *Clinical Psychology Review* 22, 2002, pages 947 to 975, a review of the Clark and Wells model and the evidence around it. Bögels and Mansell, "Attention processes in the maintenance and treatment of social phobia: hypervigilance, avoidance and self-focused attention", *Clinical Psychology Review* 24, 2004, pages 827 to 856. Both reviews concern social phobia and high social anxiety, and the application to the ordinary reader is mine.

Chapter 14. Spurr and Stopa, as above, for the self-image built from inside. The account of what the run-up does is my interpretation.

Chapter 15. Savitsky, Epley and Gilovich, as above. The description of the sting as a second run of the beam is mine. The earlier book referred to is *It's already over*.

Chapter 16. No research sources. The costs are my observations.

Chapter 17. Spurr and Stopa, as above. Mansell and Clark, as above, for underestimating how well one comes across, from correlations. The claim that self-focus reads as distance is my interpretation.

Chapter 18. Boothby, Clark and Bargh, as above. The earlier book referred to is *Look up*. The café from the ceiling is invented.

Chapters 19 to 21. No research sources beyond those already given. The methods are my suggestions and haven't been tested as a package. Ratner and Hamilton, as above, for the enjoyment check in chapter 21.

Chapter 22. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119, for the when-then form. Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts and Wardle, "How are habits formed: modelling habit formation in the real world", *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, 2010, pages 998 to 1009. 96 volunteers, 82 with usable data. What I say to expect is my expectation.

Chapter 23. The NHS page on social anxiety, at [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk), read on 26 September 2026, for the symptom list, the advice to see a GP and the self-referral to talking therapies. Changing Faces is named as a charity for people with a visible difference. Its website couldn't be read for this book and nothing is claimed about its services. The earlier books referred to are *You only saw the good bits* and *Go anyway*.

Chapter 24. Lally and colleagues, as above. The extension from a missed day to a bad week is mine.

Looked up and not used. Vorauer and Ross, "Self-awareness and feeling transparent", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 35, 1999, had no abstract available to me and isn't cited. Simons and Levin's 1998 door study couldn't be verified directly and is represented by the 2002 paper. Gilovich, Kruger and Medvec 2002 is named by title in chapter 9 and no finding from it is reported.