

# Health

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## Don't be shy about therapy

By Marilyn Elias, USA TODAY

The Internet can be a valuable tool in helping the very shy or socially phobic, who need treatment but rarely seek it, says Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo.

Zimbardo runs a shyness clinic in Palo Alto, Calif. "They write us because they can't bring themselves to call. (Or) they call because they're too shy to come in," he says.

Although his clinic is real rather than virtual, Zimbardo thinks "the anonymity of the Net gets them online, and once they feel comfortable doing that, they may be induced to come in for help."

The recent Surgeon General's mental health report said about 1-in-5 Americans have a mental disorder, but nearly half never get treatment. Socially phobic adults are among the hardest to bring in, says Zimbardo, a leading U.S. researcher on shyness and president-elect of the American Psychological Association.

One pioneering program in San Diego is getting a lot of attention.

At the Center for Advanced Multi-Media Psychotherapy, psychologist Brenda Wiederhold directs a program that helps social phobics come out into the world "in baby steps."

It started last August, so there's no long-term research yet, "but we have people going out and socializing, and getting dates, when they couldn't before," Wiederhold says. Here's how the steps go:

- Face-to-face therapy teaches a few basic social skills.
- Clients next venture into online communication pages, where users identify themselves as "avatars," or symbols, instead of people with log-in names. The symbols, computer-generated figures, can be a man, woman, cat, dog or fish. The shyness clients interact through text messages with their therapists; both represent themselves by symbols. Then the clients interact with other avatars. "This part is very anonymous," Wiederhold says.
- Next, microphones are attached to the computers, allowing "practice" audio dialogues with the therapist through the computer. Then come "chats" using the client's voice as he interacts with real people in Net chat rooms.
- Then Web cameras are added to the computer. The client, his face visible and voice audible, talks to his own therapist through the computer.
- Finally, there are audio/video chats with other therapists.

A client's heart rate and other signs of anxiety are monitored during the treatment. "You need to make sure they're not overwhelmed, that it's not too anxiety-provoking," Wiederhold says.

As they progress, clients are given "baby steps" of homework in the real world — approaching someone in a mall and asking the time, asking a menu question in a restaurant — slowly building up to social advances they'd wanted to make but hadn't been able to manage before, Wiederhold says.

"Computers give us a safe, controlled environment where they're gradually able to build social skills. It's amazing what you can do with technology."