The spotlight effect

People notice and remember far less about us than we think.

When we feel self-conscious, it seems as if a spotlight is following us around. Every stumble, blush or awkward pause feels lit up for all to see.

Psychologists have tested this. In one well-known set of studies, students were asked to walk into a room wearing an embarrassing T-shirt. They guessed that about half the people there would notice it. In fact only around a quarter did.

Why we get it wrong

- **We assume our feelings show.** We know every detail of how we feel, and assume other people can see it.
- **Nerves are hard to see.** Nerves that feel obvious from the inside are mostly invisible from the outside.
- **Other people are thinking about themselves.** Most people in the room are busy wondering how they are coming across.
- **People forget.** Even when something is noticed, it is rarely remembered for long.

Check it against your own experience

Think of the last gathering you were at. What can you remember about what other people wore, said wrong, or did awkwardly?

When someone else blushes or loses their words, what do you think of them?

An experiment

This week, deliberately do one small thing you fear would draw attention. Wear something slightly different, ask a question in a meeting, or pause mid-sentence. Count how many people react.

What I found

The T-shirt studies were carried out by Thomas Gilovich and colleagues (2000).

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