

How Anxiety Can Hijack Your Bathroom Habits

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January 15, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Parcopresis, or “shy bowel syndrome,” is a condition that makes having a bowel movement outside your home feel impossible. Meanwhile, paruresis, or “shy bladder,” causes similar difficulty with urinating in public restrooms
- › A study in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that about 14% of 714 university students avoided public toilets because of anxiety, and the analysis showed this behavior is driven by fear of judgment and social anxiety
- › A *Current Psychology* study of 316 undergraduates revealed that bathroom-related anxiety shares cognitive roots with social anxiety
- › Using the bathroom feels easier at home because familiar surroundings act as a psychological “safety signal,” lowering stress hormones and allowing normal bowel and bladder reflexes to resume
- › Practical strategies such as staying hydrated, avoiding trigger foods, and using breathing exercises can help manage anxiety when using public toilets

For most people, using a public restroom is no big deal. You walk in, do what you need to do, and move on. But if you're someone who freezes up the moment you're away from home, you know it's not that simple. This is what happens with parcopresis, or "shy bowel syndrome" – a condition where having a bowel movement outside your home feels impossible. There's also paruresis, or "shy bladder," which makes urinating in public restrooms just as challenging.¹

These issues are quite common; the International Paruresis Association estimates that more than 21 million people in the U.S. deal with shy bladder; shy bowel frequently affects adults as well,² often beginning in adolescence. Experts have long suspected that social anxiety plays a role, but how strong is that connection?

Understanding Shy Bowel Syndrome – How Social Anxiety Shapes Bathroom Habits

A study published in *Current Psychology*³ examined the reasons behind individuals' avoidance of public restrooms and determined that this behavior is not arbitrary. The researchers surveyed 714 university students using a cross-sectional design. Women comprised 73.2% of the sample size with an average age of 28.8 years.⁴

- **Participants were shown different scenarios** – Researchers showed 10 restroom vignettes to the participants and asked them if they would use the toilet or avoid it. Information on anxiety symptoms and dysfunctional attitudes was also gathered.⁵
- **Most people used the toilet, but avoidance was significant** – On average, 80% of people used an available toilet, while 14.44% avoided it due to anxiety unrelated to contamination. An additional 3% avoided toilets due to contamination concerns. Lastly, men were significantly more likely than women to use toilets.⁶
- **Analytical method used** – Through structural equation modeling (SEM), the researchers discovered that individuals with rigid and pessimistic thinking patterns are more likely to develop a fear of being judged by others. Additionally, they found that:⁷
 - Fear increased their worry about social consequences, such as embarrassment or backlash.
 - These fears contributed to social anxiety symptoms.
 - Social anxiety directly led to parcopresis symptoms, namely difficulty or inability to defecate in public restrooms.

- Those symptoms resulted in toilet avoidance behavior.
- **Social anxiety drives shy bowel syndrome** – The study shows that toilet avoidance is rooted in social anxiety processes. Addressing social anxiety may help reduce this behavior and prevent health issues like constipation and hemorrhoids.⁸

Researchers Explored How Social Anxiety Models Explain Paruresis and Parcopresis

An earlier research published in *Current Psychology*⁹ also explored whether paruresis and parcopresis can be explained by the same thought patterns that drive Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). Researchers examined fears of judgment, rigid attitudes, and concerns about social backlash to uncover why these conditions occur.

- **The study involved 316 undergraduate students** – Most participants were female (76.6%) with an average age of 31.25 years. All completed an online, cross-sectional survey assessing anxiety-related attitudes and bathroom-related distress.¹⁰

The researchers then used SEM to test whether a well-known theory of social anxiety – the "fear of evaluation" model – could also explain bathroom-related anxieties. This model looks at several factors:¹¹

- **Fear of negative evaluation (FNE)** – Worrying about being judged harshly.
- **Fear of positive evaluation (FPE)** – Feeling anxious about praise or attention.
- **Concerns about social reprisal (CSR)** – Fear of backlash or punishment from others.
- **Disqualification of positive social outcomes (DPSO)** – Believing good things won't last.

Researchers also looked at dysfunctional attitudes (DAs), which are rigid, unrealistic beliefs that often make anxiety worse.

- **The study's key takeaway** – The findings show that bathroom-related anxiety may share the same cognitive roots as broader social anxiety.¹²

The authors caution that more research is needed to confirm their findings. Larger studies could explore how these patterns develop and whether changing attitudes or reducing fears of judgment might ease symptoms. For now, this study provides a strong foundation for understanding these conditions and guiding future interventions.¹³

Defining Paruresis and Parcopresis

As mentioned earlier, paruresis (shy bladder) is the inability to urinate in a public setting. The person can only take a leak at home when they are alone. It is ranked as one of the most common phobias, second only to the fear of public speaking, and is estimated to affect anywhere from 1% to 25% of Americans.¹⁴

- **Shy bladder is not selective** – Both men and women can experience it, and it often begins after an embarrassing bathroom moment. For example, teasing in school or a stressful childhood experience when they used a urinal.¹⁵
- **It's a psychological condition, not a bladder issue** – The bladder works fine, but anxiety signals "danger" when privacy feels compromised. Stress activates the fight-or-flight response, tightening the urinary sphincter and stopping flow. This is why paruresis is sometimes called psychogenic urinary retention.
- **It's a form of performance anxiety with real consequences** – Beyond embarrassment, paruresis can lead to isolation and mounting stress. Chronic avoidance may even strain the bladder and kidneys.¹⁶

On the other hand, parcopresis is acknowledged as a subtype of SAD.¹⁷ However, it's not officially included as a standalone condition in the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, fifth edition (DSM-5).

Psychologist Simon Knowles, Ph.D., describes parcopresis as "a psychological condition involving the difficulty or inability to defecate in public restrooms due to the overwhelming fear of perceived scrutiny." For some, this fear becomes so intense that even private bathrooms at home can feel off-limits.¹⁸

- **Symptoms are real and visible** — Parcopresis can trigger physical anxiety symptoms like a racing heartbeat, trembling, sweating, and nausea.¹⁹
- **Social implications of parcopresis** — Avoiding public restrooms can become troublesome, and some people end up skipping school or work, not taking vacations, or turning down social events. Some wake early to use the toilet, or limit food and liquids to avoid needing to use it later. Ignoring the urge risks complications like constipation, hemorrhoids, or fecal impaction.²⁰
- **Women are more likely to struggle** — Research suggests females experience parcopresis more often than males, partly because women are disproportionately affected by anxiety disorders. Cultural norms around cleanliness and shame also play a role — women are often held to higher standards of "purity," making embarrassment about bodily functions more intense.²¹

Parcopresis is understudied because of stigma. Talking about bowel habits feels taboo, so many suffer in silence. Experts argue that if physical causes are ruled out, parcopresis should be classified as a phobia.²²

Do You Have a Shy Bowel or Bladder?

Feeling uneasy about public restrooms is normal — in most places, they're often less than clean and well-sanitized. But what separates everyday discomfort from shy bowel syndrome? The difference lies in intensity and impact. If the thought of using a public toilet triggers overwhelming anxiety or changes your daily habits, you may be dealing with more than simple preference.²³

- **Use the shy bladder and bowel scale (SBBS)** – Psychologists use a 16-item questionnaire to help identify shy bowel and shy bladder symptoms. On a scale of 0 (least) to 4 (most), it asks you to rate statements like "I get anxious when urinating" or "I worry I cannot empty my bowel when close to others."²⁴

Other questions explore behaviors such as delaying bathroom visits or avoiding social situations because of toilet anxiety. High scores suggest the condition may be interfering with your life.

- **Look for patterns of avoidance** – People with parcopresis often go to great lengths to avoid public toilets, skipping meals, limiting fluids, or even turning down social invitations. If you find yourself planning your day around bathroom access or waking up early to "go" before leaving home, that's a red flag. These coping strategies can lead to physical problems like constipation or hemorrhoids.²⁵
- **Determine how much anxiety drives your habits** – Occasional discomfort is one thing, but if bowel-related worries dominate your thoughts or contribute to overall anxiety, it's worth paying attention. Statements like "My bowel habits are the most significant contributor to my anxiety levels in life" are common among those with shy bowel syndrome.²⁶

Why Using Your Toilet at Home Feels Easier

If you live with parcopresis, you know the relief that comes when you finally "go" after coming home. But even people without shy bowel notice this pattern – using the toilet feels harder away from home and easier the moment you return. Now, why does your home make such a difference? Experts say it's not just comfort – it's a mix of psychology and physiology.

- **Home acts as a safety signal** – Nick Haslam, Ph.D., psychology professor at the University of Melbourne and author of "Psychology in the Bathroom," explains that this phenomenon even happens when you've been constipated during a trip:²⁷

"Most people feel more comfortable going to the bathroom in familiar – and private – surroundings. In my view the experience of 'unburdening' upon returning from a trip is largely a Pavlovian response: The home is a safety signal, signifying that this is the right place to go. If there has been any inhibition or retention at all during the trip, the relaxation response is likely to kick in when you come home."

Haslam points out that this is the flip side of what some travelers deal with – good old "vacation constipation." For many people, hitting the road means their bowels hit the brakes. Why? Often, it's because they feel awkward using unfamiliar bathrooms, or because they're eating foods that shake up their gut microbiome, the community of bacteria that helps keep digestion functioning properly.²⁸

But here's the twist – that same gut disruption can swing the other way. If a meal doesn't sit well, it might not slow things down at all. It could send you running for the nearest restroom instead.²⁹

- **Familiar routines cue your body** – Jack Gilbert, Ph.D., professor of surgery and director of the University of Chicago's Microbiome Center, says it's more complex than simply feeling "more comfortable pooping at home." According to him, "All you're doing, when you try to recall something, is triggering sensory simulacra of that experience."³⁰

Just like a smoker's craving kicks in after a familiar sequence – getting in the car, buckling up, and reaching for a pack – the rituals of arriving home (opening the door, dropping your keys, kicking off shoes) can spark a bathroom response. Gilbert explains:

*"'More comfortable' is an emotional state, but emotions are physiological responses ... When you get back into your home, your glucose tolerance will change ... your adrenaline pumping will change ... and all of these factors influence how quickly food moves through your gut."*³¹

In short, environmental cues and a sense of safety can shift hormones, energy use, and even digestion. Scientists don't fully understand why, but Gilbert jokes he could probably train people to feel the urge to pee whenever they smell peppermint. That's because "We are essentially automata responding to environmental cues," he says.³²

Overcoming Your Fear of Using the Toilet

While parcopresis and paruresis can feel embarrassing or isolating, it is treatable, and there are practical steps you can take to reduce fear and regain confidence when you use the loo:

- 1. Try to poop at home** — If you don't already, track your bowel movements, and mark off when you poop and which days of the week. Once you see the pattern, schedule your day around your bowel movements when possible.³³
- 2. Pack an on-the-go emergency kit** — Prepare a small bag with toilet paper, alcohol wipes, wet wipes, regular soap, and any medications you're taking to help ease anxiety symptoms. You can also pack extra clothes or underwear.³⁴
- 3. Use breathing exercises** — If you are feeling anxious, breathing exercises can help reduce anxiety. One example is the 4-7-8 breathing technique, which can help calm your nervous system and relax your body.³⁵
- 4. Know and stay away from your 'trigger foods'** — If you know certain foods can cause bloating, gas, stomach pain, or urgent bowel movements, it would be wise to cut back or avoid them when you're away from home.³⁶
- 5. Get your body moving** — Make sure to get at least 30 to 45 minutes of exercise every day and **avoid prolonged sitting**.
- 6. Keep your colon healthy** — Consume a nutrient-rich diet containing at least 25 to 50 grams of fiber and plenty of complex carbohydrates. Avoid ultraprocessed foods and vegetable oils, and ensure you drink enough water to promote healthy urination and bowel movements.

To know more about the relationship between food, your gut, and poop, read "[Do You Know How Your Food Gets Turned Into Poop?](#)"

- 7. If anxiety persists, consider therapy** – If necessary, your doctor can connect you with a mental health professional who can help change negative thought patterns or avoidance behaviors associated with SAD. Some people respond well to cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).³⁷

Living with a shy bowel and bladder can be challenging, but remember, it doesn't define who you are. This fear doesn't have to take over your life – you have the power to take steps toward regaining your confidence and freedom.

Every little effort you make counts, and positive change is within your reach. You deserve to feel at ease wherever you go, so flush out the fear and start moving toward the life you want.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Parcopresis and Paruresis

Q: What are parcopresis and paruresis?

A: Parcopresis is the difficulty or inability to have a bowel movement in public restrooms, while paruresis involves difficulty urinating outside the home. Both are driven by anxiety and fear of being observed or judged, rather than physical dysfunction.

Q: How common is anxiety-related avoidance of public toilets?

A: A study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that about 14% of 714 university students avoided public toilets due to anxiety, with fear of judgment and social evaluation playing a central role.

Q: Do parcopresis and paruresis share roots with social anxiety?

A: Yes. A Current Psychology study of 316 undergraduates showed that bathroom-related anxiety is linked to the same cognitive patterns seen in social anxiety, including rigid thinking and fear of social consequences.

Q: Why does using your bathroom at home feel easier?

A: Your brain reads familiar spaces as safe. At home, stress hormones ease up, your muscles loosen, and your body's natural bathroom reflexes kick back in – making it feel so much easier and more normal to go.

Q: What are practical ways to reduce anxiety when using bathrooms away from home?

A: Remember to keep your stress in check, drink plenty of water, steer clear of foods that tend to trigger your gut, and try simple breathing exercises to stay calm. It also helps to stick to a regular bathroom routine and slowly get comfortable using public restrooms with less pressure.

Sources and References

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