

Spoonfuls of Cocoa Puffs being crunched broke the silence of my otherwise quiet kitchen. I glanced at the clock. It was 4:40 a.m. In four short hours, I would begin my first day of high school after being homeschooled for my entire life. Countless thoughts raced through my mind. Would it be anything like the movies? What if I never fit in? Sunday school instilled values like gentleness, politeness, and respectfulness—but not many social skills. On top of my shyness, I would be venturing into this new world without the support of my older brother who had moved out just weeks before.

When I entered high school, my school's student body skyrocketed from 2 to 2,000, and my social anxiety soared with it. Though my instincts led me to seclude myself, my brother's previous enthusiastic pleas for me to socialize echoed in my mind. He had always encouraged me to live adventurously. I worked up the courage to approach a random group of guys at lunch on my first day. Nervously, I said hello, and one of them replied curtly, "Do we know you?" I didn't know how to respond and walked away, embarrassed. My self-esteem issues soon welled up, and social media subconsciously suggested I was inferior. I worried about never finding a friend group (much less a date) and had no hope of doing so because of my shyness and my differences in upbringing.

Since I wasn't an academic juggernaut or a sports team captain like some others, I lost myself in trying to make myself appear significant and likable. I avoided discussing church, switched to a more fashionable middle-part haircut, swapped my rectangular frames for more chic circular horn rims, and even claimed that "La La Land" was my favorite movie when I had never seen it. Reluctantly, I started speaking a little louder and blocked out feelings of embarrassment when I spoke. Partying and drugs came up while I was looking for ways to fit in, but I quickly observed just how devastating these were to my classmates. Despite wanting to fit in, I couldn't bring myself to engage in what I knew were extremely self-destructive behaviors. Their missing assignments, flunked quizzes, and constant grogginess concerned me. It hurt me to see kids resort to drugs and borderline alcoholism to ease their stress. None of it made me feel better about my good grades and otherwise prudent lifestyle. My appearance became an obsession, and I thought, "If I could just be a bit more muscular or clear up my skin," then I would be liked by my peers. On the outside, I built myself up, but on the inside, I tore myself apart. After about a year of my self-improvement journey, I was finally ready to be accepted.

A year after I asked her out unsuccessfully, I saw my crush again while she was talking with a mutual friend. I went over, confident she would be surprised by

how I looked. "Oh hey, Jerard," she mumbled and then ignored me as if I were a long Terms of Service list, just as she had the previous year. I was left speechless. My expedition toward awesomeness hadn't changed people's opinion of me. This experience gave me the revelation that some people simply won't care to talk to you. Freed, I became more comfortable being whoever I wanted to be, whether a golfer, TikTok content creator, or Christian Club President. Still proud of my physical improvements and exercise habits, self-acceptance and self-love soon took precedence over meeting others' expectations. Largely resilient to the toxic culture of Silicon Valley, I retained my core attributes of gentleness and respectfulness while also gaining sociability. My improved social skills from my incredibly transformative high school years will aid me in college when I shift from a student body of 2,000 to 20,000.