

Carol's Club CAROL GRAY SOCIAL STORIES

Custom Social Stories™ Resources Created by Carol Gray for Members - November 26, 2019



The Cure for Social Story Phobia / Writer's Block or

What to Do with a Sewer Cover When Writing a Social Story™

(There's a good reason why the above photo is lying on its side. It's for authenticity, as you will see.)

Social Story™ Phobia is a fear of writing Social Stories wrong, making a mistake and ruining a child, student, or client as a result. It's similar to Writer's Block - but more severe - and often experienced by authors writing their very first Social Story. This project was initiated by Ashley, the mother of Clay, three-years-old, and recently diagnosed with autism. Ashley knows Social Story Phobia firsthand; she's the one who introduced me to the term and contacted me for help. A video of me riding a skateboard for the first time proved to be an effective antidote for Ashley's anxiety. Ashley suggested that I share it with you, along with other ideas, to "get the pen moving" again.

© Carol Gray, 2019. All rights reserved. May not be copied or duplicated via any means electronic or otherwise without the prior written consent of the author. Carol's Club members are invited to submit specific permission requests.

Like many people, Ashley is teaching herself to write Social Stories using the tutorials in *The New Social Story Book: Revised and Expanded 15th Anniversary Edition* (Gray, 2015). Ashley froze when she sat down to write her son's first Social Story. She stared at her computer screen for several minutes. Nothing. She checked my website and discovered Carol's Club. Within half an hour, Ashley was a member and submitted her first Project Request to me. I was at my computer when it arrived. It is one of the shortest requests I have ever received, "Need help with my first Social Story!"

I called Ashley. Ashley and her husband have created an "Autism Bucket List" to organize and focus their efforts and minimize stress. I could hear the anxiety and discomfort in Ashley's voice. Learning to write Social Stories is the first item on their list, and Ashley (a stay at home mom) has been working on it. It reminded me of my own first try at a bucket list item: to learn to ride a skateboard. I have a video of it. Ashley was intrigued.

At the end of this paragraph is a link to the first half of my skateboarding video; when you get there, I'd like you to watch it. A few years ago, I was in Hailey, Idaho, with my grandson, Ryan. We went out to breakfast together, and I mentioned that I have never ridden on a skateboard. I confidently announced that I would add going one foot on a skateboard to my Bucket List, and do it immediately after breakfast. Ryan makes skateboarding look easy, second nature almost. Get on and go, right? I honestly didn't think it would be that much of a problem for me. Ryan offered to record my first ride. It may take a little while for the video to load. [Here's the link.](#)

I sent the video to Ashley via Dropbox, and we watched it together. It was good to hear Ashley laugh (even if she was laughing at me)! We found similarities between my first seconds on a skateboard and Ashley's experience as she sat down to write her first Story. Both of us had a goal that required new skills and confidence we'd achieve it because it *looks* easy.

There were also some differences in our experiences. I had early (though admittedly awkward) success on the skateboard. I stayed on, which was exciting in itself, and I made a fun discovery, "If I move my feet, I can make it go!" Ashley's initial experience with writing a Social Story wasn't like that at all, as she joked, "I went directly to the sewer cover of Social Stories! I was stuck!"

Time to watch part two of the video. I mention my son, Barrett, in this segment. Barrett visited Ryan and his family a few weeks before I did, and just like me he gave skateboarding a try. [Here's the link.](#)

Ashley and I shared how much we hate getting stuck. Some examples:

1. trying to ride a skateboard for the first time and encountering a sewer cover;
2. late for an appointment and searching for the keys to the car;
3. in a car with tires buried by mud or snow;
4. in an elevator that stops between floors;
5. locked out of a car or home;
6. in a car won't start;
7. discovering that your bicycle or wallet has been stolen;
8. 36" of snow falls overnight;
9. being lost; or
10. the words that you need for a Social Story remain at large, as they do for [this young lady...](#) at first.

One of the most frustrating things about being stuck is an awareness of the passing of lost time coupled with not knowing when movement toward completion of the goal will return. This raises anxiety and interferes with the effective use of the skills that are needed to become unstuck. “Stuck” is a loss of access to progress and success. The more Ashley and I talked, the more she relaxed and began talking about ideas for her Story.

Ten Steps to the Cure for Social Story Phobia

I work independently. Much of my workday is spent writing. I experience Writer’s Block all the time, but I have never taken much notice as to how I become unstuck. That is, not until my conversation with Ashley. I do have strategies to get moving again. First and foremost, I’ve learned that the longer I *behave* or *look like* someone who is stuck, the longer I *will be* stuck. Thinking-sitting-staring is the Bermuda Triangle of writer’s block. Here’s a list of my favorite strategies to get the Social Story ideas and words moving again:

1. Laugh. I mean this very seriously. Any professional speaker will tell you (and there is research to confirm) that humor and laughter reboot the brain, renew attention, and foster new ideas. Do something funny, like [watching this video](#).
2. Wake up your brain. Move or seek the extraordinary. Search youtube.com for unique videos to expand your thinking, like this [heartwarming musical break](#) or this [monkey doing dishes](#). Or complete an unrelated task like washing the dishes, walking the dog, sweeping the floor, or any activity where you are moving and your brain is free to wander. And, think about the Story at hand. It does work.
3. Color. I draw and color most Wednesdays as part of an Art Club. Consistent with the research on coloring, participant conversations and ideas flow. It is always worth it to leave a Story unfinished and go to the art studio and color, before completing and signing off on a final draft.
4. #1 - #3 on this list are all about regaining calm. Calm is essential to problem-solving, and not just for Social Stories. Calm is also recommended by a respected [findologist](#) (one who helps people find lost items).
5. Take the Social Story 10.2 Criteria seriously. An unexpected benefit of the Criteria is that in addition to being respectful, accurate, and consistent with the learning characteristics of people with autism, they also work in support of Social Story Authors. Once in a while, the Criteria can seem too restrictive, especially when writing about a tough topic. It’s a different kind of Writer’s Block, a panicky feeling rooted in a belief that the Criteria are preventing progress. I’ve been there twice. Both times, I stuck with the Criteria and emerged with a Story-that-worked. What initially feels like limits-that-are-working-against-me is just the opposite; there’s freedom to write about anything well within the Social Story format.
6. Review Information Again. You’re not wasting time if you read the information that you have gathered for a Story twice. If you’ve ever walked through an antique mall, and then retraced your steps in reverse, you know what I mean. You see things that you missed when you exit following the route that you took in. The same is true for the notes that you take while gathering information for a Story. On the second review, something may jump out that didn’t before. Even a slightly different topic that may definitively “hit the nail on the head.” (Those are the Stories that also seem to write themselves).
7. Use a Default Sentence. When I am writing for a young audience, I have a “stock” sentence that I use to get my first words on paper, “My name is _____. I am learning to (or, this is my Story about) _____.” My default sentence doesn’t always make it to the final draft, it’s often replaced by something better. That’s okay - it jumpstarts the writing process and serves its purpose.
8. Social Article Strategy. The Social Story 10.2 Criteria, specifically the second criterion, limit authors to first- or-third person perspective statements; second person sentences are not allowed. This may frustrate

authors of Social Articles for adolescents and adults, because a second person statement is often used to suggest or offer guidance. The solution? Identify yourself as the author, keep within all of the Social Story 10.2 Criteria, and write on! This strategy is described in a previous Social Story project, "[A Social Articles Strategy](#)," with a sample Social Article, "[Apologizing for an Unintentional Mistake](#)" (posted December 3, 2018).

9. Ask for Help. [This guy did](#) when he was stuck up to his waist in mud. Ask for help from someone familiar with Social Stories or send me an email at TakeThisToCarol@gmail.com. Even if you are happy with the final product, ask someone who knows Social Stories and, if possible, the intended Story audience to give you feedback on a Story draft.
10. Join Us! Consider attending an official Social Story workshop in 2020. According to participant evaluations, there is nothing like learning to write a Social Story with others! In January if not before, the official list of Social Story presentations and workshops will be updated for the coming year. If nothing is scheduled for your area, watch Carol's Club for a unique learning opportunity tentatively scheduled for next summer.

As this project goes to press, Ashley is working on her final draft of a Social Story about how children grow and need comfortable shoes. I saw an early draft, and it's looking like genius to me! Ashley has gathered four pairs of Clay's previous footwear – the booties he wore home from the hospital, a pair of infant soft-soled shoes, his first "walkers," and last year's boots. She has photos of him in each that will serve as illustrations. Using a repetitive and reassuring text, the Story invites – but does not require – Clay to try on each pair in sequence, and also his dad's shoes (Clay's "Someday, Clay's shoes may be this big!"). Ashley has made it past the sewer cover of Social Stories!

References

America's Got Talent. [YouTube]. (January 25, 2018). *Intelligent animals from around the world*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ih5xXiINQbU>.

Christensen, A. [YouTube / TedxKIDS@SMU 2012]. (March 28, 2013). Asha Christensen at TedxKIDS@SMU 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtnEnEgjk0E>.

Flemix, A. W. [YouTube / Storyful Rights Management]. (February 27, 2018). Monkey loves doing dishes. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXsiaWLJo4Y>.

Gray, C. (2015). *The new Social Story book: Revised and expanded 15th anniversary edition*. Arlington: Future Horizons.

Kavanagh, B. [YouTube]. (June 3, 2019). Senior citizen plays piano...then magic occurs. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avlOGya53IU>.

[YouTube / VideoJug]. (May 10, 2012). How to find lost objects. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRqE7I0vsx8>.

September 8, 2012). [YouTube / Man stuck in mud, this happens only in Russia. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADNhzWnouxY>.

