

Shyness and Social Anxiety

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Shyness and Social Anxiety

“I dread going to places where I may have to talk to people. Before I set off I just think I’m going to do or say something stupid, and that people will think I’m an idiot. No one else seems to be like this and I really feel there is something wrong with me. The only way I can face people is if my girlfriend is with me. It’s not fair, she is full of confidence ...”

“If I have to talk in a meeting I just can’t cope. My legs go wobbly, I flush up and I feel quite sick. I feel everyone is watching me closely. I know it is silly and other people don’t seem to have the same difficulty. I keep thinking afterwards that they must feel I’m not really up to the job ...”

These are the thoughts of two people who have a problem with shyness and social anxiety. This is a surprisingly common problem though people may not often talk about it. Although some people may be more generally outgoing than others, it is important to remember that almost everyone feels anxious or shy in social situations at some point. It is important to take seriously any problem that you have which prevents you from living your life in the way that you would like, but it is also important not to put yourself under too much pressure to change yourself, be someone different or to try to ‘perfect’ yourself. Strangely the more comfortable you can be with yourself as you are right now, the more you will be comfortable around people and the more your social confidence will grow. It is also important to recognise that university life can be stressful in terms of the expectations on you to socialise. It is important not to put yourself under too much pressure to perform social in the first few weeks of your degree, for example, or in your first group presentation. It is also important however to try not to avoid what may seem like difficult social scenarios because you tend to learn and grow in confidence through practice. This guide will help you to try to strike the balance between encouraging and supporting yourself and challenging yourself.

Do I suffer from social anxiety?

What happens to your body

When you go into a situation with others you may feel anxious and may have some of the following feelings in your body:

- Heart racing and pounding.
- Chest feels tight or painful.
- Tingling or numbness in toes and fingers.
- Stomach churning or butterflies.
- Having to go to the toilet.
- Feeling jumpy or restless.
- Tense muscles.
- Sweating.
- Breathing changes.
- Dizziness and feeling light headed.
- Blushing.

What you think

- You know that the fear is too much or unreasonable.
- You feel that others are thinking badly of you.
- You think others are judging you.
- Before you go into social situations you think that things will go badly.
- You think “I will make a fool of myself” or “I will look stupid”.
- You may think “I’m boring” or “I’m strange”.
- You may believe “If I get it wrong people won’t like me” or “If I show I’m nervous people will think I’m stupid” or “I must not look anxious”.
- You have a negative picture of yourself in your mind, which is how you fear other people see you, this may be flustered, foolish, uninteresting, weak, timid etc ...
- After you’ve been in a social situation you think “that was awful”, “I looked so stupid”, etc

What you do

- Sometimes you go into social situations that you find difficult but find this very distressing and become very anxious.
- You avoid going into social situations that you find difficult, even if this is inconvenient to yourself. For example, going out to buy sandwiches rather than having to go into the busy staff canteen.
- Avoid talking on the telephone.
- Do things to help yourself in difficult social situations, such as rehearsing what you are going to say, offering to help in social situations so that you can keep busy, talking for a short time but then moving on to another location.
- Cannot relax in social situations, drink more, smoke more, talk quickly, keep on the move.

What causes and keeps social anxiety going?

Social anxiety is something that very many people experience in a mild form but some people find themselves more seriously affected by it.

It is often related to 'low self esteem' or a poor opinion of yourself, which may have begun in childhood. Some people seem to be naturally more anxious and have learned to worry. Others may have had stressful life events that have led them to feel like this.

Some people feel shy when they are young or in their teenage years and tend to grow out of it when they get older. For other people shyness can last much longer and become or more protracted problem. This may be because:

- someone has a long held and fixed belief that they are 'no good in social situations'.
- Another problem that tends to encourage feelings of shyness is the avoidance of social situations which keeps the person from becoming more used to social occasions. This stops them from learning that they can cope and feel fine. If a situation is avoided it feels even more difficult the next time they try and go into it. Sometimes people have safety behaviours that don't let them learn that they can cope. For example, someone might protect themselves by always sticking with a friend.
- The person with social anxiety often holds an unpleasant image of how they look to others in their mind. When mixing with others the anxiety tends to make them focus on themselves more. They think of this image, feel anxious and believe that they look terrible to others. They rarely look to see how the other person is really responding to them. They make negative guesses about what the other person is thinking and therefore never challenge their negative, unpleasant image of themselves.

- 'Fear of fear' will sometimes take over so that the person will predict that they will be anxious in certain situations and expect certain symptoms, "I know I will go bright red when I speak", "I won't be able to get my words out" or "what if people notice my hands shaking?". These thoughts increase anxiety even before they go into the feared situation.

In summary - social anxiety is linked to low self esteem and continues because people hold long term beliefs that they are 'no good in social situations'. These beliefs are never challenged because of avoidance safety behaviours and self focusing when faced with social situations.

How can I help myself to overcome social anxiety?

1. Understanding social anxiety

It may help if you keep a social anxiety diary in order to get a better understanding of your patterns of shyness. For one or two weeks keep a diary of when you feel anxious and what was going on at the time. Keep a note each time of your thoughts, physical symptoms, avoidance or safety behaviours, what you did, and what your thoughts were afterwards.

2. How can I reduce my negative thoughts, beliefs and images?

We have seen the role that thoughts have in keeping going the vicious circle of social anxiety. Thoughts can be words or they can be pictures in your mind.

The following examples may help you to identify your own thoughts and pictures.

Negative Automatic Thoughts	Picture
"I don't know what to say - people will think that I'm stupid."	Image of self as small mousy creature
"Everyone will look at me when I walk in and I will shake."	Image of self looking wobbly and others smirking.
"I will stammer and not find my words."	Image of self flushed and sweating look of pity on faces of others.
"I sounded really pathetic when I asked a question."	Image of self with high squeaky voice, others looking strong and calm.

Why not create your own table showing some of your automatic thoughts and pictures in situations which you may find anxiety provoking.

In particular ask yourself if you are making the following thinking errors?

- 1. Am I mind-reading?** eg "he/she thinks I'm boring" In this case you don't tend to find out or look to see what the other person really thinks. You believe your own negative views and blame it on them! eg "he doesn't like me". This is a very common problem for socially anxious people who assume their own negative view of themselves, is also held by others.
- 2. Am I fortune-telling or catastrophising?** eg, "it's going to be a disaster, everyone will be laughing at me".
- 3. Am I personalising this?** eg "they are all laughing, they must be talking about me" or "he looks tense it's probably because he thinks he's got to sit with me".
- 4. Am I focusing only on the bad things** eg "I really clammed up when I tried to speak to Jane" (ignoring that you had been able to speak easily to other people that day).

How can I help myself to overcome social anxiety?

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These thinking errors mean that you don't view yourself in social situations in a fair way. It may help to begin to try and answer back to find a fairer picture of what is happening. A good way of doing this is to write two columns - one for your thoughts that make you anxious and the other for a fairer more balanced thought, eg:

Anxious Thought "If I hadn't kept quiet I would have said something stupid and people would have thought I was odd".	Balanced thought "People would not have thought I was odd, friends have said I always sound so sensible, I just expect people to be negative about me".
Anxious Thought "I just gabbled away all the time, I must look like an idiot".	Balanced Thought "No one seemed bothered by this. People come over to talk, I can't be that bad".

Write down some of your thoughts now and write as many answers or balanced thoughts as you can. Look out for thinking errors. This question might also help, "what would you say to a friend who was thinking that way?"

The aim is to get faster at catching these anxious thoughts and answering back almost instantly. It takes a lot of practice, but it really does work.

3. How can I stop thinking that everyone is looking at me?

People with social anxiety tend to show an increase in 'self processing' in situations where they feel anxious. This means that::

- They **concentrate a lot on their own body** especially looking for the symptoms of anxiety, eg shaking, sweating, red face, difficulties in speaking.

- They **focus on their own thoughts** with the negative images and views of themselves mentioned in the previous section.
- They have a strong **negative image of how they look to others**.
- The **image** is not the way they appear to others.
- They feel that they are the **centre of attention** and all this attention is critical and negative.

Ways of reducing self focus are:

- Do not **'monitor' yourself** in social situations, pay attention to what is happening around you:
 - **look** at other people and the surroundings
 - really **listen** to what is being said (not to your own negative thoughts)
 - don't take **all the responsibility** for keeping conversations going - silence is OK, other people will contribute.
- Begin to recognise that your **physical symptoms** of anxiety are not as noticeable as you think. Focus on your own body less and you'll stop noticing these symptoms.
- Begin to look at other people to see if they show symptoms of anxiety.
- Begin to believe that **people will not dislike you** because you are anxious - would you dislike someone just because they were anxious?
- Begin to note that you are **not the central focus** of everyone's attention.
- Perhaps **most important of all, start to take a genuine interest and involvement in what others are saying**. Try to feel absorbed in their conversation. Other people usually like to be listened to, and it will also help you to distract you from worrying about yourself.

Try out some of these ideas and see if they work for you. Begin to challenge some of your long term beliefs that you are no good in social situations.

How can I help myself to overcome social anxiety?

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4. How can I change my own behaviour?

Changing what you do is probably the most helpful way to overcome social anxiety. We have already talked of how avoidance and safety behaviours keep social anxiety going. It will help to be clear which behaviours you need to tackle.

Some common avoidance behaviours might include:

- not going to places where you will meet new people
- not talking to someone you would like to talk to
- finding reasons to avoid presentations such as illness

Safety behaviours might be:

- avoiding looking people in the eye
- letting someone else do the talking in your presentation group
- speaking very quickly
- always keeping busy
- not speaking about yourself

All of these types of avoidance and safety behaviours keep the problem going. It is important to:

- Gradually reduce the avoidance and begin to face the things you fear.

Begin by making a list of all the avoidance and safety behaviours that you aim to prevent. Then make an action plan or list of activities that will challenge these existing behaviours. Arrange them in order of difficulty starting with the task that seems most easy to accomplish. Set yourself the goal of doing one of these tasks a week, slowly building up to the more difficult challenges.

It is crucial when you try to challenge yourself in this way to acknowledge that it might be scary and that things may go well or not so well. It is so important not to judge yourself harshly or to give up. Try to be as encouraging to yourself when you give yourself feedback. This is not about doing things perfectly but gradually learning to be more confident in social situations.

5. How can I reduce my physical symptoms?

Relaxation

In order to reduce the severity of physical symptoms it is useful to “nip them in the bud”, by recognising the early signs of tension. Once you have noticed early signs of tension you can prevent anxiety becoming too severe by using relaxation techniques. Some people can relax through exercise, listening to music, watching TV, or reading a book.

For others it is more helpful to have a set of exercises to follow. Some people might find relaxation or yoga classes most helpful, others find tapes/CDs useful. You may be able to obtain a relaxation tape/CD from your GP, and there are also a wide number of relaxation tapes/CDs available in the shops.

Relaxation is a skill like any other which needs to be learned, and takes time. The following exercise teaches deep muscle relaxation, and many people find it very helpful in reducing overall levels of tension and anxiety.

Deep muscle relaxation - It is helpful to read the instructions first and to learn them eventually. Start by selecting quite a warm, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. Choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed to begin with. Lie down, get comfortable, close your eyes. Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly: in two-three and out two-three. Say the words “calm” or “relax” to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax. You should breathe in when tensing and breathe out when you relax. Starting with your hands, clench one fist tightly. Think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm.

Study the tension for a few seconds and then relax your hand. Notice

How can I help myself to overcome social anxiety?

(Continued)

the difference between the tension and the relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling, this is the relaxation beginning to develop. Do the same with the other hand.

Each time you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they're relaxed. Don't try to relax, just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they're relaxed and when they're tense. Now do the same for the other muscles of your body. Each time tense them for a few seconds and then relax. Study the way they feel and then let go of the tension in them.

It is useful to stick to the same order as you work through the muscle groups:

- Hands - clench fist, then relax.
- Arms - bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.
- Neck - press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.
- Face - there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.
- Chest - take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.
- Stomach - tense your stomach muscles as tight as you can and relax.
- Buttocks - squeeze your buttocks together, and relax.
- Legs - straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face. Finish by wiggling your toes.

You may find it helpful to get a friend to read the instructions to you. Don't try too hard, just let it happen.

To make best use of relaxation you need to:

- Practise daily.
- Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- Learn to relax without having to tense muscles.
- Use parts of the relaxation to help in difficult situations, eg breathing slowly.
- Develop a more relaxed lifestyle.

Remember, relaxation is a skill like any other and takes time to learn. Keep a note of how anxious you feel before and after relaxation, rating your anxiety 1-10.

Remember too that we have relaxation cds at the counselling service which you can borrow. Just ask Mandi, the administrator about it.

Controlled Breathing

Over-breathing: it is very common when someone becomes anxious for changes to occur in their breathing. They can begin to gulp air, thinking that they are going to suffocate, or can begin to breathe really quickly. This has the effect of making them feel dizzy and therefore more anxious.

Try to recognise if you are doing this and slow your breathing down.

Try practising this: take an in-breath over 7 counts, hold for one count, and then an out-breath over 11 counts. Keep practising it. If you find that 7 and 11 counts are too long, then shorten the counts but make sure that the out-breath is longer than the in-breath. Keep practising it and the exercise will help you slow down, 'centre' yourself and feel calmer. It is good to use in all kinds of anxiety-provoking situations or if you feel panicky.

How can I help myself to overcome social anxiety?

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Distraction

If you take your mind off your symptoms you will find that the symptoms often disappear. Try to look around you. Study things in detail, registration numbers, what sort of shoes people are wearing, conversations. Again, you need to distract yourself for at least three minutes before symptoms will begin to reduce.

Whilst relaxation, breathing exercises and distraction techniques can help reduce anxiety it is vitally important to realise that anxiety is not harmful or dangerous. Even if we did not use these techniques, nothing awful would happen. Anxiety cannot harm us, but it can be uncomfortable. These techniques can help reduce this discomfort.

Summary - coping with social anxiety

- Understand all the parts of your anxiety the physical symptoms, the thoughts and beliefs and your safety and avoidance behaviours.
- Reduce negative thoughts by looking for and challenging thinking errors. Use balanced thoughts to get a fairer picture of yourself.
- Reduce self processing try not to monitor your own physical symptoms and thoughts. Look to what is going on around you.
- Reduce avoidance and safety behaviours by gradually facing situations you fear whilst reducing safety behaviours.
- Tackle the physical symptoms of social anxiety using relaxation and other methods described.

Where can I get further help?

- sign up for the social anxiety group that runs once a year here at Goldsmiths (look out for the email).
- See a counsellor at the service for some individual sessions.
- If you feel your social anxiety is very severe, your gp should be able to refer you to specialist help.

Other resources

No Panic - National Self Help Organisation for phobias, anxiety, panic.
Helpline: 0808 808 0545

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<http://psychology.iop.kcl.ac.uk/cadat/patients/social-phobia.aspx>
(the social phobia unit at Maudsley Hospital which had a lot of
information that is useful)

www.anxietyuk.org.uk
www.socialanxietyinstitute.org
www.social-anxiety.org.uk

Some useful books:

Feel the fear and do it anyway - Jeffers, Susan. (2002)

Managing Anxiety - Kennerley, Helen. (1995). Oxford University Press

Living with fear - McGraw Hill. Marks, Isaac. (1978)

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