

Social Anxiety

Social Anxiety is an anxiety disorder where we believe that others will judge us negatively (e.g. "they'll think I'm an idiot"), and it is therefore experienced most acutely in situations when we are with other people. Our attention is very self-focussed - on what we must look like to others, what they might be thinking of us, trying to interpret every glance or other unspoken gesture or expression and what it might say about what they think about us. We become 'mind-readers' and imagine that we can correctly assume what others are thinking about us.

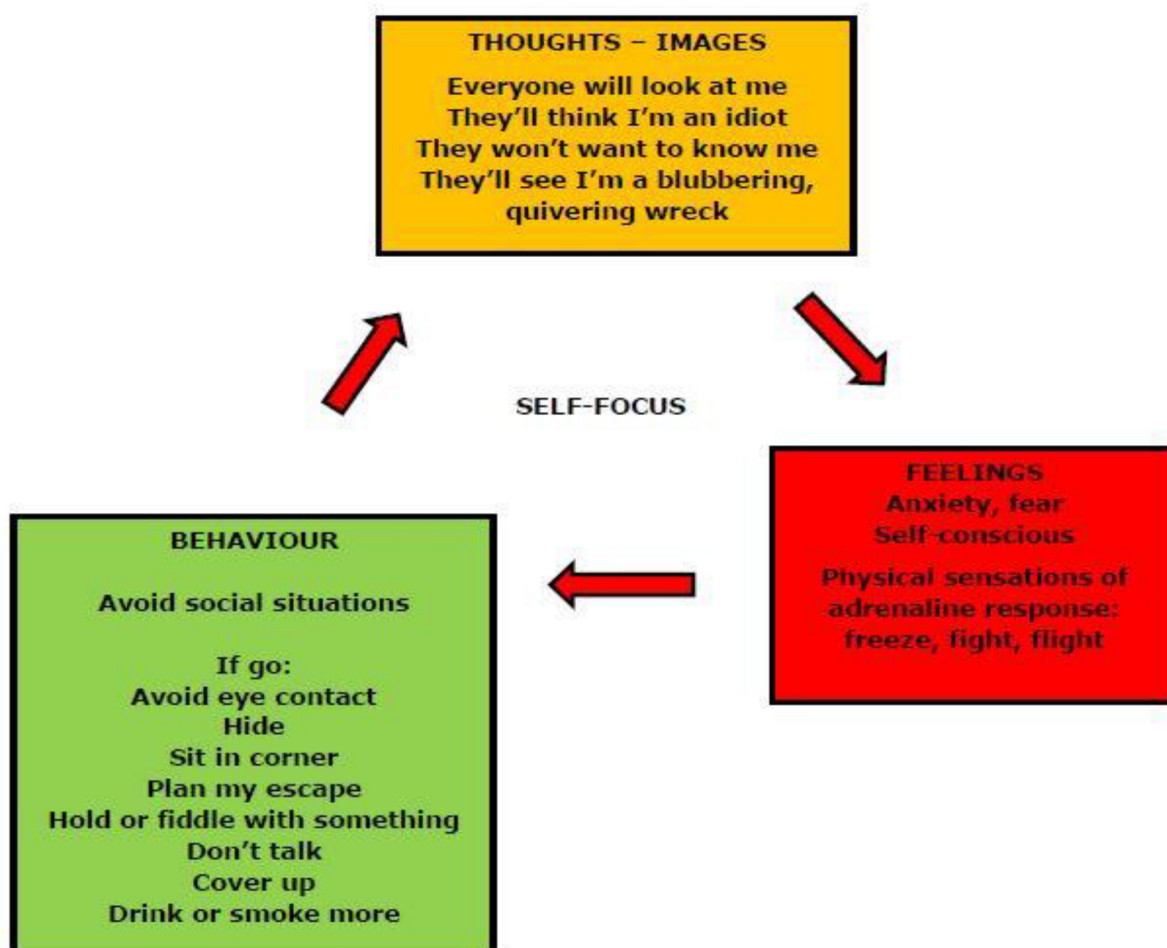


Because we don't want to experience this anxiety (and it's normal body response), we tend to avoid situations when it might happen, and therefore are unlikely to learn that it could be ok and we could actually enjoy ourselves.

If we do have to go, then we use 'safety behaviours' to help us cope, such as trying not to be noticed, avoiding eye contact, holding or fiddling with something, trying to hide (e.g. sit in corner, hair over face), don't talk, and maybe have an escape plan (e.g. sit by door or in aisle, make excuse to leave early). This all increases the self-focus.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy helps us learn to challenge the unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, learn to control our focus of attention, and change what we do.

Example of a vicious cycle of Social Anxiety



Self Help for Social Anxiety

In order to break the vicious cycle of social anxiety, we need to change the way we think, and change what we do. Firstly, we can learn about how anxiety affects our body:

- Read [Alarming Adrenaline](#)

Thinking Differently - Challenging Thoughts

If we can change the way we think about a situation, then we will not feel so anxious. We can learn to challenge those anxiety-provoking thoughts. Thoughts are not statements of fact. Don't believe everything you think!

- Learn more [About Automatic Thoughts](#)
- Learn [Fact or Opinion](#) skill
- Learn about [The Mind Bully](#)

What we believe deep down about ourselves, influences and distorts the way we think other people will think about us. Just because we **think** others think negatively about us, doesn't mean that is how it **really** is! We are looking at social situations, at other people and their judgement of us, through those very distorted lenses.

- Read: [Different Perspectives](#)

Learn to challenge the unhelpful and distorted thinking:

- Use the [Vicious Cycle & Alternatives](#) to map out your own thoughts, feeling and behaviours, and generate some healthier alternative thoughts and behaviours.
- Use this [Social Anxiety Thought Record Sheet](#)
- Practise [STOPP](#) skill
- Learn to use [Positive Coping Statements](#)

Thinking Differently: Re-Focus

When we're in a social situation with a group of people, our focus of attention becomes totally caught up in our own thoughts and feelings. We see everyone around us, but all we can think about is how they might be thinking critically about us! The adrenaline response of anxiety makes us feel terrible too, so we're thinking about how horrible that is, and how we just want to escape the situation.

It is very helpful to learn how to change our focus of attention and take more control over how we react to thoughts. We can learn to just notice the thoughts, acknowledge them, then let them pass. Notice the [Mind Bully](#) and let it go - turn your focus of attention to something else. First of all, you might learn to focus on your breathing.

- Practise [Mindful Breathing](#)

Mindfulness of everyday activity

- Choose an activity to do mindfully throughout the day, for one, two or five minutes. For example: Drink a cup of tea. Walk. Wash the dishes.
- Be in that moment, right now. See, hear, smell, touch, feel, breathe.
- Simply notice whenever other thoughts and sensations come to mind, then re-focus on your chosen mindful activity.
- Be patient and compassionate with yourself.
- Describe... rather than judge good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant.
- It is as it is.

Use the **NOW** acronym for mindful moments during the day

- **N**otice where your attention is right now
- **O**bserve what you are doing: "I am sitting", "I am looking", "I am breathing"
- **W**ise Mind: What shall I do now? Continue being mindful? Do something else?

See the Mindfulness handout for more examples

The more we practice, perhaps the more, initially at least, we will notice those thoughts intruding, and that's ok. The only aim of mindful activity is to continually bring our attention back to the activity, noticing those sensations, from outside and within us.

Doing Differently

Our usual strategy for dealing with social anxiety, is to avoid social situations. However, that just serves to keep the social anxiety going because we never find out that we could cope and that we could enjoy ourselves.

Use the **Avoidance worksheet** to gradually face your fears.

In the vicious cycle example diagram above, you will notice a list of what are called "safety behaviours" that we might use when we feel anxious in a social situation. It's helpful to identify what you do in those situations, such as: plan your exit (book a taxi), sit in a corner (to hide), sit on the end (to allow quick exit), check where the exits or toilets are, fiddle with something, drink more, not talk, avoid eye contact and so on.

Slowly, we can change what we do. Use the **Avoidance worksheet** and identify some healthy coping strategies to use in those situations, and gradually, reduce and stop those safety behaviours. So part of your list of feared situations might be changing where you sit, who you sit by, not booking a taxi etc.

It's important that you see the situations through - stick with the anxiety - it will pass.

Use **STOPP** skill to incorporate the strategies

STOP

- Just pause for a moment

Take a breath

- One slow deep breath

Observe

- There's the mind bully again.
- My body and mind are reacting to the thoughts that others might be critical and I feel anxious.

Pull back

- This is just the anxiety talking.
- The thoughts are just thoughts.
- Don't believe everything you think!
- Let's stick with the facts - these thoughts are just opinions (**Fact or Opinion**).
- I don't have to react right now.
- There's another explanation for this...(there is no evidence that others are thinking critically of me, my friends wouldn't invite me if they didn't want me there, others won't even notice me etc)
- I can let the thoughts go.

Practise / Proceed - What can I do right now? I can use my coping strategies, e.g.

- **Avoidance Worksheet**
- **Social Anxiety Thought Record Sheet**
- **Mindful Breathing**
- **Shift focus** - Where can I put my focus of attention right now? (**Mindfulness & mindful activity**).
- What else can I do that would help me tolerate these thoughts and feelings without reacting to them?

Complete your own **STOPP Worksheet**

