

SELF-HELP STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL ANXIETY

Step 1: Learning about anxiety

This is a very important first step since it helps you to understand what is happening when you are feeling uncomfortable in social situations. All the worries and physical feelings you are experiencing have a name: **ANXIETY**. Learn the **facts about anxiety**.

FACT 1: Anxiety is normal and adaptive because it helps us prepare for danger (for instance, our heart beats faster to pump blood to our muscles so we have the energy to run away or fight off danger). Therefore, the goal is to learn to manage anxiety, not eliminate it.

FACT 2: Anxiety can become a problem when our body tells us that there is danger when there is no real danger.

To learn more details about anxiety, see [What Is Anxiety?](#)

Step 2: Learning about social anxiety

People with social anxiety tend to fear and avoid social situations. They are very concerned that they will do something embarrassing, or that others will judge them. It is normal to feel anxious in social situations from time to time. For example, most people feel anxious when they have to speak in front of a large group. Social anxiety becomes a problem when it becomes quite distressing and starts getting in the way of your ability to function and enjoy life. However, it is important to note that you are not alone. Social anxiety is one of the most common anxiety disorders. The good news is that there are strategies you can use to help manage your social fears.

Step 3: Building your toolbox

If you have social anxiety disorder, there are a number of strategies that you can use to learn to overcome your fear of social situations. For social anxiety disorder, tools in the toolbox include:



TOOL #1: Observing your social anxiety.

An important first step in learning to manage social anxiety involves better understanding your social anxiety. People with social anxiety disorder tend to

fear different types of social situations (e.g., talking to co-workers, speaking in a meeting, going to parties, etc.) and experience different physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g., blushing, sweating, increased heart rate, etc.). Get to know your social anxiety. Take a couple of weeks to notice which situations cause you anxiety and what you experience physically when you are in those situations. It can help to write these things down. It is a lot easier to manage your anxiety when you have a better understanding of it!



TIP: In order to help you better observe your social anxiety, make a chart with three columns - date, situation, and anxiety symptoms. Use this chart to help you track the social situations that cause you anxiety and what you experience in those situations.

For example:

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Situation:</u>	<u>Anxiety Symptoms:</u>
January 12 th	Talking to cashier at grocery store	rapid heart rate, dizziness, dry mouth, upset stomach



TOOL #2: Learning to relax.

Feeling anxious can be very uncomfortable. By learning to relax, you can “turn down the volume” on the physical symptoms of anxiety, which can make it a little easier to face social situations. Two strategies that can be particularly helpful are:

1. Calm Breathing: This is a strategy that you can use to calm down quickly. We tend to breathe faster when we are anxious. This can make us feel dizzy and lightheaded, which can make us even more anxious. Calm breathing involves taking slow, regular breaths through your nose. However, it is important to realize that the goal of calm breathing is not to eliminate anxiety completely (because anxiety is not dangerous and it’s normal to feel anxious at times), but to make it a little easier to “ride out” the feelings in social situations.

For more information see [How to do Calm Breathing](#).

2. Muscle Relaxation: Another helpful strategy involves learning to relax your body. This involves tensing various muscles and then relaxing them. This strategy can help lower overall tension and stress levels, which can contribute to anxiety problems.

For more information, see [How To Do Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#).



TOOL #3: Realistic thinking

People with social anxiety disorder tend to have negative thoughts about themselves and about what will happen in social situations.

Common examples include:

- *“No one will like me!”*
- *“I’m going to say something stupid.”*
- *“I’ll do something foolish and other people will laugh!”*
- *“I won’t know what to say.”*
- *“I’m not as smart/attractive as other people.”*
- *“No one will talk to me.”*
- *“I’ll get anxious and others will notice.”*
- *“Others will think I’m boring.”*
- *“I’ll make a mistake and others will think I’m stupid.”*

If you believe that social situations are threatening or dangerous, then you are more likely to feel anxious. However, it is important to realize that your thoughts are **guesses** about what will happen, **not actual facts**. People with social anxiety disorder tend to over-estimate the degree of danger in social situations. Therefore, developing more realistic ways of thinking is an important step in managing your anxiety. But before you can start changing the way you think, you need to be able to identify the kinds of thoughts you have in social situations.

How To Do It

- First, ask yourself what you are afraid will happen in social situations; you might be afraid of something that **you** might do (e.g., “I’ll embarrass myself by saying something stupid,” “I’ll have nothing to say,” “I’ll blush,” etc.) or something that **other people** might think (e.g., “Others won’t like me,” “Others will notice I’m anxious and think I’m weird,” etc.). To become more aware of your specific fears, try and identify your thoughts (and write them down) whenever you feel anxious or feel an urge to avoid or escape a situation. If it’s difficult to write down your thoughts while you’re in the situation (e.g., while giving a presentation at a meeting), then try and write them down just before you enter the situation, or immediately after you leave. Repeat this exercise for a week or so.

- The next step involves learning to evaluate your negative thoughts. Remember, your thoughts are guesses about what will happen, not actual facts. It can be helpful to ask yourself whether your thoughts are based on **facts** and whether they are **helpful**. If they aren't, try and identify more **accurate** and **helpful** thoughts.

Here are some questions to help you examine your thoughts:

- *Am I 100% sure that _____ will happen?*
- *How many times has _____ actually happened?*
- *What is the evidence that supports my thought? What is the evidence that does not support my thought?*
- *Is _____ really SO important that my whole future depends on it?*
- *Does _____'s opinion reflect everyone else's?*
- *Am I responsible for the entire conversation?*
- *What is the worst that could happen?*
- *What can I do to cope/handle this situation?*
- *Do I have to please everyone – is that even possible?*
- *What is another way of looking at this situation?*
- *What would I say to my best friend if he/she was having this thought?*

Example:

What am I afraid will happen if I go to the party? I'll say something stupid.

Am I 100% certain that I'll say something stupid at the party? No, not 100% certain.

How many times have I said something stupid at a party? A few times, but not every time.

What is the evidence that supports my thoughts? Once, I made a joke that no one laughed at. Another time, I made a comment about a movie that didn't make sense. And another time, I asked an obvious question and someone started laughing.

What is the evidence that does not support my thoughts? I have gone to parties in the past and did not say anything stupid. I have had a few good conversations at parties. The last time I went to a party, someone said I was funny.

(continued)

Is not saying something stupid so important my whole future depends on it? Well, it would be embarrassing, but no, my whole future does not depend on it.

What is the worst that could happen? I do say something stupid and people laugh.

What could I do to cope? I guess I could try and crack a joke about it. Or, I could excuse myself and go get some fresh air.

Is there another way of looking at this situation? Everyone says stupid things once in a while.

What would I say to a friend who had this thought? It's not the end of the world. We all say silly things and most of the time people don't remember exactly what you said.

For more information on identifying and evaluating scary thoughts, see [Realistic Thinking](#).



TIP: People with social anxiety disorder often hold some **unrealistic beliefs**. Common examples include:

- I need to be perfect to be liked
- I should never make mistakes
- It is important for everyone to like me
- It's not okay to be anxious

However, no one is perfect and everyone makes mistakes. Also, it's unrealistic to think everyone will like us - Do you like everyone? Anxiety is often a private experience that others don't notice. Even if they do, it doesn't mean that they will think less of you – Haven't you ever seen someone else anxious? It's normal. It's okay to be imperfect and to feel anxious. It's part of being human! Rather than fighting these things, try working on accepting them.

By evaluating your negative thinking, you may realize that some of the things you fear are very unlikely to actually happen, or that if something does happen it's not as bad as you may think and that you can cope. Practise evaluating your anxious thoughts by first writing them down and then trying to identify more realistic ways of thinking (by using the questions presented in this section, as well as those presented in the [Realistic Thinking](#) module).

Test it out!

Sometimes it can be helpful to examine the truthfulness of your thoughts or beliefs. For example, how bad would it be if others saw you blush/shake, or how terrible would it be if you said something foolish? We often assume that it would be horrible if these things happened, and that we would be unable to cope. However, we need to test this out! Purposely try to shake, and see how others react. Plan to say something foolish or ask an obvious question and see what happens! Be careful not to assume that others are reacting negatively – look at the facts! What did they **do** or **say**? Was it as bad as you thought?

Examples of experiments include:

- ✓ Ask a “silly” question (e.g., ask for directions to a street you are already on)
- ✓ Let your hand shake while holding a glass of water
- ✓ Spill a drink
- ✓ Drop something or knock something over
- ✓ Wear your shirt inside out
- ✓ Send an e-mail with spelling mistakes
- ✓ Mispronounce a word
- ✓ Pretend to lose your train of thought and stop mid-sentence
- ✓ Pretend to trip
- ✓ Wait for the cashier to close the till and then ask for change



TOOL #4: Facing fears

It's normal to want to avoid situations that cause you anxiety. Avoiding feared social situations is a very effective strategy because it reduces anxiety in the short-term. However, avoiding social situations increases your fear in the long-term because it prevents you from learning that your feared expectations are either unlikely to actually happen or aren't as bad as you think. Therefore, an important step in managing your social anxiety is to face the situations that you have been avoiding because of social fears. Repeatedly facing those situations reduces distress in the long-term and helps build up confidence.

First, make a list of the social situations that you fear (e.g., saying “hi” to a co-worker, asking a stranger for directions, making a phone call, etc.). Refer back to the list you made when you spent some time observing your social anxiety and identifying the situations that cause you anxiety (see Tool #1). Common types of feared social situations include public speaking, informal socializing, being assertive, dealing with conflict, being the center of attention, eating and drinking in front of others, speaking to

authority figures, and interacting with unfamiliar people. Once you have a list, try and arrange them from the least scary to the scariest. Starting with the least scary situation, repeat that activity or enter that social situation (for example, saying “hi” to a co-worker every morning) until you start to feel less anxious doing it. Once you can enter that situation without experiencing much anxiety (on numerous occasions), move on to the next situation on the list. For more information, see [Facing Your Fears – Exposure](#).



TIP: If you haven't already, spend a couple of weeks keeping track of the types of social situations that make you anxious. This can help you compile your list of feared situations.

Eliminating Subtle Avoidance and Safety Behaviours

Rather than completely avoiding social situations, some people engage in subtle avoidance strategies or do things to feel safer or prevent their feared expectations from coming true. For example, if you're worried about saying something stupid, you might try to say as little as possible. Examples of subtle avoidance strategies or common safety behaviours include:

- Removing oneself from the situation (e.g., sitting on the outside of the group, frequently going to the bathroom, finding a task to look busy)
- Hiding visible signs of anxiety (e.g., wearing turtlenecks or lots of make-up to hide blushing)
- Using alcohol or drugs (e.g., drinking while in social situations)
- Distracting oneself (e.g., trying to think about other things, “zoning” out)
- Avoiding sharing personal information (e.g., keeping the conversation on superficial topics, asking the other person lots of questions so the focus is on them, changing the subject)
- Avoiding drawing attention to oneself (e.g., avoiding eye contact or smiling, wearing sun glasses, speaking quietly, saying very little)
- Overcompensating (e.g., over-preparing for presentations, rehearsing what you are going to say ahead of time)



TIP: We are often unaware of the things we do in social situations to feel safer. So, for the next few weeks pay close attention to the things you do to protect yourself in social situations.

These strategies prevent you from realizing that the situation is not dangerous, and that these behaviours may not be necessary to keep you safe. Thus, part of exposure involves reducing some of these subtle avoidance strategies or safety behaviours. Try to identify the things you do in social situations to feel safer (and make a list). Then try to reduce engaging in some of these behaviours when facing feared situations.



TIP: People with social anxiety tend to focus on themselves during social situations, which tends to make them feel even more anxious. When socializing with others, try to pay attention to what other people are doing or saying.

Meeting New People

Once you have gained some confidence facing social situations, it may be time to start thinking about expanding your social network. People with social anxiety disorder often have a hard time developing new relationships. Having opportunities to meet other people and develop friendships is very important. Social situations that provide opportunities for repeated contact are the best ways to develop friendships. Try and brainstorm ways to get involved with other people. Here are some ideas of where you can meet people:

- Work or school (talk to co-workers, go for lunch together, share coffee breaks)
- Play a sport/exercise (join a gym or running group, play soccer or tennis)
- Join a club/organization (travel club, hiking group, singles group, etc.)
- Take a class (painting, pottery, language course (e.g., Spanish, French) etc.)
- Volunteer (community centres, hospitals, charitable organizations)
- Take group lessons (swimming, dance)
- Go to sports facilities (skate park, ski hill)
- Dating services/On-line dating



TIP: Make a concrete plan to meet new people. Pick from some of the ideas listed above and take the steps to get involved. For example, do a search on the Internet for hiking groups in your area. If you make an attempt to make new friends and it doesn't work out, keep trying. It takes time to develop friendships and relationships. It can be very scary at first, but if you don't try, you reduce your chances of making friends or meeting someone special. See [Guide to Goal Setting](#) for some ideas on how to set goals around meeting new people.

What if I need other skills?

Many people with social anxiety disorder believe that they lack social skills. In many cases, these people have the skills, but lack the confidence to use them. However, some people do have deficits in their social skills, and may benefit from learning strategies for communicating more effectively. For more information, see [Effective Communication – Improving Your Social Skills](#).

Step 4: Building on bravery

Learning to manage anxiety takes a lot of hard work. If you are noticing improvements, take some time to give yourself some credit: reward yourself!

How do you maintain all the progress you've made?

Practise! Practise! Practise!

In a way, learning to manage anxiety is a lot like exercise – you need to "keep in shape" and practise your skills regularly. Make them a habit! This is true even after you are feeling better and have reached your goals.

Don't be discouraged if you start using old behaviours. This can happen during stressful times or during transitions (for example, starting a new job or moving). This is normal. It just means that you need to start practising using the tools. Remember, coping with anxiety is a lifelong process.

For more information on how to maintain your progress and how to cope with relapses in symptoms, see [How to Prevent a Relapse](#).