

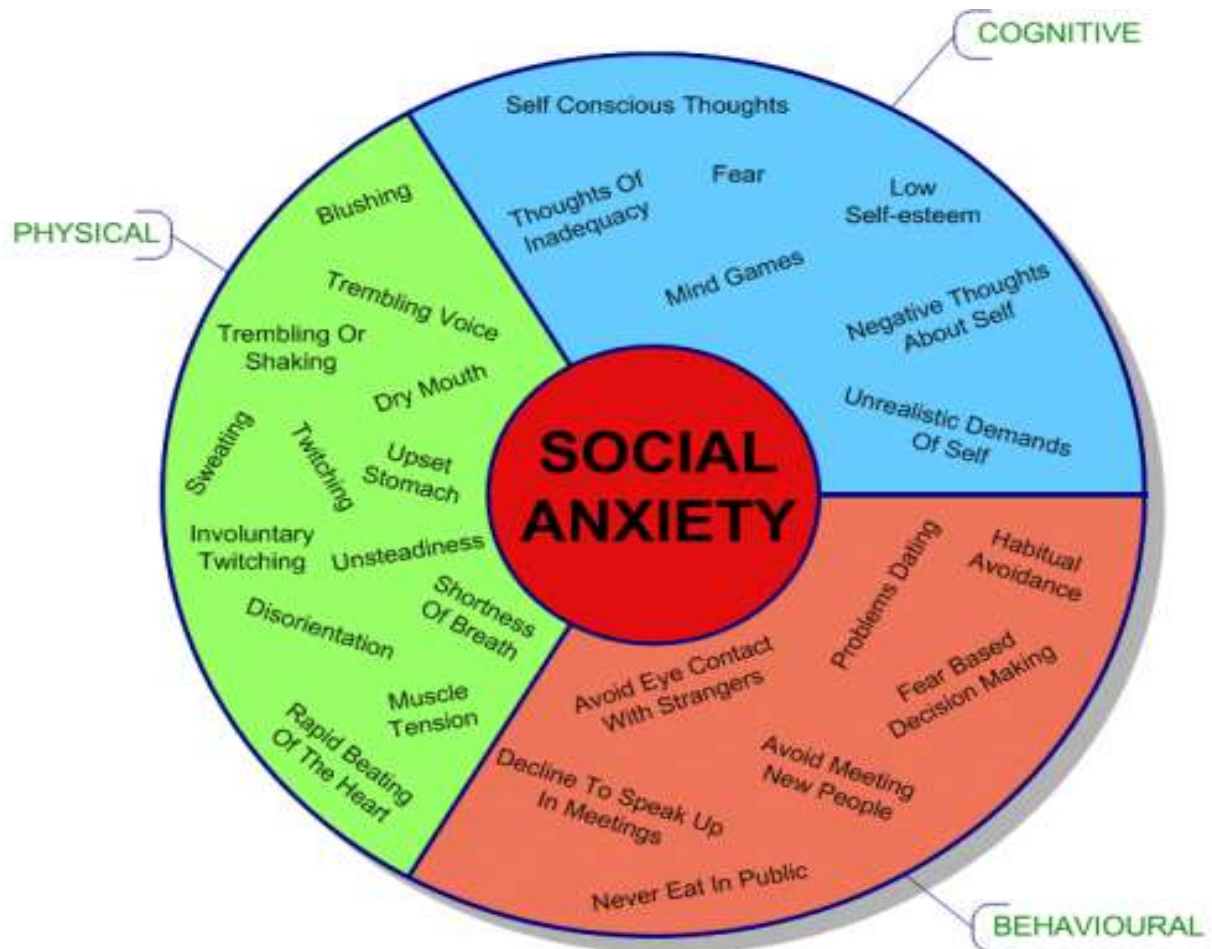
# Coping with Social Anxiety



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## **What is Social Anxiety and what does it look like?**

Social anxiety disorder is sometimes called social phobia. While everyone is likely to feel shy or anxious in certain social situations, individuals with social anxiety disorder tend to get extremely anxious to the point whereby it causes them psychological distress. Thus shyness can be considered a personality trait but social anxiety is defined as a psychological disorder. If you are suffering with social anxiety, you may often become very anxious about what other people may think of you, or how they may judge you. As a result you have great difficulty in social situations, which can affect your day-to-day life.



The Figure above highlights some of the common symptoms of social anxiety disorder. These symptoms can be physical (e.g. shortness of breath), behavioural (e.g. habitual avoidance) and cognitive (e.g. self-conscious thoughts). What sets social anxiety disorder apart from other anxiety disorders including Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and Panic disorder, is that many of the behavioral and cognitive symptoms centre on interpersonal aspects of functioning. This highlights how debilitating social anxiety can be in terms of causing someone to feel such little confidence in themselves that they feel as though they must limit their social exposure in response. By doing this, a person's social

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circles and educational and professional opportunities becomes extremely limited.

People develop social anxiety for a number of reasons. A person may come to experience social anxiety because of past learnt experiences. For instance an individual who was left humiliated in a previous situation might come to avoid that situation again which eventually may cause them to become socially anxious in that environment. Another reason for developing social anxiety may be due to an individual's thinking styles. There is also evidence to suggest that social anxiety may develop due to an individual's biological make-up. It is likely a combination of all of these factors that influences an individual's social anxiety levels.

Once a person develops social anxiety it may be maintained through any number of factors most notably:

- **Unhelpful thoughts:** People's unhelpful thoughts and predictions make it more difficult for them to overcome their social anxiety. Socially anxious people often hold unhelpful thoughts about themselves and their ability in social situations (e.g. I'm dull; I'm weird). This of course lowers their confidence and makes it harder to become involved in social situations. This, in turn, means they rarely get the chance to test out their social skills and prove they can interact well. Socially anxious people often interpret positive social interactions as overly negative.
- **Avoidance:** Socially anxious people tend avoid social contact whenever possible. If they cannot avoid it, they tend to try and escape it as quickly as possible. Although this is a very understandable way of coping with social anxiety, it is actually one of the main reasons that people find it hard to overcome. This is

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because by avoiding social situations, people stop themselves having positive experiences that could disprove some of their unhelpful thoughts. As well as this, the longer someone avoids a social situation, the more daunting it becomes and it is increasingly difficult to face.

- **Using 'Safety Behaviours':** Often, the only time that socially anxious people feel comfortable in social settings, is when they use what is known as 'safety behaviour'. Examples of 'safety behaviours' include: trying to stay in the background on social occasions; remaining quiet during group conversations; sticking closely besides those they know well; avoiding eye contact or drinking alcohol for extra courage. Although such safety behaviours help people feel slightly better at the time, they are actually unhelpful strategies in the longer term. This is because, like avoidance, 'safety behaviours' stop people from having the opportunity to prove that they can cope well, without putting such precautions into place.
- **Increased Self-Focus:** People who are socially anxious often spend a lot of time concentrating on their own bodily sensations during social interactions. Unfortunately, this too plays a part in keeping social anxiety going. For example, people often spend time trying to judge whether they are sweating, stammering, shaking or blushing during social situations. Although they do so in the hope of being reassured that they are not noticeably anxious, this strategy actually just makes things much worse. This is because people tend to overestimate how visible their anxiety is and this of course makes them feel even more self-conscious.

It is important to be aware of these social anxiety maintaining factors in order to challenge negative thoughts and change maladaptive behaviours. The final section in this handout will provide some advice on how to do that.

## **Do I have Social Anxiety? – A checklist for seeking help**

*Please tick the boxes which describe your feelings, physical symptoms, thoughts and behaviour patterns when in social settings.*

### **Feelings**

- Anxious / on edge
- Vulnerable / under the spotlight
- Self-conscious / out of place
- Embarrassed

### **Physical Symptoms**

- Face goes red (blushes)
- Butterflies in stomach / stomach churns
- Heart races
- Voice goes shaky / body trembles
- Sweat
- Dizzy / light headed
- Breathing changes

### **Thoughts**

- I have nothing interesting to say, I'm boring
- Everyone is staring at me
- People can tell how anxious I am
- I'll stammer / I'll blush
- I mustn't look anxious
- I look and sound stupid

### **Behaviour Patterns**

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- You avoid social situations ( )
- You make a quick exit from social situations ( )
- You stay in the background or hide away ( )
- You stay quiet to not make a fool of yourself ( )
- You always take a friend with you ( )
- You drink alcohol for courage beforehand ( )

If you have ticked a number of these boxes, you may be experiencing symptoms of social anxiety. However don't be alarmed, this is very common and there are things you can do to help.

### **How is Social Anxiety treated?**

There are a number of options for the treatment of social anxiety disorder. Research has shown that both psychotherapeutic and medication-based solutions have been effective. It is advisable that you make yourself as informed as possible on what your options are.

There are a number of simple things that you can do yourself to help reduce your social anxiety symptoms:

- **Lifestyle Changes.**

There are a number of simple lifestyle changes that you should try to make if you are feeling socially anxious. These include:

- **Sleep.** It sounds simple but issues with sleep are common for people with social anxiety. When you are sleep-deprived you are more prone to social anxiety.

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Improve your sleep by avoiding daytime napping, caffeine products, browsing mobile devices and excitable television late at night. Try to get between 7-9 hours of sleep per night.

- **Avoid or limit caffeine.** Coffee, tea, energy and sugary drinks act as stimulants that increase anxiety symptoms.
- **Drink only in moderation.** Drinking alcohol in social situations can be extremely tempting in order to calm your nerves, but alcohol increases your risk of having an anxiety attack.
- **Quit smoking.** Nicotine is a powerful stimulant. Smoking leads to higher levels of anxiety.
- **Practice Relaxation and breathing techniques.** This can help to reduce your symptoms early before you experience a full-blown panic attack. Please see the following section for more information regarding relaxation and breathing techniques.

- **Medication**

Medication has been shown to be effective for some people in the treatment of social anxiety. There are typically three types of medication prescribed for social anxiety disorder:

Benzodiazepines, Antidepressants and Beta blockers. Medication

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is often only prescribed as a temporary measure to relieve symptoms of anxiety at the beginning of the treatment process. It is important to remember however that medication does not get to the root of the problem and instead just treats the symptoms. Some people experience some side-effects when taking medication. If you have any questions or concerns regarding medication, you should seek advice from your doctor or a medical professional.

- **Psychotherapy**

There are a number of psychological therapies that have been shown to be effective for the treatment of social anxiety. These include but are not limited to:

- **Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT).** CBT focuses on identifying, understanding, and changing thinking and behavior patterns. In this type of therapy the patient is actively involved in his or her own recovery, has a sense of control, and learns skills that are useful throughout life. For social anxiety, time is spent learning relaxation techniques, challenging negative and unhelpful thoughts and changing behaviors by facing feared situations in a gradual and appropriate way.
- **Interpersonal Therapy (IT).** The underlying assumption with interpersonal therapy is that social anxiety and interpersonal problems are interrelated. The goal of interpersonal therapy is to help a person understand how these factors are operating in their

current life situation to lead them to become anxious or depressed and put them at risk for future depression.

- **Group Therapy.** Group therapy based on CBT principles has been shown to be particularly effective for social anxiety. Group therapy for social anxiety disorder uses acting, videotaping and observing, mock interviews, and other exercises to work on situations that make you anxious in the real world. As you practice and prepare for situations you're afraid of, you will become more and more comfortable and confident in your social abilities, and your anxiety will lessen.

### **Some self-help skills for treating Social Anxiety**

- **Challenging Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs)**

As mentioned earlier, the way that we think about things such as social situations can impact on our anxiety levels and increase the likelihood of someone becoming socially anxious. Our thoughts can feed into our behaviours, our feelings and how we feel physically, and so it is important to remember that they are just thoughts, and not facts. If thoughts are not facts, then they can be challenged. Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs) are common in social anxiety disorder and recognizing them is the first step in learning to change them. By becoming aware of these thoughts and the effect that they are having on us, we are working towards breaking the panic cycle. Below are some common NATs:

- **Predicting the Future:** When we are shy or socially anxious, it is common for us to spend a lot of time thinking about the future and predicting what could go wrong, rather than just letting things be. In the end most of our predictions don't happen and we have wasted time and energy being worried and upset about them. e.g. Assuming that you will trip up in public and everyone will laugh at you.
- **Mind Reading:** This means that you make assumptions about others' beliefs without having any real evidence to support them. e.g. They think I look ugly.
- **Taking Things Personally:** When people are socially anxious or shy, they often take things to heart when they were not meant to be taken that way. e.g. You walk past a group of people laughing and presume that they are laughing at you.
- **Focusing on the Negatives:** After a social gathering, you tend to focus on the parts of the evening that you believe didn't go well and ignore all of the parts that did.
- **Over Generalising:** Based on one isolated incident you assume that all others will follow a similar pattern in the future. e.g. You believe that one presentation did not go well so therefore the rest of them will not go well.
- **What If Statements:** Have you ever wondered "what if" something bad happens? This type of thought can often make us avoid going places or doing the things that we would like. e.g. What if nobody talks to me at the party?
- **Labelling:** Do you find that you attach negative labels to yourself? e.g. I'm boring. Labels like these really influence how we see ourselves and can heighten our anxiety levels.

If some of these thought processes resonate with how you think about things, it might be useful to try to challenge your NATs. Below is a helpful template to track your challenging thoughts:

Where were you?	Emotion or feeling	Negative automatic thought	Evidence that supports that thought	Evidence that does not support that thought	Alternative thought	Emotion or feeling following alternative thought

- **Relaxation techniques.**

Social anxiety is more than just a feeling. It's the body's physical "fight or flight" reaction to a perceived social threat. Your heart pounds, you breathe faster, your muscles tense up, and you feel light-headed. When you're relaxed, the

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complete opposite happens. Since it's impossible to be anxious and relaxed at the same time, strengthening your body's relaxation response is a powerful anxiety-relieving tactic. Progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, and meditation can help you to relax. These are skills that might take some practice initially.

The following are a set of links to further information about these relaxation techniques.

**Progressive muscle relaxation** can help you release muscle tension and take a "time out" from your worries. The technique involves systematically tensing and then releasing different muscle groups in your body. As your body relaxes, your mind will follow.

<http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/ACF3C67.pdf>

<http://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/MuscleRelaxation.pdf>

**Deep breathing.** When you're anxious, you breathe faster. This hyperventilation causes symptoms such as dizziness, breathlessness, lightheadedness, and tingly hands and feet. These physical symptoms are frightening, leading to further anxiety and panic. But by breathing deeply from the diaphragm, you can reverse these symptoms and calm yourself down.

<http://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/CalmBreathing.pdf>

<http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/ACF3C8B.pdf>

**Meditation.** Research shows that mindfulness meditation can actually change your brain. With regular practice, meditation boosts activity on the left side of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for feelings of serenity and joy.

[http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini\\_ID=21](http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini_ID=21)

<http://cdn.franticworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Mindfulness-Of-Body-And-Breath-from-book-Mindfulness-Finding-Peace-in-a-Frantic-World-128k.mp3>

- **Removing avoidance and safety behaviours**

As already highlighted, avoidance and safety behaviours are common ways of dealing with social anxiety but do not actually fix the problem and often make things worse. It might be helpful to consider confronting anxiety provoking social-situations in order to decrease the impact that they have on you and ultimately work towards eliminating your symptoms of social anxiety. Of course, confronting social situations can be daunting, especially given that our anxiety levels often rise when we do so. However research shows that if we can stay in a situation that we feel anxious in for long enough (without using our safety behaviours), gradually our anxiety will reduce. It is almost as though our

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body and mind become 'used to' the situation and our anxiety begins to fall. This may take around 30 minutes or more but often happens more quickly. More importantly, if we subsequently confront a similar situation again, the amount of anxiety we experience is likely to be less and less on each occasion. Not only this, but it is likely to pass more quickly each time too, until the point that the situation causes us little or no anxiety. This process is often done as part of individual or group CBT-based exposure therapy but you could consider developing your own exposure hierarchy to work off of by following these steps:

1. Generate ideas
2. Put them in order of easiest to most difficult
3. Start to confront items in order of easiest to hardest.  
Remember to challenge yourself but be careful not to be overly ambitious. Also remember that it is ok to take a step back on your hierarchy if you feel that you need to. Be conscious of the panic cycle and use breathing and relaxing techniques if you need to.
4. Repeat the exposure exercise as necessary.

Below is a template to create your own exposure plan.





**Some useful links for further reading:**

Social Anxiety Support - Good website including lots of information and links to support services

<http://www.socialanxiety.com/>

Vancouver Social Anxiety and Shyness Support Group

<http://www.meetup.com/Vancouver-Social-Anxiety-Support/>

Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada

<http://www.anxietycanada.ca/>

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