

Social Anxiety Disorder

Feeling anxious in social situations is normal human behaviour. At some time in most people’s lives they will feel anxious, for example when asking someone for a date or having to give a speech. Social anxiety disorder, also called social phobia is when this anxiety becomes so extreme that it stops you from doing the things you want to be able to do in life.

It may be an intense fear about a specific situation, or it may be that fears are more generalised and include most social situations found in routine life. Whether anxiety is specific or general there will be things that trigger the anxiety. They could be thoughts, feeling or situations that are unique to you. However what is common amongst most people experiencing social anxiety is an underlying fear of being scrutinised, judged or embarrassed.

What is the experience like?

The feelings associated with social anxiety can be physical, emotional or behavioural.

Physical	Emotional	Behavioural
Blushing	Excessive self-consciousness	Avoiding situations
Shortness of breath	Intense worry for days, weeks, months before situations	Staying quiet when you don't want to
Stomach Upset / Butterflies	Extreme fear of being watched or judged	Hiding in the background
Trembling or shaking	Fear that you will embarrass yourself	Sitting close to exits in case you need to 'escape'
Racing heart	Fear of others noticing your nerves	Always having to take a buddy with you
Tightness in chest		Drinking before social situations to calm nerves
Sweating		Using recreational drugs to reduce anxiety
Hot flushes		
Feeling dizzy or faint		

As uncomfortable as the feelings of social anxiety may be, it is actually possible to challenge and overcome it. It won’t happen overnight but by taking little steps towards a goal you can see gradual improvements. The biggest thing to remember is that the more we avoid the things we fear, the bigger the fear becomes as it feeds off itself.

How can I change things?

Some people find that speaking to their G.P. is helpful who can advise on options for treatment such as self-help material, counselling, and possibly medication to reduce the symptoms. The following organisations may also be helpful.

Anxiety UK - <http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>

No More Panic - <http://www.nomorepanic.co.uk/>

Mind - http://www.mind.org.uk/help/diagnoses_and_conditions/anxiety

Self-Help Techniques

Some of the following techniques may help, but it is important to speak to a professional if you are unable to cope with the symptoms you are experiencing.

Challenge Negative Thoughts

Many people with social anxiety hold negative and unrealistic thoughts and beliefs about themselves and how other people perceive them in a social context. For example someone may think when a conversation dries up “it’s my fault I am stupid and inept, other people must not like talking to me” where-as if you challenge this assumption you may realise conversations naturally come to an end all the time. The first step to challenging negative thoughts is identifying them, write a list when you notice yourself thinking negatively and try and see which of these categories they fit into.

- Mind Reading
- Fortune Telling
- Catastrophizing
- Personalising

Write a list of alternative beliefs and repeat them to yourself when anxious.

Learn some relaxation techniques.

Many of the symptoms of anxiety are felt within the body. At times these symptoms can get so bad that they become frightening. Mostly when we are anxious our muscles tense, or heart rate increases and we stop breathing properly (sometimes all together)

By learning to relax, you can begin to notice the signs of anxiety earlier and start to reverse them. Relaxation is a skill like playing sport or a musical instrument and as such can be learnt. The more you practice the quicker and easier relaxing will become.

A Simple breathing exercise to try.

- Sit comfortably in a chair with both feet planted firmly on the ground, your back pressed into the chair, keeping your shoulders back and relaxed (try not to hold too much tension here) relax the muscles in your face, unclench your jaw and relax your tongue from the top of your mouth if it is there. Place your hands where they are comfortable and close your eyes if you wish
- Slowly breathe in through your nose to the count of four
- Hold your breath for two seconds
- Breathe out to the count of six through your mouth, exhaling as much air as possible.
- Start the sequence again and try to focus on keeping a slow and steady count feeling the air pass over your nose and mouth as you breathe in, hold, and out to the count of 4 – 2 – 6.
- Stop when you feel ready and notice any changes in your body or feelings

Face your Fears – Avoiding situations has been shown to make anxiety worse overtime as we do not learn how to cope with the experience and we do not give ourselves the opportunity for positive experience to happen. Tackle the situations you fear one by one, starting with the less scary working up to the most. Expect set back and know that this is ok.

Build Relationship Skills - Take a course in assertiveness and communication skills. Volunteer to do something with a local charity or organisation you feel passionate about so you can spend time with like-minded people.

Change your Lifestyle – Avoid or limit caffeine, drink alcohol in moderation only, quit smoking (it actually increases your levels of anxiety within the body) Try and sleep well.

Investing in good health at work

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