

# Social Anxiety Information Sheet

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## What is Social Anxiety?

Social anxiety is one of the most common forms of anxiety, with an estimated 12% of the population having some form of social anxiety. Everyone will have felt socially anxious at one point in their lives, though for some people this can persist in and become a recurring difficulty in a person's life that can be extremely distressing and have a huge impact on their functioning.

People with social anxiety often believe that others are judging them or that people think badly of them. They may think that they do not come across well, or that they are not able to perform well socially. This may come from a fear that they are not as good as other people. These thoughts can make certain social situations quite difficult for people with social anxiety.

It is important to note that presentations of social anxiety can be different; some will find situations distressing that others do not. Some situations may seem more difficult than others. For example, some people may only feel social anxious when they speak to strangers, but might feel at ease speaking to people who they know well or vice versa. Some may feel uncomfortable in crowded places such as pubs, shops, queues, or canteens. For some people, their experience of social anxiety may be solely to do with speaking or performing in front of groups of people, which may be stopping them from progressing with their career. This information sheet is designed to help you begin to think how social anxiety may affect you.

## How does it affect us?

### Thoughts

People with social anxiety tend to worry about social situations before, during, and after they happen. They might have negative unhelpful thoughts about themselves or how they act in social situations. They might also engage in a range of unhelpful thinking styles such as mind-reading (*they think that I'm making a fool of myself*); predicting the future (*if I speak up in front of everyone, I will blush and people will laugh*); disqualifying the positives (*they were only nice to me because they pity me*) or all-or-nothing thinking (*if I show I'm nervous then I am stupid*).

People with social anxiety may also hold a negative image of themselves in their mind of how they fear other people may see them. This may be a picture of themselves looking flustered, foolish, timid, or shaking excessively for example.

## Behaviour

### Avoidance

People with social anxiety may find it difficult to go into social situations and may find them very distressing. As a result of this, they may avoid going into social situations that they find difficult, even if this is inconvenient for them. For example, calling in sick for work so that they don't have to take part in a presentation, walking a longer route to avoid bumping in to someone they know, or avoiding answering the

### Safety Behaviours

When people feel anxious in social situations, they may do certain things to try and make themselves feel more relaxed at ease. These are called 'safety behaviours'. For people with social anxiety, they may notice that they drink more alcohol or smoke more in social situations. They may engage in certain safety behaviours during social situations such as sitting in a corner, checking for exits, going to the toilet more frequently, or offering to help out so that there is something to do. They may try to reduce feelings of anxiety by rehearsing what they are going to say before meeting with someone. During a conversation with someone, they might notice themselves avoiding making eye contact, talking too much or too little, or fidgeting to try and make themselves feel less anxious.

## Physical Symptoms

When our brain detects a threat, it activates an ancient survival mechanism - our 'fight or flight' response. This response will be activated whether a real threat (*a wild animal charging towards you*) or an imagined threat (*an anxious thought that someone might judge you negatively*) is detected. The 'fight or flight' response prepares our body for action – to either physically fight the threat or to 'take flight' and run away from it. It releases our body's stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, which create the physical symptoms of anxiety. These physical symptoms include sweating, shaking, feeling dizzy or lightheaded, heart racing, changes in breathing, churning stomach, tightness in chest and tense muscles.



**Thoughts racing**

Quicker thinking helps us to evaluate danger and make rapid decisions. It can be very difficult to concentrate on anything apart from the danger (or escape routes) when the fight or flight response is active

If we don't exercise (e.g. run away or fight) to use up the extra oxygen then we can quickly start to feel dizzy or lightheaded

**Dizzy or lightheaded**

**Changes to vision**

Vision can become acute so that more attention can be paid to danger. You might notice 'tunnel vision', or vision becoming 'sharper'

**Breathing becomes quicker and shallower**

Quicker breathing takes in more oxygen to power the muscles. This makes the body more able to fight or run away

**Dry mouth**

The mouth is part of the digestive system. Digestion shuts down during dangerous situations as energy is diverted towards the muscles

**Adrenal glands release adrenaline**

The adrenaline quickly signals other parts of the body to get ready to respond to danger

**Heart beats faster**

A faster heart beat feeds more blood to the muscles and enhances your ability to run away or fight

**Bladder urgency**

Muscles in the bladder sometimes relax in response to extreme stress

**Nausea and 'butterflies' in the stomach**

Blood is diverted away from the digestive system which can lead to feelings of nausea or 'butterflies'

**Palms become sweaty**

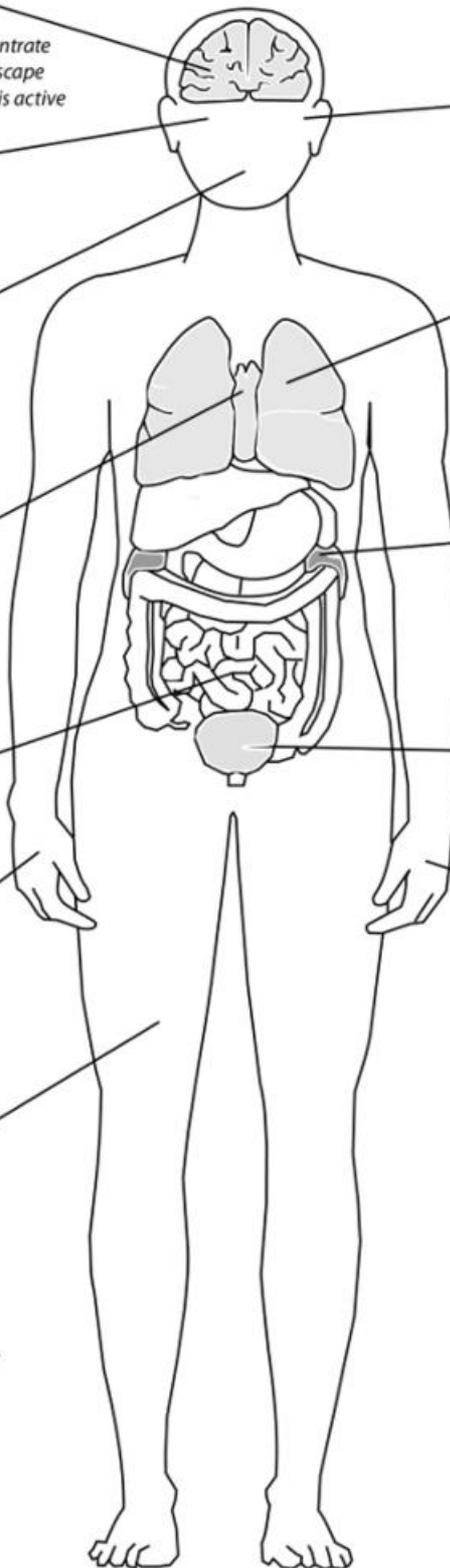
When in danger the body sweats to keep cool. A cool machine is an efficient machine, so sweating makes the body more likely to survive a dangerous event

**Hands get cold**

Blood vessels in the skin contract to force blood towards major muscle groups

**Muscles tense**

Muscles all over the body tense in order to get you ready to run away or fight. Muscles may also shake or tremble, particularly if you stay still, as a way of staying 'ready for action'



The fight or flight response is really helpful if we have to take action and fight off a wild animal charging towards us, but not so helpful if we are just trying to enter a social situation.

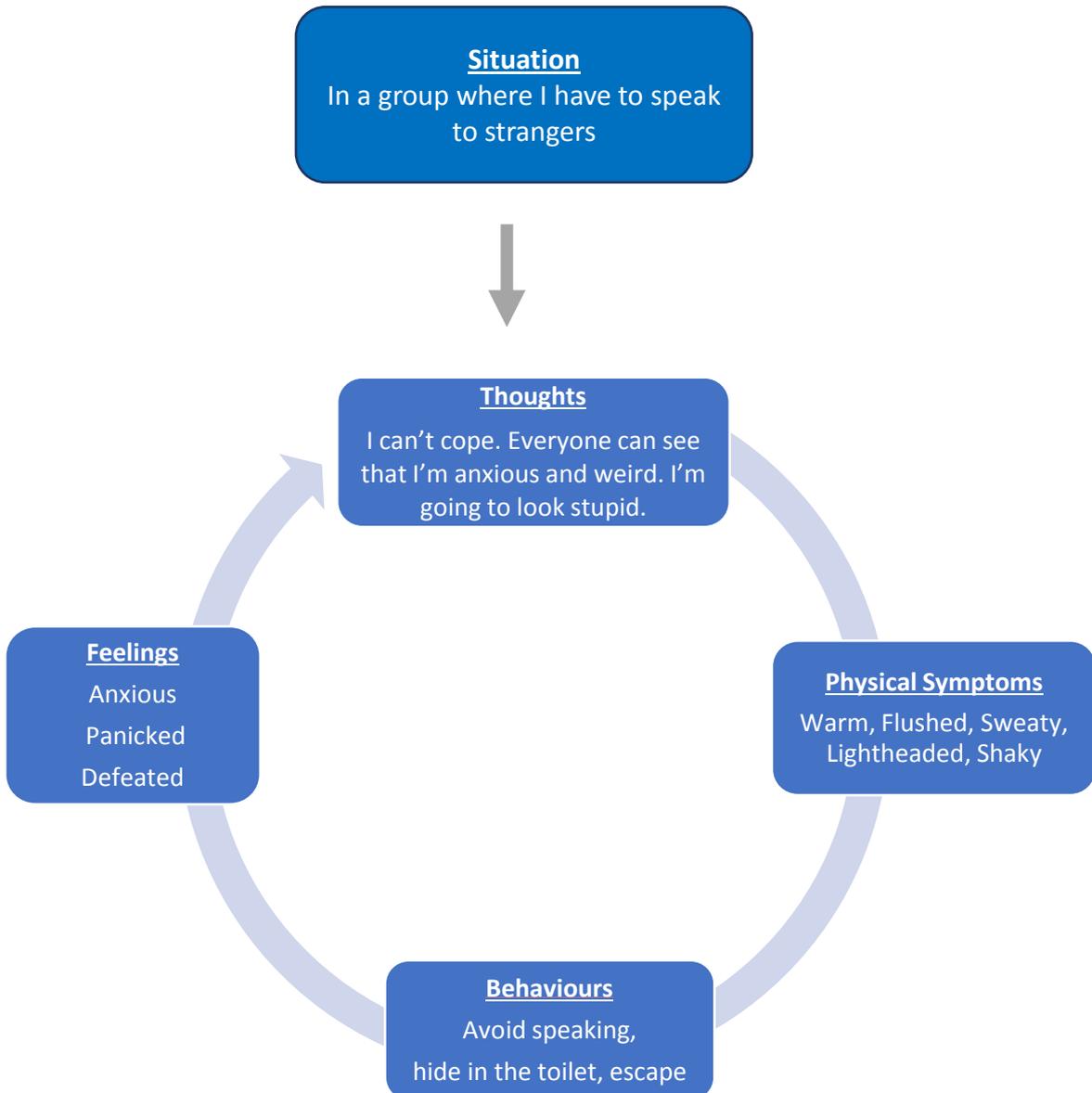
For some people, their physical symptoms may be the main reason that they feel distressed in social situations. For example, some people may fear that they blush, sweat, or tremble in social situations. In these cases, their anxious thoughts are centred around a fear that people will see these physical symptoms and judge them negatively. They may avoid situations where their physical symptoms are more likely, and engage in safety behaviours to try and reduce or hide their physical symptoms (*e.g. always presses their arms tight to their sides to avoid others seeing potential sweat patches*).

## Vicious Cycle

Our thoughts, feelings, body symptoms and behaviour are interconnected and take cues of one another. Our anxious thoughts, feelings and behaviours all work together to keep our social anxiety going, and even make it worse by creating a vicious cycle.

Let's take a look at an example.

Sarah has to attend a compulsory training day at work. She has been asked to team up and brainstorm ideas with 4 other colleagues that she doesn't know well. As soon as she is told she has to participate in groupwork she begins to worry and thinks '*everyone is going to think I'm stupid*'. She begins to feel the physical symptoms of anxiety. She notices she feels light-headed and shaky and can feel her heart racing and her face and body becoming really warm. She starts to think '*everyone can see that I am blushing! They are going to know that I'm anxious and think I'm weird! I can't cope with this!*'. Sarah notices that the more she thinks about her face becoming warm, the warmer it gets. She doesn't say anything while the rest of her colleagues chat. She then decides that she feels too anxious and leaves the room to hide in the bathroom. She then texts her boss that she doesn't feel well and had to go home. She notices that as soon as she leaves she feels better.



By avoiding the situation and escaping, it is likely that Sarah experienced a relief of her physical symptoms and anxious thoughts. However, this will only benefit Sarah in the short term. In this example, leaving the situation is only going to confirm her anxious thoughts and her belief that she cannot cope. The next time she enters a social situation, it is likely that her thoughts will be just as anxious, and she will feel just as distressed – thus continuing her vicious cycle.

## What can I do to stop my vicious cycle?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) targets anxious thoughts, physical symptoms & behaviours to try and weaken the vicious cycle and reduce feelings of anxiety. Here are some CBT techniques that you can try.

### Controlled Breathing

Controlled breathing is a relaxation technique which reduces the physical symptoms of anxiety, panic and stress. When you are anxious, panicked or stressed, your fight and flight mechanism tells you to breathe in more oxygen. We therefore lose the balance between oxygen (breathe in) and carbon dioxide (breathe out).

This imbalance is called hyperventilation which can cause uncomfortable symptoms such as heart palpitations, sweating, and feeling dizzy, light-headed and weak. Learning to control our breathing means we learn to control and reduce the symptoms of fight and flight.

Controlled breathing is slower and deeper than normal breathing and happens in our stomach rather than our chest. Imagine a balloon in your stomach. Breathe in slowly counting to four (you should notice your stomach move out slightly as if the balloon was inflating), before breathing out to the count of four (you should notice your stomach move in slightly as if the balloon was deflating). Repeat this cycle.

### Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Our bodies respond automatically to stressful situations and thoughts by becoming tense. The opposite relationship also works: a good way of relaxing the mind is to deliberately relax the body. In a progressive muscle relaxation, each muscle group is tensed in turn, and the tension is then released. This relaxes the muscles and allows you to notice the contrast between tension and relaxation. Relaxation should be enjoyable so if any part of the exercise is too difficult skip it for the moment. If you have any injuries, you may wish to leave out that part of the exercise.

### *Preparation*

Lie down flat on your back, on a firm bed, a couch, or on the floor. Support your head and neck with a pillow or cushion. Alternatively sit in a comfortable chair with your head well-supported. Close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so.

### Instructions

Focus your attention on different parts of your body in sequence. Go through the sequence three times:

- 1) Tense & release: Tense that body part, hold it for a few moments, then relax
- 2) Lightly tense & release: Tense that body part with just enough tension to notice, then relax
- 3) Release only: Just pay attention to each muscle group and decide to relax it

### Recommended sequence

1. Right hand & arm (clench the fist & tighten the muscles in the arm)
2. Left hand & arm
3. Right leg (tense the leg, lifting the knee slightly)
4. Left leg
5. Stomach & chest
6. Back muscles (pull the shoulders back slightly)
7. Neck & throat (push the head back slightly into the pillow/surface)
8. Face (scrunch up the muscles in your face)

Remember, if relaxation is new to you then these techniques may feel a bit strange at first. It is important to practice these techniques regularly and at a time when you are feeling less stressed as this can help you apply the technique more easily when feeling stressed or anxious. Remember practice makes perfect. Remind yourself that the physical symptoms you are experiencing are your body's natural response to the fight or flight response and are simply trying to protect you and keep you safe. These will eventually pass.

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a technique that teaches us to pay attention in a specific way; on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgement. Mindfulness it is a practical way to notice your thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds and smells. We can often do daily tasks being miles away without realising it. In this state, we are more likely to have our "buttons pressed" as our environment may trigger old, unhelpful thinking patterns. By becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, we give ourselves more opportunity to challenge and change our old thoughts habits that might cause us problems.

Here are a few different mindfulness exercises you can try:

- Mindful Meditation
  - Assume a comfortable posture lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting, keep the spine straight and let your shoulders drop. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.
  - Bring your attention to your belly, feeling it rise or expand gently on the in-breath and fall on the out-breath.
  - Keep your focus on the breathing, being with each in-breath for its full duration and with each out-breath for its full duration, as if you were riding the waves of your own breathing.
  - Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that took you away and then gently bring your attention back to your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out.

- If your mind wanders away from the breath a thousand times, then your job is simply to bring it back to the breath every time.
- Practice this exercise for fifteen minutes every day, whether you feel like it or not, for one week and see how it feels to add this to your daily life. Be aware of how it feels to spend some time each day just being with your breath without having to do anything.
  
- 5 Senses
  - Take a look around your environment. Notice 5 things that you can see. Now 4 things you can hear. Then 3 things you can feel, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing that you can taste.
  
- Mindful eating
  - Try eating mindfully. Mindful eating can be practiced with many different foods. for example – try to slowly and mindfully eat a raisin. Notice all that you can see about the raisin. Is it big or small? There are many different ridges and changes in colour. Next notice all you can feel about the raisin. Is it soft or firm? Does the texture change in places? Now smell the raisin and finally taste it. How would you describe the way it tastes? Is it a sweet raisin or quite sour? Is it chewy?

## Reduce self-focus

When you are in an anxiety provoking social situation, you may notice an increase in self focus. Self focus means that your attention is turned on yourself. This can be unhelpful for a few reasons. Firstly, people who do not get anxious in social situations tend to be able to focus their attention outwardly. This could mean that they pay attention to the conversation that they are in, their surroundings or the body language of others. Picking up on these other factors usually allows a person to be quite effective and attentive in social situations. People who do become anxious in social situations may find it hard to pick up on these other factors as their attention is turned towards themselves, hence **self-focus**. This means that people who are social anxious tend to concentrate a lot on their own body, particularly looking for physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g. blushing, trembling or sweating). We also know that people with social anxiety tend to think that their physical symptoms are more noticeable than they are - which is why they are on the look-out for them.

Unfortunately, paying increasing our self-focus to look out for physical symptoms or to check that we look acceptable to others tends to make us more anxious which can make our physical symptoms worse – creating that dreaded vicious cycle! So how can you stop focusing on yourself?

- Try not to inspect yourself. Try and pay attention to what is going on around you.
  - Look at your surroundings and other people.
  - Concentrate on what is being said instead of your own stream of thoughts.
  - See if you can notice anyone else showing any signs of anxiety.
  
- Begin to notice that you are not the centre of everyone's attention – just as everyone else is not the centre of your attention.

- Remind yourself that your physical symptoms of anxiety are not as noticeable as you might think. You could film yourself beforehand to see if the image in your head matches up to what you actually look like. It more than likely won't!
- Start to challenge your negative thoughts – is it true that people will dislike you because you are anxious? Would you dislike someone just because they were anxious?

*(adapted from NHS Northumberland, Tyne & Wear, 2016)*

Try out some of these ideas and see if they can work for you. Remember that breaking old habits takes practice and determination. If you find it difficult to reduce your self focus, don't be disheartened and keep on practising!

## Reduce Avoidance

When we are faced with situations that make us feel uncomfortable or fearful, our natural reaction is to avoid it. Whilst this coping strategy can benefit us in the short term, there is a substantial long-term cost. Avoidance can lead to a loss of confidence, as by avoiding something we undermine our own ability to cope with it. Also, the longer that we avoid something the bigger a problem it becomes. This can mean that when we can't avoid the situation anymore, it always appears bigger and scarier than it actually is! Tackling the things that we have once avoided can help our worries and fears reduce, and can prove to ourselves that we are able to deal with these difficult and uncomfortable situations.

The best way to reduce our avoidance behaviour is gradually.

- Write down a list of all the things or situations you have been avoiding or putting off.
- Now number each situation from 1 to 10. The situation that has been numbered 1 should be the easiest to face, with 10 being the hardest. It might be easier to start at 10 and work your way down.
- Now imagine tackling your avoidance like climbing a step ladder – start at step 1 and work your way up to step 10.
- Reflect on your progress after each step. Celebrate your achievements as tackling avoidance is hard.

Say for example, someone had been eating lunch at their desk and avoided speaking to colleagues at all work as they found it too distressing. They could have the goal of feeling able to eat their lunch in the same room as their colleagues. They might start tackling their avoidance by making a quick trip to the lunch room while one other colleague is in there. The next step might be to make one passing comment to a colleague in the lunch room. After that, they may make a trip to the lunch room when it is a bit busier, and then gradually build up the confidence to make a passing remark when the lunch room is busy. If they continue to persist with tackling their avoidance, perhaps they will eventually feel confident enough to sit with their colleagues at lunch and join their conversation.

## What is the treatment?

The current recommended treatment for social anxiety is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). At Wellbeing Services, we run an 'Overcoming Social Anxiety' group. There is no pressure to speak in these groups as they are like classes designed to teach you some strategies that can help to manage your social anxiety. Please contact Wellbeing Services for more information, or visit our website for more information on the topics discussed in this sheet.