



# **Understanding & managing social anxiety**

A workbook & guide

## An introduction



Did you know that social anxiety is one of the most common anxiety disorders, affecting at least one in ten people in the UK?

When we struggle with social anxiety, daily tasks can feel distressing and this can hold us back from engaging in life fully, for example it may hold us back in our careers, relationships, or hobbies and it can also lead to other health issues including severe stress and depression.

While a range of effective psychological and pharmacological treatments exist for social anxiety, many choose not to make use of them, perhaps because the thought of accessing these services is in itself anxiety provoking. Sharing our personal feelings and struggles with others, even medical professionals such as GPs or therapists, can be tough!

This booklet aims to reach those who are struggling with social anxiety and have not yet felt able to seek therapeutic services. Or perhaps you have a friend or family member experiencing this at the moment. Whatever the reason, we hope you find it helpful and informative – and please do feel free to take it at your own pace!

Not only will this booklet provide a wealth of information about social anxiety and how we can better understand it, but it will also provide some examples of techniques and activities that can be used to manage social anxiety effectively.

## Understanding social anxiety

### What does social anxiety feel like?

It is completely natural for people to be sensitive to and give a great amount of thought to social interactions with other people. However, social anxiety can be characterised by the movement of this helpful awareness, into an unhelpful pattern of persistent fear and avoidance.

Social anxiety involves experiences of anxiety or fear in social situations. This can include everyday activities that take place around other people, such as eating, drinking, or using a public toilet. In these situations, the individual can feel humiliated or judged.

Here are some examples of what social anxiety might feel like:

- Worrying about blushing in front of other people
- Worrying that what you are saying doesn't make any sense
- Worrying that everyone is looking at you
- Worrying that people are thinking negatively towards you

### What is your experience of social anxiety?

At times, social anxiety can feel such a strong fear to the individual experiencing it that they feel unable to control it. As a result, they may worry about certain events well in advance of them happening, and avoid any situation where there is a possibility of engaging in social interaction. Because of this avoidance behaviour, it is common for people with social anxiety to become withdrawn, isolated, and depressed.

Although there are various anxiety disorders, there are distinctive features of social anxiety disorder that separate it from the rest.

#### **Physical signs**

- Nausea and stomach pain or 'butterflies'
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Heart palpitations

#### **Emotional signs**

- Feeling anxious or 'on edge'
- Feeling vulnerable
- Feeling self-conscious
- Feeling embarrassed



### **Behavioural signs**

- Avoiding social situations
- Remaining in the background of social situations
- Staying quiet in social situations
- Drinking alcohol before a social situation

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What signs of social anxiety have you noticed in yourself? Write them down here.

## **What causes social anxiety?**

### **Past experiences**

One theory about how we develop social anxiety is that it is a result of our past experiences. For example, if we have felt embarrassed or humiliated in a previous social situation, we can worry or assume that a similar situation will go the same way in the future. For this reason, we will often do whatever we can to avoid finding ourselves in that situation again. Over time, this can increase our fear of social situations, contributing to the maintenance of our social anxiety.

Here are some examples of past experiences that may have influenced how we experience social situations today:

- Previous history of bullying
- Having been involved in an abusive relationship
- Growing up with parents or family members who are very critical of us
- A social interaction in our past that left us feeling totally humiliated and/or judged

### **Unhelpful thinking patterns**

Another reason we may struggle to think of social interactions in a positive light is because of negative or unhelpful thinking styles that we may have developed.

Here are some examples of unhelpful thinking patterns or 'cognitive distortions' that we might experience in relation to social situations,

- 'Mind-reading' (e.g. "That person looked away while I was speaking which means they must think I am boring")
- 'Prediction' (e.g. "If I go to the party tonight, I will end up making a fool of myself")
- 'Comparing and despairing' (e.g. "They are so confident compared to me")
- 'Shoulds' and 'musts' (e.g. "I must be loud and make others laugh")
- 'Catastrophising' (e.g. "If I say the wrong thing, everyone will hate me")

### **Evolutionary factors**

It has also been suggested that some people may develop social anxiety as a result of evolutionary factors. Human beings are historically a sociable species that tend to thrive in the company of others. For this reason, it is understandable that people would fear upsetting others or not fitting in to a social group, leading to avoidance of situations when this could occur. People with social anxiety may be naturally more sensitive to negative evaluation or have an increased awareness of the disadvantages this could bring.

### **Biological factors**

Biological factors have also been recognised as potentially playing a part in social anxiety. For example, if someone in your immediate family is socially anxious, there could be a higher chance of similar personality traits. However, it is important to acknowledge the role of environment here and consider that we may also learn these traits from others rather than inherit them.

In reality, it is likely that it is a combination of biological, social and environmental factors that play a role in the development of social anxiety.

Although it is interesting to understand why we may be socially anxious, it is perhaps more useful to think about our own unique experiences of social anxiety in more depth. It is important to recognise how it is negatively impacting our daily lives and to think about helpful ways in which we can manage this.

Reflecting on factors that may have contributed to our own social anxiety can help us better understand the issues we face and how we might heal.

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## Managing social anxiety

### Recognising and challenging unhelpful thoughts

Negative and unhelpful thoughts can occur so quickly that it can be difficult to even recognise they are there. However, negative automatic thoughts (or 'NATs') can contribute to how we feel and behave when facing a social situation.

Listed below are examples of some NATs that may come up for people with social anxiety:

- 'I am going to make a fool of myself'
- 'People will laugh at me'
- 'What if they know I am anxious?'
- 'People think I am weird'
- 'I need an escape route'
- 'I can't do this'
- 'I am pathetic'

Can you think of any NATs that might have come up for you in social situations? This will make you more likely to recognise them if they come up next time!

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Write down any NATs that you have noticed arising in your own social situations.

So what can you do when these thoughts do come up? Instead of accepting them as fact, it can help to remind yourself that they are not actually factual, but often unrealistic and unhelpful!

To challenge these thoughts, there are some useful questions you can ask yourself:

- Is there any evidence that contradicts this thought?
- Can you identify any of the patterns of unhelpful thinking described earlier?
- What would your friend say to you if they knew what you were thinking?
- How do you think you will feel about this in six months?
- What are the costs and benefits of thinking in this way?
- Is there another way of looking at this situation?

## Example Challenging your NATs



NAT: 'I am going to make a fool of myself'

**Is there any evidence that contradicts this thought?**

Answer: 'I didn't make a fool of myself last week when I was socialising with friends'

**Can you identify any of the patterns of unhelpful thinking described earlier?**

Answer: 'I can see that I used the cognitive distortion of 'prediction' here, which could be unhelpful.'

**What would your friend say to you if they knew what you were thinking?**

Answer: 'They would tell me I will be fine and not to worry'

**How do you think you will feel about this in 6 months?**

Answer: 'In six months, I will probably not be thinking about this anymore'

**What are the costs and benefits of thinking in this way?**

Answer: 'This thought is making me worry a lot and is also very distracting. I am not sure what the benefit is'

**Is there another way of looking at this situation?**

Answer: 'I could look at this social situation as something new and exciting. It is something I want to be a part of, but my negative thoughts have been preventing me from thinking about it this way'

Alternative thought: 'I am looking forward to this event, and have no reason to worry'

## Behavioural experiments

Behavioural experiments can be another really helpful way to challenge our anxieties. They allow us to work towards our goals in small, manageable steps.

This is something that can be done in therapy or individually. If you feel open to the challenge, why not give this exercise a go!

### **STEP 1: Identify the belief you would like to test**

We tend to have hundreds of beliefs about ourselves going through our minds when we think about upcoming social situations. Take a moment to think about some of the beliefs that come up for you. Here are some common examples that may help with this part:

“If I eat in front of people they will think I’m disgusting”

“If I make eye contact with people they will react negatively”

“If I engage in conversation, people won’t be interested”

You can choose your own experiments based on what feels comfortable for you, starting with situations that are only a little uncomfortable, and gradually working on more difficult situations as you build self-confidence, one small step at a time!

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Write down a statement that you would like to test.



**STEP 2: Rate the belief**

Next, write down how much you believe the statement above from 0 (not at all) to 100 (I believe it to be completely true).

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**STEP 3: Plan an experiment that could test the belief**

If someone was to ask you how you knew that statement was true, how would you respond?

If they then asked you to prove it was true, how would you go about it? With these questions in mind, can you think of a way in which you could test the belief? Most of the time, we tend to avoid the situations that these beliefs are about, but continue to assume they are true.

Think about what behavioural experiment you would like to try. Here are some examples to give you some ideas:

- eat in front of another person when you would usually eat alone
- make eye contact with people in a situation when you would usually purposefully look elsewhere
- engage in a conversation you would usually avoid

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Are there any obstacles you can foresee with this experiment? Location? Practicalities? Safety issues (you may wish to ask someone you trust to support you)?

Think about any potential obstacles and whether there is a way around them or whether an alternative experiment would work better in this instance. For example, if in-person meetings aren't possible, could you carry out the experiment virtually?

**STEP 4: Go for it!**

It's time to carry out the experiment now. This may require a lot of courage and belief in yourself. If you are struggling to feel motivated at this stage, remind yourself why you're doing this, and how well you have done in just getting to this stage!

**Reflections**

Once you have completed an experiment, take the time to reflect on the outcome and what your experience of the experiment was. Go back to step 2 and re-rate your belief.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Remember that whatever the outcome, you have successfully taken some positive steps to challenge your anxieties and can continue to try this as much as you like. Well done!

Has your rating of this belief changed? Tick the outcome that applies to your experiment.

## Additional techniques to manage social anxiety

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness is all about living in the present. When we experience social anxiety, we can get caught up in distracting and disturbing thoughts and feelings, usually making negative judgements and assumptions about ourselves and our behaviour.

By becoming more mindful, we can increase our awareness of these thoughts and feelings, noticing them without judgement. In doing this, we are able to bring ourselves back into the moment, giving ourselves space to make valuable decisions about what course of action to take next.

With the practice of mindfulness, we can learn to notice our social discomfort and recognise any associated thoughts as merely thoughts, not facts. With practice, we can learn to accept these thoughts as temporary and passing, return to the present moment, and feel calmer and more in control.

If you are interested in learning more about mindfulness, check out our 'Guide to Mindfulness' booklet available on our website or have a look online for some user-friendly free apps that offer some mindfulness-based exercises for you to try!

<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/mindfulness-booklet.pdf>

### Self-compassion

Research has shown that self-compassion can be lower for those who experience social anxiety disorder, believed to be related to a greater fear of being evaluated.

As we become more accepting of ourselves, the fear of being evaluated negatively is likely to decline. Treating ourselves kindly allows us to feel safe and connected instead of alone and isolated. Self-compassion can activate the parasympathetic nervous system and dampen the sympathetic nervous system, which is the part responsible for the 'fight or flight' reaction we might experience in social situations!

For more information on self-compassion and how to incorporate it into your own life, have a look at our booklet, which can also be found on our website at

<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/self-compassion-booklet.pdf>



**Self-compassion can be lower in those who experience social anxiety**

## What next?

Now that you've completed our booklet, we hope you have found it a helpful tool towards understanding and managing social anxiety. You can always come back to this resource if you are looking to refresh your memory on any of the topics discussed.

Alternatively, you might now feel that speaking to a professional about your social anxiety would be a helpful next step. Remember that it is not a step you have to take alone. You can always ask someone you trust to come along with you to the first session, or even to support you in making that first call.

If this sounds like something you might feel ready to do, feel free to contact us with any questions you have about this process, and we will be more than happy to offer our expertise.

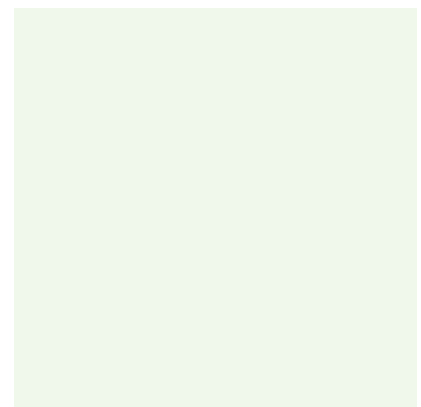
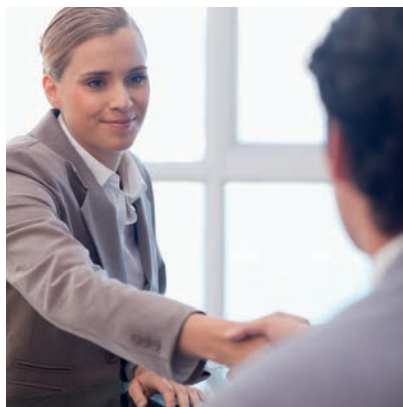
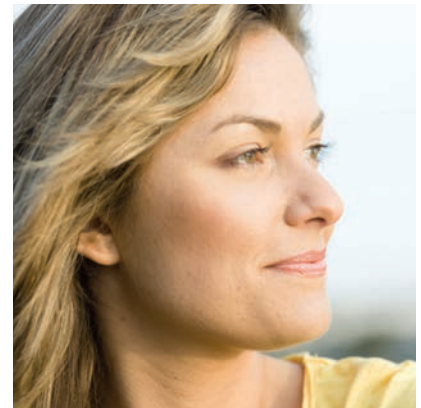
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