

Managing social anxiety guide

Introduction

Welcome to this Foothold and Rightsteps guide on how to manage social anxiety.

This guide will help you consider:

- **What social anxiety is**
- **Causes of social anxiety**
- **Signs of social anxiety**
- **How to tackle social anxiety**

There are also some links to further resources at the end of this guide that can be used to access more information about overcoming social anxiety.

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What is social anxiety?

We all experience anxiety.

Anxiety can help us do better; professional sportspeople use their anxiety to improve their performance.

But too much anxiety can take away our confidence.

Social anxiety can leave us feeling excessively anxious about being judged in certain social or performance situations.

We may feel anxious just thinking about these situations and avoid them altogether.

Although anxiety is common, it isn't easy to 'snap out of'.

With the right help and support, we can get better.

Causes of social anxiety

Many things can contribute to us feeling anxious, such as:

- **Stressful life events such as work, money or relationship problems.**
- **Physical health problems, such as long-term conditions.**
- **Negative early experiences, such as bullying or neglect.**
- **Family history of mood difficulties.**
- **Certain chemicals in the brain such as serotonin and noradrenaline.**

Signs of social anxiety

Social anxiety can change how we think, feel and what we do.

Here are some common signs of social anxiety:



Changes to how we think

- “I’ll embarrass myself.”
- “Everyone will laugh at me.”
- “I’ll make a fool of myself.”
- “I can’t cope. I need to leave now.”

Changes to how we feel

- Feeling anxious, worried or stressed
- Feeling sick, dizzy or faint
- Feeling fearful or shaky
- Blushing or ‘jelly legs’

Changes to what we do

- Avoiding meeting new people
- Not being able to relax
- Avoiding performing or speaking in front of others
- Not eating, drinking or writing in front of others

How we think, feel and what we do are all linked together.

The good news is that making a positive change in one area can also have a positive effect on the other two.

Tackling social anxiety

There are three effective steps to help you tackle social anxiety and **SHY** no more.



S: Stay in the situation

“I want to run away from situations that make me feel anxious.”



It's common, when we feel anxious, to want to run away from situations that are making us feel tense.

This is why we tend to avoid these situations altogether, preferring to be on our own and withdraw.

Although it feels easier avoiding situations, this makes our anxiety and fear keep going.

Thoughts:

“I won't know what to say.”

“I'll make a fool of myself.”

Avoidance behaviours:

Avoid going; turn down invites.

Avoid staying for long if I have to go.

Anxiety and Fear:

Our feelings of anxiety and fear keep going.



Avoidance makes anxiety worse in the long run. It knocks our confidence and prevents us from finding out that things could be okay and we could cope.

Exposing ourselves to situations may feel scary at first. But staying in the situation helps us turn fearful situations into manageable experiences, reducing our anxiety.

Stay with the anxiety

Coping with anxiety is not easy or fun. It takes courage and hard work to bring our anxiety under control.

Facing our fearful situations is a great way to reduce our anxiety in the long run.

Getting through an easier situation first can make us confident to face more difficult situations next.

Gradually, we can tackle our social anxiety.

Exercise

When you feel ready, follow these steps here:

Step 1

Choose a situation that is making you feel only a little anxious

Step 2

Set a realistic time to stay in this situation (e.g. five minutes).

Step 3

Stay in this situation until you are comfortable in it. This may take five attempts or more.



Step 4

Once comfortable in this situation, celebrate your efforts. Noticing our successes can keep us going.

Step 5

Next, move on to a situation that is making you feel a bit more anxious. Follow the same steps again.

H: Hear others

“They’ll think I’m stupid.”

When we feel socially anxious, we believe that others will judge us negatively.

Our attention becomes very self-focused. We think about how we may appear to them and what others might be thinking of us.

We try to interpret every facial expression and what it might mean.

We become ‘mind-readers’ and trust that we can correctly predict what others are thinking about us.

“He just looked at his watch. He thinks I’m boring.”

The truth is, just because we think something, doesn’t mean it’s true.

Although our thoughts may seem believable, they can often be unrealistic and unhelpful.

Hear what others think

We often try to predict what others are thinking about us.

We take our feelings as facts that others are judging us negatively.

“I feel so hot, I must look bright red to them.”

“I feel so nervous when I talk, people must be judging me.”



The truth is, other people may not think like this.

They may not notice these things that we are worried about.

Exercise

The best way to find out what others think about us is to ask them.

Think of someone you feel comfortable with. Find an opportunity to ask them how you looked at a time when you felt anxious.

You may find that your symptoms were not as noticeable as you thought they were.

You can also ask whether they get anxious and how they cope. You may see that anxiety is a perfectly normal human emotion, not a sign of weakness or incompetence.

People are not judging others so harshly for their anxiety.

Y: be Yourself

“I try to hide who I really am, so that I can fit in easier.”

We often use ‘safety behaviours’ in order to feel safer and avoid or reduce our anxiety. We may find ourselves saying we agree with everything others say.

We may try not to be noticed, by speaking very quietly, or sitting at the back of a room, away from others.

We may find ourselves fiddling with something or tensing up to hide our shaking.

We may even start using alcohol or drugs to increase our confidence and try to reduce anxiety.

At first, these behaviours may make good sense as they can temporarily reduce our anxiety. In fact, these activities increase our self-focus. This means that our anxiety gets worse in the long run.

Situation: My boss asked me to make a presentation to our team



Thoughts:

“I’ll forget my words.”

“I’ll go all red and look stupid.”

Safety behaviour:

Use alcohol to help me relax before presentation.

Anxiety and Fear:

Our feelings of anxiety and fear keep going.

Anxiety will go away naturally after a while.

Using these safety behaviours to try and avoid feeling anxious will only keep our anxiety going in the long run.

Safety behaviours can often make us act less naturally in social situations.

Using safety behaviours means others don’t see our ‘true’ self. We also miss the opportunity to show that we would be able to cope without our safety behaviours.

Exercise

Think about what your safety behaviours are in situations that make you feel anxious.

For example, you might sit at the back of the room (to hide), look away or down when talking to others (to avoid eye contact).

When you have identified your own safety behaviours, gradually drop them one at a time, for good.

You can find out that there is nothing to fear and that you can cope without them, no matter what the situation.



Social anxiety summary

You should now have a better understanding of what social anxiety is and how you can put steps in place to stop it taking over your day-to-day life.

You've had the opportunity to explore three simple SHY steps to tackle social anxiety:

1. Stay in the situation
2. Hear others
3. be Yourself

Even making small changes can make a big difference to how we feel!

Further support and resources

If you or someone you know would benefit from further support, here are some helpful resources:

Wellbeing sessions

Our wellbeing sessions are based on psychological treatments recommended by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE).

They are available for a number of difficulties, such as anxiety, low mood or stress problems. People can work through the sessions (typically 6-8) at a pace that suits them best.

[Click here to access the Foothold wellbeing hub](#)

Turning Point

Turning Point offers a wide range of health and wellbeing services, supporting individuals with mental health, physical health, substance abuse and learning disabilities needs.

[Click here to access the Turning Point website](#)





Foothold

Supporting engineers

GP

Your GP will be able to discuss things with you in more detail, offer support and advice as well as suggesting next steps, if needed.

[Click here to find your GP](#)

Medication

Some people may be offered medication, either on its own or in combination with a psychological treatment. It can help them to improve their mood and feel more able to deal with problems more effectively.

[Click here to access more information about medication](#)

