

Shyness & Social Anxiety: An Introduction

Counselling & Wellbeing Service

You may find it helpful to look at this Introduction in conjunction with other materials on the Self Help site, particularly:

Mindfulness Based Progressive Muscular Relaxation
10 Top Tips for Exam Stress Relationships and Group Presentations
10 Top Tips for Group Work Assertiveness Tips

Introduction

We all feel shy or anxious in some situations. These can involve meeting new people, starting new activities or settling down to an unfamiliar environment, such as beginning a course of study at university. Most people would even say that it is important that we feel anxious at times, as this makes us work harder at preparing for examinations or presentations or taking our other responsibilities more seriously. So a little bit of anxiety can be a good thing.

However, shyness and anxiety which stops us from socialising with other people, prevents us from getting on with group-work assignments or makes us fear giving presentations that are a required on our courses, is not helpful.

There are many symptoms of shyness and social anxiety, which can be categorized into feelings, thoughts, physical sensations, beliefs and actions. The following is by no means a complete list of the signs and symptoms, but is intended as a way for you to check whether you may be experiencing excessive levels of shyness or social anxiety.



Social Anxiety Symptoms Check List

Do you experience the following:

1. A strong feeling of fear in social or group situations or when asked to give a presentation?
2. Thoughts that you may embarrass yourself in front of others?
3. Physical sensations, such as:

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| (a) A pounding heart. | (g) Muscle tension. |
| (b) Tight or painful chest. | (h) Sweating. |
| (c) Tingling or numbness in toes and fingers. | (i) Changes in your breathing. |
| (d) Stomach churning. | (j) Dizziness or light headedness. |
| (e) Having to go to the toilet. | (k) Blushing. |
| (f) Feeling restless or jumpy. | |



Do you believe that:

- (a) The fear is too much or there is no reason for it.
- (b) Others think negatively of you.
- (c) Others judge you.
- (d) Things will go badly in a group or a social situation before you even go to them.
- (e) You will make a 'fool' of yourself or look 'stupid'.
- (f) You are 'boring' or 'strange'.
- (g) People won't like you if you make a mistake or show that you are anxious.
- (h) People may see you in the negative way that you have of yourself in your mind.

(i) That 'it was awful' or that you did really badly after you have been in a social situation or a group.

4. Do you take the following actions:

- (a) Sometimes you go to social situations but find them very difficult and become anxious.
- (b) You avoid going to social situations, taking part in group work or giving presentations.
- (c) You avoid talking on the telephone.
- (d) You rehearse before the event so you know what you are going to say, or agree to help in the social situation so that you are kept busy.
- (e) You cannot relax in the social situation so you drink more, smoke more or talk more or very quickly.

If you have said 'yes' to several of these symptoms, you may be experiencing social anxiety or shyness.



The Causes of Social Anxiety

As we said at the beginning, all people feel anxious at times. Anxiety can be a positive emotion e.g. when it helps us to prepare for group presentations or social events. However, when it starts to interfere with the way we want to live our lives, it causes us difficulties.

Social anxiety may have its origins in your childhood. You may have a low opinion of yourself because of experiences that you had when you were little. Perhaps you grew up in a home where others were anxious and therefore you learnt to worry more. Or you may have experienced stressful events in your life which have left you feeling more anxious.

Whatever the reasons for anxiety, many of us grow out of these feelings as we get older. We become more confident and better able to trust our own judgement. However some may continue to feel anxious and this becomes a long lasting problem. The person may feel that they are no good in social situations and so the problem continues. They may also feel that the negative view they have of themselves is what others also believe. Thus they are not able to see when the other person may actually be positive towards them. The person may also expect or fear that something will happen, e.g. 'If I go in front of the group to do my presentation, I will not be able to get one word out of my mouth.'

Without meaning to, we may in some ways be keeping social anxiety and shyness going. We may, for example, believe that no one is interested in our views or we may avoid social situations. We may also have developed coping strategies such as never going out socially on our own or making sure that we say very little in the hope that others will not notice us.



How to Overcome Shyness and Social Anxiety

1. The first step for you to take when tackling shyness and social anxiety is to acknowledge that you have a problem. Rather than seeing 'the problem' as some kind of a huge block, it is important to understand what it means to you. It is much easier to find a solution if you are specific about the problem, for example, a problem with giving presentations and meeting large numbers of people you don't know rather than saying that you suffer from anxiety in general. The first example gives us some information about the problem and can lead to possible solutions, whereas the second may feel overwhelming and thus not easily resolved.

2. So identify your difficulties and what they mean to you. You may find it helpful to write them down, e.g. 'I feel anxious at parties', 'I fear that I will make a complete mess of my presentation'. You can then follow this with how you react to this anxiety, e.g. 'Because of feeling anxious at parties I no longer go to them', 'As I fear making a complete mess of my presentation, I try not to do them'.

3. Having written down your concern, try to think of what you imagine could go wrong, e.g. other people will not talk to me, they will think I am stupid, I will be unable to say anything during my presentation, I will drop everything on the floor etc. Think how likely it is that these things will happen and give this a rating, such as it 30% likely or 15% likely.



4. What are the consequences of the actions that you take to avoid the situations where you feel uncomfortable? By not going to parties you may feel that you miss out on making friends and enjoying yourself. By not giving presentations you may get lower marks, or even fail your subjects. Think about these consequences. Are you happy to go ahead like this or do you wish to overcome your anxiety and or shyness?

5. Assuming that you wish to do something about the problem, what is it that you would like to change? Looking at our previous examples, you may wish to be able to go out to parties with your friends or you may wish to start to give presentations.

So, to recap on the above:

- You recognise you have a problem with shyness or social anxiety.
- You know the effects of the problem.
- You know what you imagine will go wrong.
- You know what you would like to do differently.
- You are prepared to do something to achieve this goal.

Taking Action

Once you have made a decision to do something about overcoming your difficulties, you will need to think what action to take. The following ideas may be helpful with this task:

1. Identify your goal, e.g. you may wish to give a presentation in three months' time.
2. Set some intermediate goals leading up to the event, e.g. you may wish to give the presentation to a group of your friends first, then to a larger group of people etc. It often helps to tackle problems in small steps at a time.
3. Decide what actions you may need to take, e.g.
4. You may find it helpful to talk to someone to get their support, e.g. a friend, a family member, your PAA.
5. You may decide you need to learn about exam stress (see 10 Top Tips for Exam Stress) or relaxation (see e.g. Mindfulness Based Progressive Muscular Relaxation) or you may wish to consider meditation (see C&WB website).
6. You may feel that it would be helpful to see your GP for a consultation or you may decide to see a university Counsellor for help with addressing the issues.
7. Review your progress regularly by checking how you are getting on with your intermediate goals. If all is going fine, that's great. However, problems are to be expected on the way, especially if these difficulties have been with you a long time. Rather than criticising yourself for what you haven't achieved concentrate on the positives. One good way to do this is to write down all the things that you have done, a 'have done' list as opposed to the 'to do' lists which often seem disappointing as it is very difficult to get everything done on schedule. Affirmations, statements such as: 'I am proud of myself for all that I am', 'I love myself and want to succeed' can also be a positive way of raising your self esteem.

Exercise: Disputing

Some people find it helpful to dispute their beliefs and imaginings about a situation. To do so:

1. Imagine you are a detective investigating your fear. The detective is looking for evidence, e.g. what evidence can he or she find to support the idea that you have reason to be fearful of groups or presentations.
2. List the evidence. This might include examples from the past and things you know about yourself.
3. Now list the evidence that does not support this theory. This too might include examples from the past and things you know about yourself. You would include the successes you have had and the encouraging comments you have had from others.
4. Have a look at the evidence and see what you conclude.

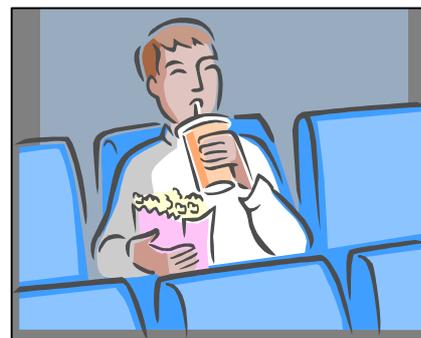
8. When it comes to tackling the main goal, do not be afraid to seek help if you have not done so already. Make sure you have supportive friends around, that you have had enough sleep, food and fluids. Do not expect perfection and be open to appreciate the effort that you have made. And reward yourself with something meaningful afterwards.

9. Having completed the task, review how you have done. You may realise that you have confronted long held beliefs or challenged ideas that had affected you for a long time. Make sure you reward yourself and practice the skills you have learnt.

10. Having now tackled one task, you may realise that you have learnt skills and strategies that will be useful in other situations. Think how you can use these in other situations.

Conclusion

At all steps of the way, do remind yourself that you are not alone. There are many people who, like you, feel shy or anxious. There are also many ways to overcome these problems. As we are all individuals, we need to find the way that works for us. The above self-help procedure may work for you. But if it doesn't, or you do not feel it is right for you, please remember that you can consult your GP and that you are welcome to come to see a counsellor at the Counselling and Wellbeing Service to discuss your situation.



Further information about Shyness and Social Anxiety

<http://www.social-anxiety.org.uk/>

<http://socialanxietydisorder.org.uk/>

http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/condition_yp_exam.php

Butler, Gillian, Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness, A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques (London, Robinson, 1999)