

Information Sheet

Overcoming Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is anxiety which becomes triggered when an individual enters, or thinks about entering, a social situation. Usually it involves fear of being negatively judged by others, or of embarrassing oneself. Although many people experience anxiety in some social situations (such as public speaking), for others it may become debilitating as more social situations are avoided (or endured with distress). Over time, social anxiety can impact many aspects of life including not only social but also academic, career and leisure activities.

People who are socially anxious interpret social situations as threatening, hence the 'fight or flight' response is triggered, in readiness to run away or defend themselves. This often involves uncomfortable physical sensations such as racing heart, short breath, stomach upset, muscle tension and sweating. Thinking may also become faster and more focussed on danger. Often the urge to avoid or escape social situations will seem overwhelming.

What Causes & Maintains Social Anxiety?

There seems to be an inherited component to anxiety, although this is unlikely to wholly explain its development. In many cases there is a learned component; for example, a child growing up may have observed a socially anxious parent or older sibling, or they may have been exposed to negative social experiences (e.g., being bullied or teased). When working to manage social anxiety, however, it is far more important to recognise *what is keeping it going* (maintaining it) than where it came from. The main two factors which maintain social anxiety (and worsen it over time) are **unhelpful thinking** and **avoidance**.

Unhelpful Thinking

Our minds are very active and their job (at which they excel!) is to produce thoughts. Most of the time we are unaware of this constant stream of thinking; at times, however, our minds produce unhelpful thoughts that increase our anxious feelings and lead to maladaptive

behaviour. Some common unhelpful thinking styles in social anxiety include:

- *'Mind reading'* – assuming that we know what others are thinking about us, and that it's negative;
- *Catastrophising* – assuming that the worst possible outcome will definitely occur and that we will be unable to cope;
- *Assuming* - believing that we are the only person who is anxious and that everyone else is confident;
- *Black & White Thinking* – believing that if a social interaction is not perfect, then it is a failure.

Whether or not the thoughts are 'true', we can evaluate them as helpful or unhelpful. If they are unhelpful we can choose to tune them out (like a radio station on static), and focus on what is important to us (e.g., the actual social interaction).

Escape and Avoidance

The most compelling urge when socially anxious is to escape or avoid a situation, but this is the least helpful behaviour in the long term. Escaping/avoiding never provides evidence that social situations are actually safe, instead perpetuating the belief that you were only safe because you avoided or left. This will also increase your fear of social situations in the future.

Rather than escaping or avoiding, try and put in place steps to make the situation more manageable, such as going with a close friend or only expecting yourself to attend for a short time. By gradually increasing the difficulty of being in social situations, dealing with unhelpful thoughts and continuing to practice, over time you can conquer social anxiety.

This *Info Sheet* provides brief information on how to manage social anxiety. However, if social anxiety is preventing you from living your life the way you would like, then seeking professional help is highly recommended.