

social anxiety/shyness

identification

Almost everyone has felt nervous before a presentation, or uncomfortable in a new social setting, which illustrates that everyone has some degree of social anxiety. It makes the most sense seeing people on a continuum.



According to the findings of a survey about Student Health at the University of Alberta (2011), 18% of the 1,600 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt socially isolated at the U of A. A higher proportion of international students (25.4%) reported feeling socially isolated at the U of A in comparison to their Canadian counterparts (13.5%). In addition, 61.7% reported that they “felt very lonely” within the previous 12 months.

According to a Student Life Survey (2001) done on the University of Alberta campus, 45% of the students reported that shyness has been a problem and about 50% of the students reported that they had problems with public speaking. Most people feel shy because they worry about other’s perceptions of them. However, if this worry becomes persistent and disrupts daily life, leading to the use of drugs or alcohol to facilitate their social skills, or turning down opportunities that require public speaking, they are exhibiting signs of social anxiety disorder. Social anxiety is described as a pervasive fear of social situations in which an individual might be subjected to humiliation or scrutiny.

According to data from the 2002 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS): Mental Health and Well-being, just over 2 million Canadians aged 15 or older reported a “lifetime history” of social anxiety, meaning that they had symptoms at some point in their lives. This represents about 8% of the population. Individuals with social anxiety are at higher risk of having major depressive disorder, panic disorder, and dependency on illicit drugs and alcohol than people in the general population.

common characteristics

People with social anxiety display a number of other common characteristics including:

- being overly self-conscious
- trouble making friends or maintaining a relationship
- feeling anxious during social situations/interactions
- excessive worry about how others will evaluate you
- constant need for reassurance
- fear that others will disagree with you
- fear that your own words might be offensive
- not feeling in control of your body
- fears that fit into one or both of the following categories:
 1. *performance*
 - being in public areas (washrooms, buses, malls)
 - eating, drinking, or writing in front of others
 - participating in sports or working out with other people
 - participating in classes or meetings
 - public speaking
 2. *interaction*
 - initiating or maintaining a conversation
 - talking on the phone
 - talking to someone in authority (doctor, professor, boss)
 - expressing personal opinions
 - working in a group
 - being in intimate situations (i.e. dating)
 - going to parties or other social events

common signs

Social anxiety can also be understood in terms of a number of common signs, which fit into three main categories:

- 1. physical (what you feel)**
 - blushing
 - sweating
 - rapid breathing
 - increased heart rate
 - shaking
 - clammy hands
 - upset stomach
 - dry mouth
 - light-headedness
- 2. cognitive (what you think)**
 - false belief that you will be judged negatively
 - false belief that others will not approve of you
 - fear of embarrassment in front of others
 - wanting to make a good impression, but doubting your ability to do so
 - worrying about events ahead of time
- 3. behavioural (what you do)**
 - avoidance of uncomfortable situations (performance or interaction with others)
 - passive, withdrawn
 - use of alcohol or substances to manage situations
 - asking for reassurance
 - apologizing excessively
 - avoiding eye contact
 - wearing makeup to cover blushing

coping strategies

1 be realistic about what you are able to change

By learning the self-help strategies in this handout, you will not become an extrovert if you have spent your life being an introvert. Instead, the hope is that you will become “successfully shy” as opposed to being “unhappily shy.”

Unhappily shy people fear being judged, say as little as possible due to this fear, believe that other people don't get nervous, believe that everyone is aware of their nervousness, feel responsible for any gaps in a conversation, feel like they are a failure in many social situations and question everything they say in social situations.

Successfully shy people feel they have interesting things to say, believe that most people are friendly and accepting, don't feel like they have to impress everyone in a social situation, realize that just about everyone gets anxious meeting new people, realize you can't be friends with everyone, can handle silences in conversations, can admit they are nervous, have realistic expectations for social encounters and feel okay about being a good listener.

Also, realize that the goal to aspire to is not to eliminate all of your anxiety, but instead to reduce it to a level that you can live with, where you can enjoy your social interactions.

2 remember that it may feel worse, before it gets better

Confronting your social anxiety or shyness is difficult and this is why you have likely avoided a number of social situations. When you begin to confront new social situations, at first it will feel awkward or uncomfortable, but you can't let this stop you. After repeated practice, facing your anxiety provoking social situations will definitely get easier. The no pain, no gain idea fits for facing your social anxiety, but you need to face new social situations slowly and progressively, building on what you are already comfortable with.

3 identifying your negative automatic thoughts

One of the biggest problems for people with social anxiety is that they are their own worst critics. They often have negative thoughts about themselves and their performance in social settings that appear automatically. Such thoughts include:

- “No one will ever like my presentation.”
- “I look like an idiot with my stammering.”
- “I bet they are all laughing at me behind my back.”
- “I can't do this, I'm such a failure.”
- “No one will ever want to be with me.”

To identify these negative automatic thoughts, it can be very helpful to use a log. Every time you have a negative thought about yourself in a social context, write it down. It is also beneficial to write down the situation you were in that triggered your negative thoughts and anxiety. This method will help you identify what situations provoke your anxiety.

4 challenge negative thoughts

After you have identified your negative thoughts, you need to begin to assess the validity of these thoughts. It is highly likely that most of your beliefs are highly exaggerated, irrational or completely untrue. You can discover the distortions in your thinking by asking yourself some of the following questions:

- What is the evidence that supports my fear?
- Do other people actually notice my nervousness?
- What is the worst possible thing that could happen?
- Will that mistake ruin all prospects of my future?
- Am I 100% sure that others think that way about me?
- What are the odds of that particular situation happening?
- I probably do not possess fortune-telling abilities, so how do I know what will happen in the future?
- Will that situation happen to the extent I fear?
- Maybe I am exaggerating the risk?
- Would I ever treat a friend the way I'm treating myself?
- What would a confident person do in the same situation?
- Will any of this matter a year from now?
- Could there be other explanations for their behaviour?

5 identifying cognitive distortions

People with social anxiety have a different mindset compared with confident individuals. Underlying your negative automatic thoughts is usually a set of faulty and unhelpful beliefs. By identifying the distortions in your thinking, you can begin to understand the source of your anxiety. Typical cognitive distortions (Aaron Beck, 1963) include:

1. **Perfectionism** – you set impossible goals for yourself in social situations and end up feeling like a failure. For example, you might expect to do a job interview flawlessly, even though you have only done a couple of them in your life.
2. **All-or-None Thinking** – you see social interactions in black-or-white terms and unless it all goes smoothly,

you are unsatisfied with your performance. For example, unless everyone likes your presentation, it feels like a disappointment.

3. **Mind Reading** – you assume people are responding to you negatively without any clear evidence or without checking out their true perceptions. For example, you assume people will dislike you, even before they have a chance to form an opinion.
4. **Discounting the Positive** – you minimize any positive experiences socially and focus only on the times you were embarrassed or uncomfortable. For example, despite enjoying several parties you have gone to, you focus only on the few times you felt awkward or anxious.
5. **Prospecting for Flaws** – you focus on the smallest flaws in a social interaction, despite many positive aspects that are present. For example, you see one person yawning in your speech and assume that the whole audience is bored to tears.
6. **Overgeneralization** – you see one negative event as representing a whole pattern. For example, if one person turns you down for a date, you believe no one will ever want to go out with you.
7. **Emotional Reasoning** – because you feel something strongly, you believe it must be true. For example, you feel very insecure, so you believe that everyone sees you as a failure.
8. **Turning Predictions into Facts** – you predict a negative outcome and believe that your prediction is true. For example, you predict that people will want to have little to do with you, so you limit your interactions with them and therefore they have no opportunity to connect with you.
9. **Assuming You Are the Centre of the Universe** – you assume that someone's behaviour is directly a result of you and your interactions with them. For example, your boss doesn't make eye contact with you and you assume he is angry at you, when in fact he doesn't make eye contact with anyone.
10. **False Theory of Relativity** – you compare yourself to others and see their strength, while minimizing your own abilities. For example, other people appear confident and you assume that they have no feelings of insecurity, when in fact they do, but you are not privy to them.

6 stop avoiding social situations

One of the primary ways people with social anxiety deal with their anxiety is to avoid anxiety-producing situations. This indeed helps reduce the anxiety in the short run, but only serves to reinforce it in the long term. As well, by avoiding social situations, you are reducing your opportunities to develop your social skills and without good social skills, you will feel more anxious when you need to interact with others. Using avoidance to deal with your social anxiety needs to end, even though you may have had some embarrassing situations that make avoidance very tempting.

Aside from directly avoiding social situations, shy people also commonly use other avoidance behaviours, such as drinking or doing drugs to reduce their anxiety during a social event, avoiding smiling or making eye contact to avoid a conversation, socializing only with people who talk a lot, and steering conversations toward safe topics. These behaviours also need to be targets for change to successfully overcome your social anxiety.

7 develop realistic coping statements

After you have familiarized yourself with the source of your anxiety and fears, the next step is to “counteract” your fears and negativity by developing more realistic self-talk. These statements need to be based on facts and evidence rather than anxiety and fears. Some examples of more generic realistic coping statements include:

- “I can survive this.”
- “It’s okay to be nervous.”
- “The audience will be okay if I make a mistake.”
- “This is familiar to me, so I will be able to handle it.”
- “There is no evidence that I will fail.”
- “Their feedback is not a “personal attack.” It is constructive and will help me do better in the future.”
- “I just need to breathe.”
- “My self-esteem doesn’t depend on other people.”
- “This is good practice.”
- “These people want me to succeed.”

It is good to remember these kinds of phrases before you engage in an uncomfortable social situation. It is even more helpful to develop specific realistic coping statements, related to each negative automatic thought you have identified. Always make these statements based on evidence rather than just positive thinking, because they will have a lot more power.

For example:

Negative Automatic Thoughts

- “No one at the party will like me.”
- “No women will ever want to date me.”
- “I sound like an idiot on the phone when I talk to new people.”

Realistic Coping Statements

- “People are usually friendly to me, if I make the effort to talk to them.”
- “I won’t know if they will want to date me, until I ask the question.”
- “I don’t know what people are thinking of me – it might be positive.”

8 develop and utilize an anxiety hierarchy

Create a list of at least ten social situations in which you feel anxious. Then, using a scale of 0 - 100 (0 being completely relaxed and comfortable, 100 being extremely fearful), rate your anxiety. Be as specific as you can. You can then start exposing yourself to the least anxiety-provoking situations first and move up the list as you become more comfortable with each social situation. A sample anxiety hierarchy may look like this:

Anxiety Hierarchy

	<i>anxiety level</i>
1. Talking to someone I know well.	10
2. Talking to other group members while working on a group project.	20
3. Talking to someone new in one of my classes.	30
4. Talking to a group of students before class.	40
5. Presenting as part of a group project.	50
6. Presenting a familiar topic to a small group of students (under 10).	60
7. Presenting an unfamiliar topic to a small group of students (under 10).	70
8. Presenting a familiar topic to a group of 10-30 students.	80
9. Presenting an unfamiliar topic to a group of 10-30 students.	90
10. Presenting to over 30 students in class.	100

9 consider the following guidelines when doing exposures

1. Exposures should be set up on your own terms, instead of being random and unpredictable. By scheduling exposures, you already feel in greater control, rather than experiencing them by chance.
2. Anticipate how the exposure might go and plan to deal with all possible outcomes.
3. Stay in the situation you are exposing yourself to for a prolonged period of time. If you leave as soon as you become anxious, it reinforces the belief that you need to escape to manage the anxiety. Situations that are brief by nature need to be repeated many times.
4. Exposures need to be repeated frequently to be effective. Exposures will not be helpful if they are infrequent. Ideally practice for at least 1 hour/day.
5. Rather than fighting your fear or anxiety, simply allow yourself to experience it and it will come down faster.
6. Expect that you will feel anxious and fearful during the exposure. If you're not, then it is likely that the exposure isn't difficult enough.
7. Don't expect that the exposures will go perfectly and realize that even if they go poorly, you are making a change in the right direction by even doing them.
8. Stay optimistic despite any setbacks. It is unlikely to be a smooth progression to overcoming your fears, but over time you will have more and more positive experiences.
9. Practice your exposures in many different situations and with many different people, because it will most likely be effective in giving you the confidence to handle any situation.
10. Use realistic coping statements before, during, and after an exposure to develop your most healthy mindset to cope with the exposure.

10 remember what research says about socially anxious people

Studies indicate that if you are shy, you tend to:

1. Judge your observable, personable attributes and social performance more negatively than outside observers would (Rapee & Abbott, 2006).
2. Focus on social information that suggests "danger" (Clark & Wells, 1995).

3. See ambiguous facial expressions as negative (Ledley, Fresco, & Heimberg, 2006).
4. Perceive your anxiety symptoms (e.g., blushing, shaking, sweating) as more visible to others, than people who are not shy (Alden & Wallace, 1995).
5. Be less willing to trust others and form close relationships, and have greater fear of rejection or abandonment (Eng, Heimberg, Hart, Schneier, & Liebowitz, 2001).

Hopefully, with this information you can learn to modify your perceptions.

11 remember the benefits of shyness

Shyness isn't all bad and therefore you need to appreciate some of the benefits of being a shy person. On an evolutionary basis, it serves to curb socially unacceptable behaviours that could lead to rejection. For example, shyness prevents one from dominating conversations, offending other people, or disclosing too much about our personal lives. As well, there is good evidence that shy people are great listeners, sensitive people, more empathetic and make great friends.

Remember however, that although a little bit of shyness is good, too much is very painful.

12 understand that you are not the centre of everyone's attention

Shy people commonly believe that everyone around them is observing and evaluating everything they do or say. They tend to believe both that they are being judged and that the judgment is most probably negative.

Therefore, it is important to understand that most people are busy focusing on themselves and their own performance, and are therefore too disinterested, busy, or self-absorbed to notice what you are doing or saying. When you finally stop focusing obsessively on how you are being perceived, you can focus on what the other person is saying, doing, and their non-verbal cues, so that you can respond to them more appropriately.

13 stop comparing yourself to the most socially competent people

By comparing yourself to the most socially competent people (which shy people often do), you will inevitably feel inferior. By comparing yourself to the M.C. at a wedding, the speaker at a presentation, the most outgoing person

at a party or a celebrity on television, you can't help but feel bad and this feeds further into your shyness. Instead, try to compare yourself to other shy people who are more like you. There are going to be a lot of other people who are even shyer than you, given that almost half of the population struggles with shyness.

14 stop remaining silent in social situations

Many socially anxious people respond to their own anxiety by remaining silent in different social environments. This won't help you develop the skills you need in the future or make the connections you want. Instead, try asking an open ended question, giving a compliment to someone, performing a social grace (i.e., opening a door, getting something for someone, giving someone a smile), commenting on something you have in common in the environment, or have something interesting to say. By reading books or newspapers, watching T.V. or movies, going to events in the community, or just living an active life, you will have much more to talk about.

15 focus on your successes

Shy people tend to analyze each social situation they are in, with an eye for their mistakes. When we look for mistakes, it is inevitable that we find them, which then ultimately confirms our worst fears.

Instead, try a new tactic. Look for what you are doing right. Before a social situation, think of what you have done well in the past. During a social situation, focus on what is going well. After the situation, focus again on what worked for you. In other words, start to retrain your brain to focus on the positive aspects of the exchange.

16 understand your body's reaction to social situations

As you have probably experienced many times in your life, certain social situations have brought on a flood of bodily changes, which are labelled as the "fight and flight response." These include: sweating, blushing, shaking, upset stomach, light-headedness, rapid breathing, increased heart rate and dry mouth, to mention a few. This bodily response occurs in reaction to the potential perceived threat to your sense of self. Understand that this fight and flight response is a short term reaction and don't dwell on it. Instead, refocus your attention, for example, on what the other person is saying. Also understand that the bodily

changes are much less likely to be visible to the people around you than they are to you. Don't believe that your strong bodily response means that you need to escape the situation or you don't belong. It will disappear on its own if you stay in the environment long enough. If you have to, leave temporarily and come back. It might also be helpful to relabel your stress symptoms from "anxiety" to "excitement" or from "fear" to "anticipation."

17 learn some psychologically based relaxation skills

Relaxation skills can be used to reduce your anxiety before, during, or after an anxiety provoking social situation. By developing a variety of tools to relax your body, you have several options if one strategy isn't as helpful or isn't working for you at that time. These skills include diaphragmatic breathing, autogenics, progressive muscle relaxation, passive muscle relaxation, imagery, and mindfulness. Work with a psychologist in order to develop these skills.

18 develop your social skills

Make a plan to progressively develop your social skills, since a lot of anxiety is created because you may perceive your social skills as weak. In some cases, this may be a false perception, but in others this may be a big part of the problem. Figure out which social skills you are lacking and then set up some appropriate situations to practice them. For example, if making small talk is one of the skills you lack, first observe other people making small talk, and see what you can learn. Once you have done this for a while, then begin to practice your small talk in common situations where small talk is appropriate. For example, in one of your classes with someone sitting next to you. In each of your classes, you can utilize the same strategy and talk about the things you have in common: how they are finding the class, whether they have finished an assignment, what degree they are working on, what topic they are writing about for a paper, what year of university they are in, and what they plan to do when they graduate, to mention a few ideas. Doing this over and over will slowly develop your confidence and build your repertoire of topics.

* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth

