



**Let's Talk Social Anxiety:
A Self Help Guide**

Written By: James Thomas
Let's Talk Social Anxiety – A Self Help Guide

Acknowledgements for editing to Jan Bagnall (Locality Clinical Lead)

Acknowledgements for design and administration to Emma Hall (Administrator) and Sue Freeman (Administrator)

Let's Talk is Gloucestershire's Improving Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) Service.

Let's Talk is a free service from the NHS.

We offer short-term talking therapies to people with mild to moderate depression and anxiety.

Our Self Help guides provide an introduction to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy at Step 1 of our programme of support.

The authors have made every effort to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information in this workbook. However, it is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice or treatment. Any person with a condition requiring medical attention should consult a qualified medical practitioner or suitable therapist. Evidence suggests that a self-help material is most effective when you are supported by an appropriately qualified clinician. We strongly advise that when using this workbook you stay in touch with your named clinician. If for any reason you are unable to reach them and you are feeling concerned about your mental health we recommend you go to see your doctor. Other agencies that can help you are listed in the back of this workbook.

For further information please contact:

Let's Talk
2gether NHS Foundation Trust
Rikenel, Montpellier, Gloucester, GL1 1LY
Website: www.talk2gether.nhs.uk

Let's Talk Social anxiety

Managing Social Anxiety using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Introduction

The aim of this self-help guide is to tell you a little bit about social anxiety and to help you identify whether you may be experiencing symptoms of social anxiety. This guide includes a number of helpful steps you may wish to take to manage your symptoms and improve your wellbeing using cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

Anybody can experience social anxiety and levels of severity can vary considerably. You may find that after completing this self-help guide, you wish to develop strategies for improvement and increasing your understanding. To do this you can contact Let's Talk, Gloucestershire's Free NHS IAPT Service. We tell you more about how to do this at the end of this leaflet.

If you feel you need immediate support please contact your GP.

What is Social anxiety?

When experiencing social anxiety or shyness, you fear others will judge or think badly of you. You think you are 'under the spotlight' and want other people to think well of you but you are worried that you are failing, other people will think badly of you or you are not as good as other people. This causes you great difficulty in social situations.

You may experience a range of physical symptoms of anxiety in social situations, e.g. meeting or speaking to strangers, eating in public, going to crowded places or even being with people, you know well. You may start to avoid such situations,

which can lead to you feeling very lonely as you begin to avoid all kinds of social, work even family events. You may begin to carry out certain safety behaviours so that you don't make a fool of yourself, e.g. don't speak at parties or in meetings, avoid eye contact, speak very carefully, so that you do not draw too much attention to yourself. Some people sit on their hands so others don't see them shaking.

Do I have Social anxiety?

Read the following symptoms of social anxiety and tick the ones that apply to you:

THOUGHTS

Other people will judge or think badly of me

Other people think I am weird, strange, odd, that there is something wrong with me

I worry before a social situation and think it will go badly

I worry after a social situation about what I said, didn't say, etc

I am boring, stupid, I will/did make a fool of myself, I am a fool/an idiot

I think I will say/do the wrong thing and people will not like me

I see myself getting things wrong and this is how I think other people see me

BEHAVIOURS

I experience a lot of anxiety in social situations which I know is too much

I avoid social situations that make me anxious and then feel bad about myself

I find it hard to talk on the phone or I prefer to talk on the

phone because I find it very difficult to meet face to face
I practise what I am going to say before speaking to someone

I make myself busy or offer to help in social situations to
distract myself

I find myself alone in social situations, e.g. stand in the kitchen
at a party

I make 'excuses' not to go or to leave a situation early

FEELINGS AND PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

Nervous

Fearful

Embarrassed

Loneliness

Heart races or pounds

Tense muscles

Dizzy or light-headed

Strange sensations in hands, arms, legs and feet

Blush

Sweat

Breath rapidly

Mouth or throat goes dry

What causes social anxiety to develop?

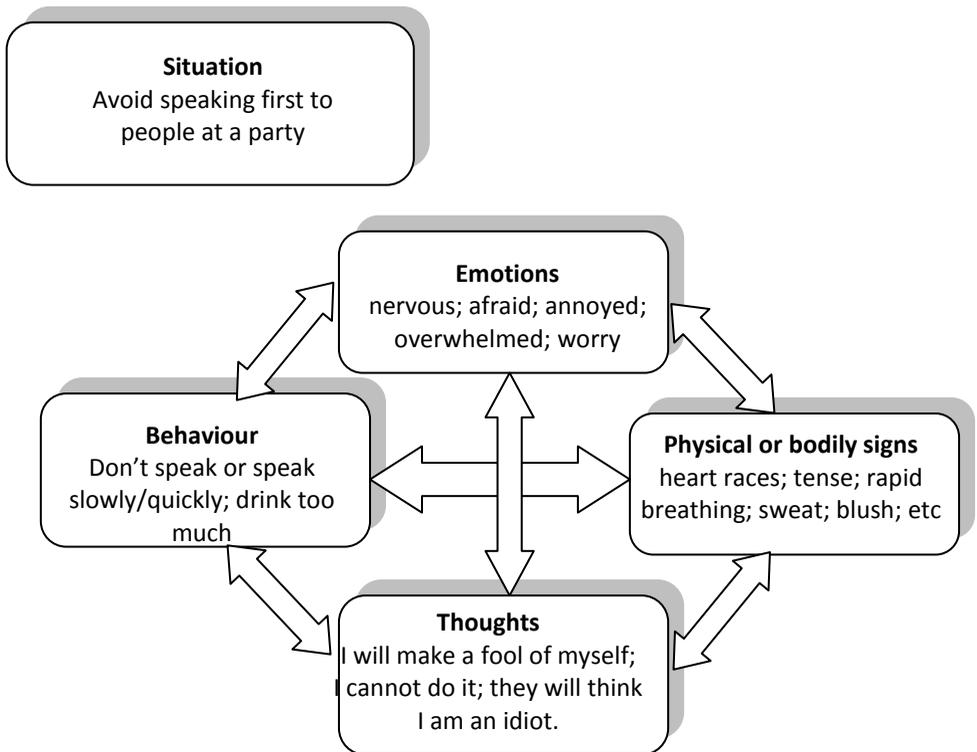
Most people experience social anxiety at some time in their lives, unfortunately some people experience it on a regular basis and it can be quite upsetting for them. Usually it develops because of a stressful life event or series of events, causing people to worry about what other think of them. This may lead to you having a low opinion of yourself, which causes low self-esteem.

What maintains my social anxiety?

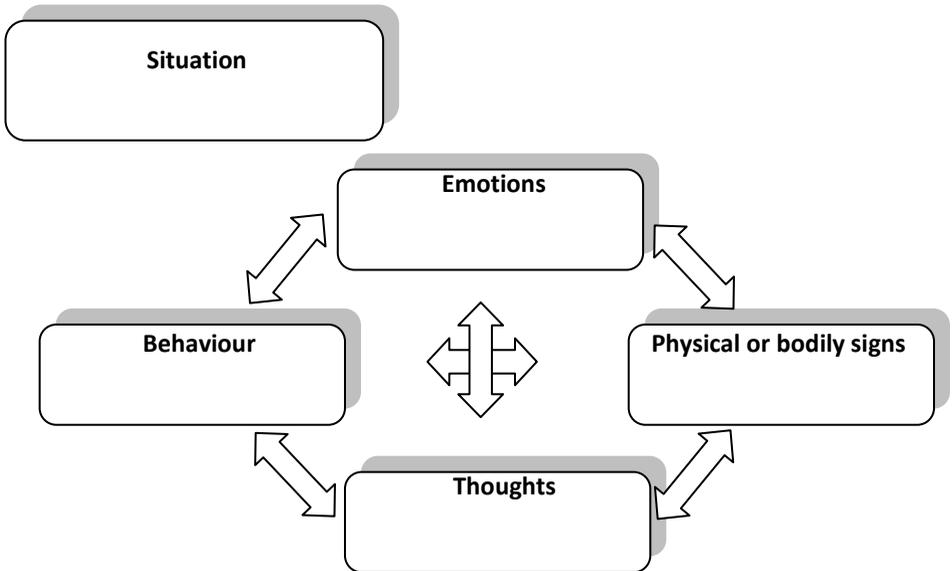
Overtime you may become more and more anxious in social situations, to the point where you believe you cannot cope in social situations. You may also have images of how you think you will look or act in social situations, which are usually negative images. You wonder how you must look to other people, thinking that you look weird or strange and think that other people are judging you harshly.

You may even begin to fortune-tell or predict what other people think of you. This can then lead to you having to carry out safety behaviours before going into a social situation or avoiding them all together. Unfortunately, you are then not able to challenge the negative thoughts or images you have of yourself. You never learn that you can cope in these situations. Because you worry you will have certain physical symptoms before social situations that will draw attention to you, e.g. talk quickly and not make sense, go red, act strangely or shake, you will become anxious before you go into situations.

Worrying about physical symptoms, fearing social situations, having negative thoughts and images, safety behaviours and avoidance cause a vicious cycle of social anxiety. These vicious cycles will prevent you from learning that you can cope in social situations and keep you thinking that you are no good in social situations and low self-esteem.



Has a similar cycle happened to you? Try and fill out yours below.



What steps can I take to overcome my social anxiety?

You can begin to overcome social anxiety by learning techniques to manage the physical symptoms, negative thoughts, and images and by changing your unhelpful behaviours.

Managing physical symptoms: *Controlled breathing*

When people become anxious they, breathe too much or over-breathe. This can lead to feeling, dizzy, light-headed and fearing that they may pass out; their breathing has become faster and shallower. Which can make people feel more stressed and anxious, again another vicious cycle. Practicing a controlled breathing exercise can help you to overcome these feelings, helping your body and mind to relax.

You can practise the following exercise anytime and anywhere:

Start by sitting in a relaxed position, begin to notice your breathing, try and breathe 'from' your belly-button, feeling your stomach move in and out, rather than your chest or shoulders. Breathe in for 3 seconds (counting 1-2-3), hold for 2 seconds, (counting 1-2), then breathe out for 3 seconds (counting 1-2-3).

The more you practise, for about 10 minutes each time, the better you become with this technique. Tension, stress, and physical symptoms usually reduce after a few minutes.

Progressive or deep muscle relaxation

When anxious or stressed we often hold tension in our bodies, which can make us more tense and stressed. This muscle relaxation exercise can help to reduce physical tension and help you feel mentally calmer. Think about where you might be holding tension in your body, often in our necks and shoulders.

You can work through the muscles in your body, you do not have to relax 'every' muscle in your body, but try to repeat the exercise for the same muscle's each time. You will need to practise this exercise every day.

Find a quiet comfortable place. Sit or lie down and begin by noticing your breathing, let it become slow and comfortable (see the controlled breathing technique to help this). Try this for a few minutes.

When you are breathing evenly and slowly, tense and hold each muscle group (see below) for a count of five, do not tense it too tightly. Relax those muscles for a count of five, tense, hold again for five, and then relax again for five. Notice the feeling each time the muscle relaxes. Then move on to the next muscle group. Make sure you breathe evenly, do not hold your breath when you tense your muscles. Start with

Toes and feet – squeeze your feet and toes.

Calf muscles – on both legs squeeze your calf muscles

Squeeze or tense your thighs

Tense your bottom

Tense your stomach muscles

Make fists and squeeze your arms at the same time

Shrug or lift your shoulders, lift them towards your ears

Make a frowning expression with your face

Working with negative thoughts and images

It is possible to work with negative thoughts and images, which keep the vicious cycle of social anxiety going. First, you need to identify these unhelpful thoughts or images, which are usually our own critical thoughts. For example fears about being judged or drawing attention to ourselves in some way e.g. I will say something stupid, I don't make sense when I speak, I am boring and uninteresting, imaging yourself going red or sounding stupid and other people looking critical.

First, you can write down the situation you find difficult, then your feelings, then your unhelpful thoughts or images, challenge that thought and come up with a more balanced thought.

Your example:

Situation	Feelings	Unhelpful thoughts	Challenge unhelpful thoughts	Balanced thoughts

With a negative image you can try imagining an alternative more helpful image, e.g. instead of imagining people looking bored or uninterested when you see yourself talking to them, imagine them smiling or looking interested.

Working with unhelpful behaviours

There are three kinds of unhelpful behaviours in social anxiety, avoidance, safety behaviours and self-focusing.

Reducing avoidance and safety behaviours

The more you avoid social situations the more you will find it difficult to cope in future social situations. Or when you find yourself in social situations you do certain behaviours that help you feel safe, e.g. avoid eye contact, only speak when someone speaks to you, make jokes, etc. However, avoidance and safety behaviours stop us from learning that we can cope in social situations and these behaviours actually make us more anxious if we do not do them.

The more you can do to 'expose' yourself in a gradual way to social situations the more you learn to put up with the physical symptoms of anxiety and build your confidence. First, make a list of the things you avoid. Give them a number from 0 – 100, 0 = no anxiety, 100 = the highest amount of anxiety. Then re-arrange the list in order of difficulty:

Once you have created your list or hierarchy, start with the lowest number and repeat it as often as possible until your anxiety comes down. Anxiety may go up at first but it will reduce if you stay in the situation, the longer the better. The more times you repeat the activity and the more your anxiety will come down. When you are comfortable with the first item move on to the next one on the list.

You can also work on safety behaviours some of which may be included in your list above, e.g. avoiding eye contact, when walking around wearing headphones, keeping your hood up, avoid talking to people, say very little, make jokes, etc. Make a list of your safety behaviours and try to stop or drop them one by one.

Finally, if you suffer from social anxiety you are likely to carry out what is called self-focusing. This is where you worry about how you appear to other people, you imagine yourself looking, and acting in weird or strange ways and think this is how other people see you. You are likely to worry about showing physical symptoms of anxiety and that you will be judged critically by other people, especially if you draw attention to yourself in some way. You may also over think and prepare what you are going to say before a social situation and overanalyse after by checking if you did anything wrong. You can begin to change self-focusing by reducing how much you check or imagine how you come across to other people. Pay attention to your surroundings and what other people are saying, don't try too hard to be funny or say interesting things. Reduce how much you focus on any physical symptoms of

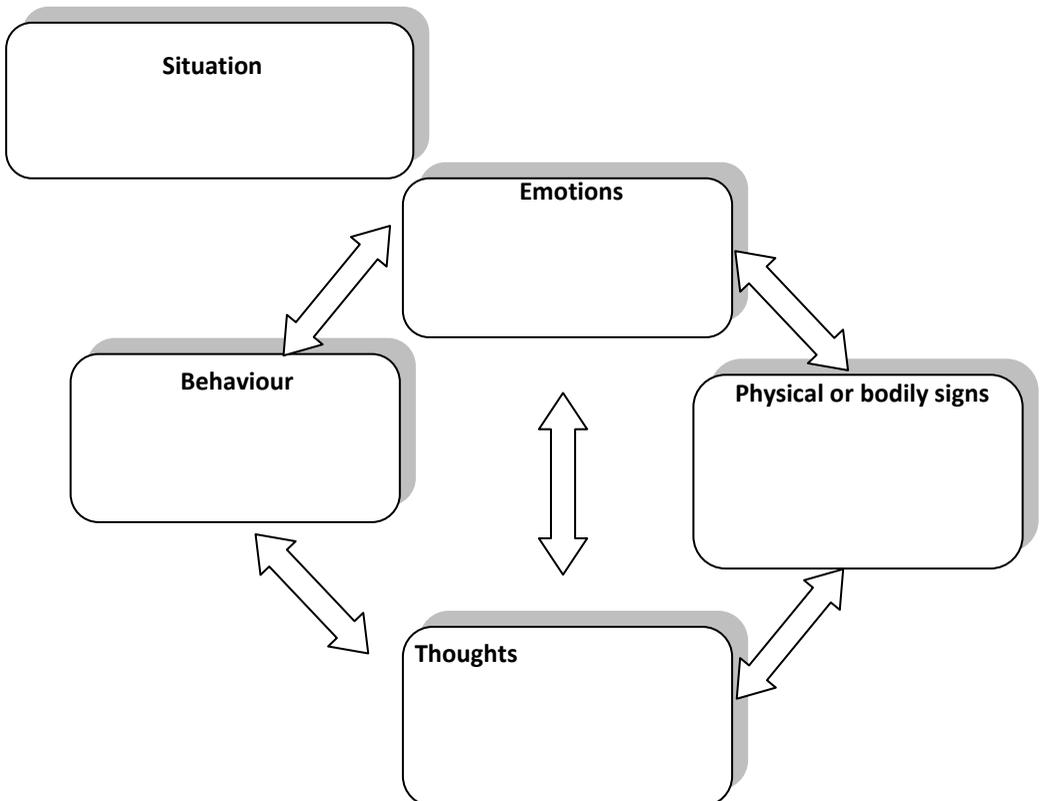
anxiety which are not that noticeable.

Can Social anxiety be treated?

Yes. The national Institute for clinical excellence (NICE) who publish guidelines for treatments in the NHS recommend CBT for the treatment of social anxiety. CBT can help you understand and manage the relationship between avoidance and safety behaviours, self-attention and thoughts about being judged by other, feelings of anxiety and physical sensations.

At Let's Talk we aim to help you develop more positive ways of behaving, thinking, feeling etc.

Complete your own cycle after trying the exercises above.



What further help is available?

You can contact Let's Talk on 0800 073 2200.

Let's Talk is Gloucestershire's Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service. We offer courses and one to one work where we can guide you in developing strategies like the ones discussed here, and we also offer CBT with a qualified therapist. CBT focuses on the 'here and now' and uses specific techniques to help you manage your symptoms. CBT encourages you to work on tasks between sessions to help you achieve your goals.

You can access our website on www.talk2gether.nhs.uk where you will find more information about your difficulties, and also our leaflets and questionnaires that we would like you to complete before you phone us.

Alternatively you can speak to your GP, who can refer you and also give you a copy of the 'Introducing the Let's Talk Service' leaflet, which has our questionnaires on it.

Useful Books on Prescription

Let's Talk can provide you with a book prescription to take to your local library. You can then choose from a range of self-help books to borrow, which provide helpful information and step by step self-help techniques for managing common conditions, including depression and anxiety. These include:

Overcoming social anxiety and shyness, Butler, G. (2009).

Other Self-help Guides in the Let's Talk Service

Let's Talk Panic
Let's Talk Low Self Esteem
Let's Talk Health Anxiety
Let's Talk Social Anxiety
Let's Talk OCD
Let's Talk PTSD
Let's Talk Bereavement and Loss
Let's Talk Negative Thoughts
Let's Talk Getting Active

Useful websites

Let's Talk website: www.talk2gether.nhs.uk

Moodometer: Let's Talk
<http://www.2getherinclusion.nhs.uk/themoodometer.php>

Living Life to the Full website: www.lltff.com

MoodGym: <https://moodgym.anu.edu.au/welcome>

Other helpful contacts:

The Samaritans: www.samaritans.org

Call on 116 123; 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Mind: www.mind.org.uk

Info line: 0300 123 3393

Mental Health Helplines Partnership: www.mhhp.org.uk

The Royal College of Psychiatrists: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info

Community Health Trainers, Gloucestershire

(Community Health Trainers offer support, information and guidance to people who want to make changes to their lifestyle whatever their faith or culture)

Email: gloshealth.trainers@independencetrust.co.uk

Website: www.gloshealthtrainers.nhs.uk

Telephone: 0845 863 83 23