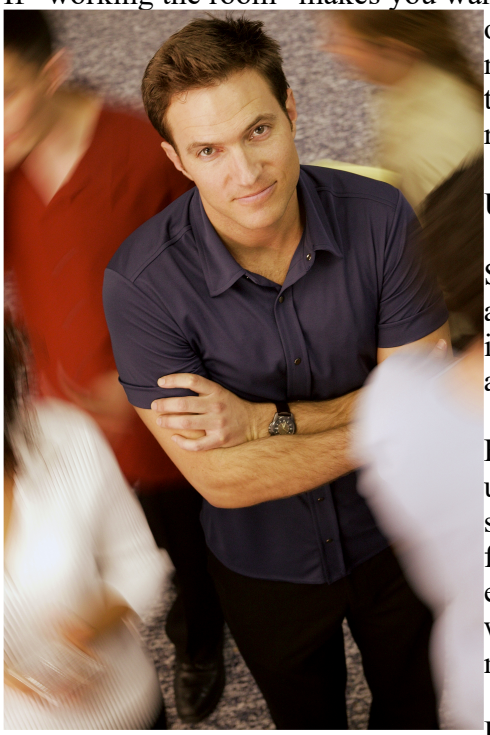
Overcoming social anxiety: how to reduce your discomfort

If “working the room” makes you want to head for the hills, you may be one of the estimated seven per cent of the population who suffers from some form of social anxiety. It may not be possible to make a complete switch from being socially anxious to being a social butterfly, but it’s possible to learn some tactics to reduce your discomfort in social situations.



Understanding social anxiety

Social anxiety is the unpleasant emotion people may experience due to a concern with interpersonal evaluation. Any situation in which individuals are expected to mix and mingle with others or participate in a group activity, may cause people to feel a certain degree of anxiety.

For the socially anxious, this anxiety can range from merely uncomfortable to downright debilitating. In the most extreme cases, social anxiety can become a phobia, where individuals have an extreme fear of meeting new people or being with people. The most rare and extreme form of social phobia is agoraphobia (fear of open places), where people cannot leave the house to participate in any activity that may involve contact with others.

How to reduce your feelings of anxiety

Finding ways to rein thoughts of apprehension is the first step in managing the amount of anxiety we feel in social situations.

The following technique is based on the process of systematic desensitization that is a common and very successful treatment for many phobias. You can adapt it for social anxiety and implement it yourself, with the help of a supportive friend or family member. Let them know exactly what you are planning to do. This —in and of itself—may cause you some anxiety, but you can feel confident that you are taking action against your problem and that things will get better with just a little bit of perseverance.

1. **The first step is to learn how to manage the physical and mental symptoms of anxiety.** You can do this by practicing anxiety reduction techniques such as meditation, deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation.

2. **Identify a social situation that currently doesn't cause you any social anxiety.** For example, perhaps you feel very little anxiety eating in a restaurant with a friend, as long as you have been there before and your friend meets you at your home in advance.

3. **Make the situation a bit harder, and slightly more anxiety-provoking for you.** Instead of meeting at your place, arrange to meet in front of the restaurant. Then, head in and enjoy a lovely meal—your reward for getting this far.

4. **Next time, if you would normally drive to avoid public transit, take the bus.** Arrange to meet the friend in the restaurant, instead of outside, and show up 15 minutes early. Take your seat, and order a beverage—then congratulate yourself for making it this far.

5. **After you feel comfortable getting to step four a couple of times, up the ante yet again.** You now know the restaurant well, and probably they know you. Set a time to have dinner on your own. If you

can't manage dinner, choose a less busy time to have lunch or, failing that, even just dropping in for a beverage and snack during the middle of the day.

6. **Once you can get to step five with a manageable level of anxiety, try having dinner on your own at a different restaurant, where you've never been before.** Or, with newfound confidence in your ability to manage this formerly nerve-wracking situation, ask a casual acquaintance for a dinner date.

Keep in mind that you're going to feel anxious during this process. But at every next step, you will be confronting your fears and, once you have reached it, reinforcing that you can manage the anxious thoughts and your responses to them.

Preventing or coping with an anxiety or panic attack

Many people who experience generalized or specific anxiety know the warning signs of the onset of an anxiety attack. The following signs and symptoms are typical:

- It happens suddenly, from "out of the blue"
- You likely feel a sense of danger, impending doom and a wish to run
- You may feel as though you are going crazy or having a heart attack
- You may feel as though you are about to die or lose control

Once this cycle of thoughts begins, your body is already kicking in with the "fight or flight" response—an automatic physical response to any experience of stress. You will begin to feel physical symptoms. These may include:

- Pounding heart or accelerated heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea or abdominal pain
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed or that you are about to faint
- Feelings of detachment, like you are floating above your body or feelings of "unreality"
- Numbness or tingling
- Chills or hot flashes

If you can catch yourself heading into an anxiety attack, it's often possible to control your thoughts and responses so that the anxiety does not escalate and cause severe physiological and psychological consequences. As soon as you feel the anxiety starting to build, try to remove yourself from the situation and find a place where you can calm down.

Then, try the following:
Plant yourself. Plant both feet firmly and flatly on the ground, applying enough pressure so that you can feel the contact. Try to hold on to something: the armrest of the chair or a railing, or lean back against a wall.

Breathe. Breathe as deeply and as slowly as possible. Try breathing through the mouth at first, then switch to the nose (if possible) and breathe deeper if you can. You may feel light-headed: that is normal. Your brain is getting a lot of oxygen, which is essential to function properly and think clearly.

Focus. Pick an object and begin to describe it to yourself. Any object will do. What is it made of? What color is it? What do you think it feels like? Is it soft? Hard? Cold? Warm? Describe it in as much detail as you can then move to another object. Keep breathing, keep describing objects until you feel a sense of control returning.

If you feel that anxiety—social or otherwise—is overtaking your life, you may want to consult a professional. Often, through reviewing our behaviour, we are able to better understand what happened and learn how to overcome such situations again. Share your thoughts with a friend or a counsellor whom you

trust, write in a journal, log on to an Internet site about anxiety, or find some other way to process your thoughts. As soon as you begin to do so, you will be on your way to recovery.