



# SOCIAL ANXIETY

What is it?

And

What you can  
do about it



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This booklet aims to help you overcome your social anxiety.

It is split into two parts:

## **Part 1: Finding out about social anxiety**

- 🌍 What is social anxiety?
  - Other people's stories
- 🌍 Who gets social anxiety?
- 🌍 What does social anxiety mean for us?
  - Our thoughts
  - Our bodies
  - Our actions

## **Part 2: Tackling social anxiety**

- 🌍 Challenging our negative thoughts
- 🌍 Reducing inward focus
- 🌍 Changing the way we act

# **Part 1: Finding out about social anxiety**

# What is social anxiety?

If you have social anxiety, you tend to worry about what other people think. You might worry about being the centre of attention. You may think other people are judging you or thinking badly of you. You might think you aren't as good as them – that you can't come up to the mark.

Social anxiety can be mild, where you are just a bit shy. Or it can be severe, where you avoid being with other people.

Social anxiety affects your body. There can be lots of symptoms, like sweating, blushing, a dry throat or trembling.

**Here are some situations that someone with social anxiety may find hard:**

- **Speaking to people of the opposite sex**
- **Speaking to people in authority**
- **Speaking on the phone**
- **Having to talk at meetings**
- **Having to give a work presentation**
- **Walking into a place where there are a lot of people, like a party or a busy bus**
- **Being in social gatherings, which may involve talking to others**
- **Some people even find that walking down the street can make them feel awkward and self-conscious**

## Other people's stories

**“I have always been a shy person, but lately it has got much worse. I just can't cope if I'm in company. I'm meant to be going to my wife's dad's birthday party next week. There will be quite a few people there that I don't know. I'm dreading it. I keep thinking that I won't know what to say and that I'll show myself up. I'll probably end up making some excuse so that I can get out of it.”**

**“I had to give a talk at work the other day. I had been nervous before it, but I thought I would be OK. After all, it was just a few people from work. Just before I was about to do the talk, my boss invited people from the other branch into the meeting. That really floored me. I started getting all tongue-tied and shaky. I got all hot and sweaty. I'm sure I made a fool of myself. I'm never going to do a talk again.”**

**“I'm totally relaxed with my family. But the minute I have to talk to someone I don't know well, I clam up. I bumped into a guy I knew from school the other day. I started to blush straight away. He must have seen it and thought I was an idiot. Then I started to worry about what I could say next. At the back of my mind I was thinking about how I must be coming across to him. I had to tell him I was in a hurry and couldn't talk. He must think I was really rude.”**

# Who gets social anxiety?

If you have ever been shy, you are more likely to become socially anxious. Your early years can play a big part. If you had harsh parents, or you were bullied as a child, you are more likely to get it.

It is more likely to start in the teens to early twenties. Most socially anxious people get better as they get older, even if they don't get any help.

- **How common is it?**

Both men and women can have social anxiety – though slightly more men get it. In total it affects between 3% and 13% of people. It is normal for most of us to have a bit of social anxiety at times. Some people may try to cope by drinking too much or using drugs.

- **What causes it?**

There is no one cause. For lots of people it may start at a time of trouble or strain. Some may not remember when they first felt it. Many people with it have had nasty life events, like being teased, rejected or bullied. It often starts in the teen years but can happen at any time.

Shyness and social anxiety are similar. Ways of treating social anxiety can also help with shyness. It can be treated without knowing its cause.

- **Things that keep social anxiety going**

People try to “play safe” to stop getting anxious. They do things like keeping quiet or staying out of the spotlight. This means they reduce the risk of being judged, which is what they are afraid of. Playing safe can make us feel like we're coping. But over time social anxiety can make us feel alone and apart from others. It can affect our ability to work and make us feel sad and low.

## **What does social anxiety mean for us?**

- **Our thoughts**
- **Our bodies**
- **Our actions**

## **Our thoughts**

If we have social anxiety, we have a lot of low thoughts. These feed into our anxious state and make us feel worse. Many of the thoughts come from believing we are not as good-looking or clever as others. We might be afraid of being judged by them.

These thoughts have an effect on our bodies – which then makes us worry about how we look. This feeds the anxiety and makes us feel even worse.

Here are some of the thoughts we may have in a social situation like a party:

- **I look totally out of place here**
- **Everyone else can talk so easily and I can't think of anything funny or interesting to say**
- **If I say something they'll think I'm a loser**
- **If I do talk, I'll show myself up and blush**
- **I'm so nervous I'm shaking. People are going to think I'm an idiot**
- **There's something wrong with me. I'm not the same as others**
- **I should be part of the crowd, not apart from the others**

Some situations make socially anxious people feel less at ease – or even at risk:

- **Parties**
- **Family get-togethers**
- **Interviews**
- **Public speaking**
- **Weddings**

Feeling at risk makes the anxiety worse. What is it about these situations that feels so risky? Often, the answer can be found in the way we look at them or think about them.

If you think you might make a fool of yourself, you can be very worried. The same goes if you worry that no-one will care about what you say. As an example, imagine having a chat with someone you don't know very well. You might not be able to think of anything to say. Thinking "I can't think what to say" might make you feel nervous, even if you haven't put the thoughts into those exact words.

Thoughts affect how we feel. And one thought may lead to another, making the symptoms worse. You might jump to the idea that, if people notice your hand shaking, they will know you are anxious. Then you might think that they will judge you as weak or stupid or weird.

Thinking this way makes us feel even worse. There's a vicious circle as soon as we think of a situation as scary or a threat. But there are ways you can tackle these thoughts, as we'll see in Part 2.

# Our bodies

People can have a lot of symptoms of anxiety. These can feel very nasty. They include:

- **Blushing**
- **Rapid heartbeat or skipped heartbeats**
- **Sweating**
- **Fast and shallow breathing**
- **Trembling or shaking**
- **Feeling light-headed**
- **Blurred vision**
- **Stiffness or muscle tension**
- **Trembling or shaky voice**

**There are two key points about bodily symptoms of anxiety:**

**1. They are not harmful.** They are just the way our bodies react when we are anxious.

Lots of chemicals, such as adrenaline, are released when the body is under threat. This is a way of getting us ready for danger. Imagine someone is chasing you with a weapon. Your body would react to help you run faster, or be able to fight. Your heart would beat faster to pump more blood to your arms and legs. Your muscles would tense up at the shoulders, getting you ready for action and making you look stronger.

You may start to breathe too much. You may feel like something awful is going to happen. Nothing bad will happen to you.

**2. People don't notice them as much as you do.** This is the second thing to remember. You notice them because you feel them. Chances are, most people aren't even aware of your blushing or trembling. And even if they were, they would just think you were a bit nervous.

Often people with social anxiety have a strong image of how they come across to others. But it is often wrong. People with social anxiety tend to focus on their symptoms. Then they worry about how these will be picked up by others. But the more you focus on your symptoms, the more anxious you become. And that makes you feel worse.

## Our actions

What do people do when they are socially anxious? There are two main actions:

**1. Avoiding things.** You might avoid going to certain places. Or you might avoid situations you find scary. You might find yourself making excuses to get out of things. You may avoid taking on more responsibility at work. Or you may avoid being around certain people or going to certain events.

**2. Playing safe.** When we feel anxious or afraid, it is normal to want to keep safe. You might do this by only talking to “safe people” about “safe topics”. Or you might not make eye contact. You might end up thinking that things would have been much worse if you hadn’t done this. For example, you might think that, if you hadn’t kept a tight hold of yourself, other people would have seen you shaking and thought badly of you.

Feeling at risk makes you want to keep safe. But trying to keep safe keeps you thinking things are risky.

Here are some things we may do because we think they keep us safe:

- **Wear high-necked jumpers to cover up flushing in the neck area**
- **Pull down a cap or hair to cover our blushes**
- **Pull hair over our face to hide our blushes**
- **Not talk to people**
- **Read a newspaper in company so we don’t have to talk**
- **Clean up at a party so we can stay in the kitchen most of the time**
- **Change our posture or body language in a way we believe hides how we feel: like fidgeting legs to hide the shakiness, or sitting on our hands to hide the trembles**
- **Not looking at people, or not giving them eye contact**

These things may help in the short term. But in the long term we can think that everything worked out all right just because we did them. We believe that if we hadn’t done them, it would have been a disaster. In the long run, playing safe and avoidance chip away at our self-belief. They stop us from being happier, more confident people.

# **Our bodies, actions and thoughts:**

## **How we might be affected**

### **Body**

Social anxiety affects your body. Your heart beats faster. You might sweat, blush or tremble. You might feel dizzy or sick, have chest pains, or feel you can't get a breath. You may feel hot and flustered and your arms and legs might feel shaky. You might feel "unreal". You may be very aware of your body and get stressed at the slightest change in it.

### **Thoughts**

You might worry that you are going to show yourself up. You can think that if you say something then you won't get your point across and will look stupid. You might worry that others can see you sweating, shaking or blushing.

### **Actions**

You may find it hard to stay still. You might avoid places where you think you will be anxious. Or you might escape from places and people as soon as you feel your stress rise. You may avoid talking to people or looking them in the eye. You may only talk to people you know well. If you do go out to a party, you may stay in the kitchen and do the washing up so you don't have to talk to people. When others speak to you, you may keep your answers brief and cover up your face with your hands or hair to hide blushes.

# Part 2: Tackling social anxiety

There are ways to treat social anxiety. The good news is that you can work on it yourself. The only bad news is that, like any life change, it can involve hard work and having to face your fears.

We can do 3 things to help ourselves:

- 🌍 **Change the way we think**
- 🌍 **Reduce inward focus**
- 🌍 **Change the way we act and behave**

# How to change the way we think

## 1. Try to notice our faulty thoughts

We all have some faulty thoughts. But when we are stressed or feeling low, these thoughts pop into our minds more often. They are harder to get rid of, too. Try to notice your faulty thoughts. Here are some of them:

### All-or-nothing thinking

You tend to think in extremes – black or white, good or bad. You don't see a middle ground. You judge people or things using labels like "He's an idiot" or "I'm hopeless". You may judge yourself badly as a person based on one single thing.

### Thinking something awful will happen

You tend to build up events and how bad or awful they will be. You always see a chance of disaster. You think that whatever can go wrong will go wrong.

### Taking things to heart

You tend to take the blame for a lot of things. And you do this even if they have nothing to do with you. An example could be: "My boss is in a bad mood – I must have upset him."

### Mind-reading what others think of you

You think other people think badly of you. This might be "They think I'm boring" or "They only act nice because they feel sorry for me".

### Negative focus

You tend to see the bad side of things. You ignore the good things about an event, or misread them. You focus on your flaws and forget your strengths. You only look on the dark side.

### Extreme statements and rules

These are things like "I'll never get better". Or "This always happens to me". Or "I should be a better mother". When you think in terms like **always**, **never**, **should**, **ought to** and **must**, you set your expectations far too high. That tends to mean you can't achieve them. This makes you feel guilty and disappointed.

## 2. Change our faulty thoughts

This means finding a more helpful way to think about something. Or it might mean learning to look at things in a new way. Ask yourself these questions:

- What are the facts? What proof do you have to support what you are thinking?
- What proof is there *against* what you think?
- What are the other ways of looking at it?
- What would you think if you were more outgoing and happy?
- What did you think at a time when you were more positive?
- What would you say to someone else who was thinking that way?
- Are you focusing on the black side of things at the expense of everything else?
- What can you do next? What skills and strengths do you have to help? What past know-how do you have of dealing with similar problems?
- What advice, support and help can you get?
- What can you do to change things? If you can't change the situation, can you at least keep an open mind about what it means?

## Some examples of changing faulty thoughts

### Example 1

- **Faulty thought:** “I sound really stupid.”
- **Possible answers:** “Perhaps everyone does once in a while. Even if I did say something silly, it wouldn’t mean I am stupid.”

### Example 2

- **Faulty thought:** “They can see how nervous I am.”
- **Possible answers:** “Maybe they can see I’m nervous. But that doesn’t make them think I’m a bad person. And maybe they’re thinking about other things altogether. They might not even have noticed me.”

**The key thing with this approach is to keep an open mind. Here are more examples:**

- Maybe people aren’t judging me or sussing me out. Maybe they’re not even noticing me at all.
- Maybe I can’t tell what people are really thinking.
- Maybe I feel worse than I look.
- Maybe people don’t reject you for being nervous. After all, it happens to us all at times.
- Maybe I’m just as good as they are underneath.

# **How to reduce inward focus**

## **(Or: how to stop focusing on ourselves)**

Another thing we can do is stop focusing on ourselves. If we are anxious, we tend to focus on what's going on in our body. Then we worry about how it might look to others. Instead we should try to focus on what's going on around us.

The more we focus on other things, the less likely we are to have anxious thoughts. In fact, we might not even notice symptoms in our body at all. If we can stop focusing on ourselves, we are more likely to feel in control. That means we can handle things better.

When we focus too much on our body, we can jump to the wrong idea about what is happening. It's really important to remember that. You may feel anxious and believe that people think badly of you. But the chances are they don't notice how flushed you are. You might be 100% aware of your symptoms – but that doesn't mean others notice them at all. And even if they do: so what? Everyone can identify with feeling shy or awkward. It surely doesn't make people think badly of you.

# How to change the way we act and behave

## Step 1

It's time to face your fear and change the way you act. If you make excuses not to do talks at work, it's time to face it. You should come up with a plan to help you cope better and problem-solve. For example:

**“I know it will be scary, but I will feel better in myself for doing it. I might be nervous, but I will change my faulty thoughts and stop focusing on how I feel inside or how I might look to others. If I fluff it up, it won't be the end of the world. I will prepare well for it and give handouts of the talk so that people can still see where I'm coming from.”**

## Step 2

The next step is to learn how to do things differently. This means finding other ways to behave in the situations that bother you.

Thoughts, feelings and actions are all closely linked. So it's important to **act** in other ways as well as **think** in other ways. Doing the two together will help you **feel** better.

Trying new ways of doing things lets you check if the changes you've made to your thoughts are real and helpful. This could mean being more outgoing, asking more questions or making the effort to meet new people.

Acting in new ways is a real test of what you think. For instance, your thoughts might be about guessing what will happen next. If you were giving a talk, you might think: “I'm going to feel dreadful the whole time” or “I will get muddled and confused”. In this case you might want to protect yourself: perhaps by making an excuse not to do the talk. But keeping safe by avoiding things means you will never know if your predictions are right. If you take a few risks, you can find out whether they were right ... and whether you were anxious for no good reason.

Let's take an anxious thought like "If I blush, people will think I'm a loser". How real is that? You could come up with more real answers instead, like: "So what if I blush? It's no big deal. They may think I feel a bit nervous. But I wouldn't think someone was a loser just because they blushed a bit."

Thinking like this means you are less likely to feel anxious. It also means you are less likely to do the things you believe will keep you safe – like avoiding a talk.

Of course, thinking in a more real way won't get rid of your anxiety altogether. But it will help, and in time your anxiety will go down. Remember that some anxiety is normal, especially when you are facing new and scary things.

We've looked at how anxiety affects our bodies, our thoughts and our actions. Now we also know how to tackle it.

This means stopping it defining how we look at things. It means changing our focus on our bodies. And it means changing what we do – or don't do! – when we're feeling anxious.

**When you're somewhere that makes you anxious, it can help to speak to yourself like this:**

## **Body**

You feel anxious and you can feel yourself getting hot and sweatier. You can feel your face blushing. But you know this isn't harmful: it's just the way our bodies react. You know that if you try not to focus on your symptoms, they won't be as bad. You also know you shouldn't worry about whether other people can see them. You might be 100% aware of them, but the chances are others haven't spotted them. And even if they have, it's OK for them to see that you are shy or nervous. Everyone goes through that from time to time.

## **Thoughts**

You worry that you'll show yourself up if you speak out. You remind yourself that thinking this way is doing you no good at all. So you change the way you think. You can say: "If I talk up, I might not show myself up. I might look nervous, but that's OK. It's a new thing for me to do. Keep at it, and in time I'll be able to get a grip on this."

## **Actions**

You may find it hard to force yourself, but you manage to speak up in company. You know that you try to cover up your blushing with your hair ... but you also know this is an example of "playing safe". So you make sure you don't do it! You try to look people in the eye and really listen. You fight your tendency to avoid the situation by making an excuse and leaving early.

# Keeping a record

Keeping a diary can help you tackle your social anxiety. You can use it to make a note about your thoughts, your body and your actions. That means you can look at what you did and how you handled the situation.

So next time you have social anxiety, you could write down the answers to these questions:

1) **Where and when did you have the social anxiety?**

2) **Was there a reason for it?**

3) **What body symptoms did you have? (Body)**

4) **At its worst point, what went through your mind? (Thoughts)**

5) **What did you do? (Actions)**

6) **What can you do to stop it happening again?**

Here is how your diary might look. In the first example, the person hasn't handled things too well. But keeping a record has helped her see what she did – and to think about how she might have handled it differently.

<b>Situation</b>	<b>Body Symptoms</b>	<b>Emotions</b>	<b>Thoughts</b>	<b>Actions</b>
<i>Being asked a question in a group of strangers</i>	<i>Feel face blushing. Throat dries up. Forehead sweats</i>	<i>Anxious</i>	<i>I'm going to make a fool of myself. Everyone can see me blushing and sweating. They will all think I'm a real loser.</i>	<i>Give a brief answer. Hide blushes with hair. Avoid making eye contact. Make an excuse to leave soon after.</i>

Now here is a more helpful way of dealing with the situation. You can see that the symptoms and emotions are exactly the same. What's different is how the person has handled things. She hasn't focused on the symptoms. She has challenged her negative thinking. And she isn't playing it safe.

<b>Situation</b>	<b>Body Symptoms</b>	<b>Emotions</b>	<b>Thoughts</b>	<b>Actions</b>
<i>Being asked a question in a group of strangers</i>	<i>Feel face blushing. Throat dries up. Forehead sweats</i>	<i>Anxious</i>	<i>I'm doing OK. I'm not making a fool of myself. Probably no-one's even noticed the blushing. And if they have, what's the big deal? People won't think I'm a loser if I blush. They'll just think I'm a bit anxious. And that's normal.</i>	<i>Try to answer the questions openly and freely. Look at my surroundings. Look at the people and their body language. Really listen to what they are saying. Don't hide blushes with my hair or make an excuse to leave early. Try to ask them some questions about themselves.</i>

You can use what you have learned to spot patterns with your social anxiety. That way you can build up a plan to help tackle it better the next time.

You can do that while remembering these three steps:

## **Control your stress (in 10 words)**

- **Face your fears**

- **Be more active**

- **Watch what you drink**

## **How to cut down physical symptoms**

People with social anxiety often find that relaxation and breathing retraining helps. Some people can relax by exercise, listening to music, watching TV or reading a book. Others find that using a relaxation tape or CD helps them with their social anxiety.

You can get a CD from the Steps team in Glasgow – or download the MP3s from our website. Once you have learned the relaxation technique, you should be able to do it without listening to the CD.

### **Deep relaxation**

Choose a quiet, warm place. It is probably best if you lie down, although you can also do this while sitting up in a chair.

Think about your breathing for a few minutes before you start. Try saying the word “relax” to yourself, breathing in for “re” and out for “lax”. Each time you say it, imagine you are getting rid of tension from inside you.

Think about your hands. Try to clench both your fists. Clench them really tight and study the tension. Hold that tension for a few seconds and then relax. Notice the difference between the tension and the feeling of relaxation. You might even notice a tingling feeling in your hands as they begin to relax.

Now try tensing your forearms. Hold that tension and then relax. Think about the difference between the muscle tension that you have felt and the sense of relaxation. Each time you relax a group of muscles, think how they feel when they are relaxed. Don't try to too hard to relax: just try to let go of any tension you have. Work your way through the muscles in other parts of your body. Each time you tense the muscles, study that tension for a few seconds and then relax. Study how different it feels when you relax.

Now tense your stomach by pushing your stomach in as far as it can go. Study that tension and then relax.

Now think about the muscles of your lower back. Tense the muscles by pushing your back into the back of the chair or bed. Study that tension for a few seconds and then relax.

Now think about your neck. Press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Try to think about how heavy your head feels as you are moving it. Now bring your head back into a position which is comfortable for you.

Now think about the muscles of your face and jaw. Tense up the muscles of your face, which may cause it to frown. Study that tension and now relax. Now try clenching your jaw, study the tension and then relax. Notice the difference between the tensed and relaxed feelings you have.

Now think about relaxing the muscles of your chest. Take a deep breath and imagine that you are pushing your chest out as far as it can go. Study that tension, and now relax. Let your breathing return to normal. You are now beginning to feel more and more relaxed.

Now think about tensing the muscles of your legs. Straighten your legs and push your feet up towards your face. Now let them go back into a more relaxed position and study the difference.

With relaxation, you should practise every day. You can learn to relax without having to tense your muscles first.

You can also learn to use breathing techniques in any given situation that makes you feel anxious: see the next page.

## **Breathing retraining**

Some people breathe too fast when they are anxious. They begin to gulp air and worry that they are not getting enough. The technique on this page helps you slow down your breathing. It takes at least three minutes of slow breathing for your breathing to return to normal.

**Take a breath in and think "1"**

**Breathe out and think "*relax*"**

**Take a breath in and think "2"**

**Breathe out and think "*relax*"**

**Repeat up to 10, and then back down to 1**

**Concentrate on breathing,  
on the number and on "*relax*"**

**Use slow, normal breathing  
(10-12 breaths a minute)**

**Breathe in through your nose. Then purse your lips  
and breathe out slowly through your mouth**

**Practise twice a day in different places**

**Fight the social anxiety all the way.**

**Rule it – don't let it rule you.**

Social anxiety is common. Some of us might be more prone to it than others. But people whose lives are most affected by it often have:

- **Anxiety**
- **Panic**
- **Depression**
- **Phobias**
- **Poor sleep**
- **Sleep problems**
- **Alcohol or drug problems**

If you feel you would like to tackle other problems such as stress, anxiety, poor sleep, depression, low self-confidence and more, STEPS might be able to help. Check our website ([www.glasgowsteps.com](http://www.glasgowsteps.com)) or call us on 0141 232 2555.

You can also ask at your GP practice for more information.