Five Strategies for Overcoming Social Anxiety

As you know, social anxiety disorder is a challenging problem. You may have developed habits for dealing with it that you have relied on for years but that are not working well. It will take sustained effort put forth over time to change those. As you work on your social anxiety, try to get as much help and support as you can. It is best if you can find a knowledgeable therapist to guide you.

However, many people live in areas of the world without easy access to the kind of help and support they need. Also, even though social anxiety disorder is the third largest mental health problem in the United States, it isn’t easy to find a therapist who specializes in it.

I started The Center for Social Anxiety in order to offer high-quality and professional self-help resources for people who cannot find the help they need elsewhere, as well as to provide additional support for those who have found a therapist.

I have been working with people who have social anxiety disorder for nearly thirty years. Since I run groups as well as see clients individually, I get the opportunity to help a lot of people. All of the ideas I present on the website are a result of integrating the latest research and theories about the treatment for social anxiety with what my clients find useful.

The site is being launched in October, 2013 and the development of it will take place gradually over time. Because you have subscribed to the site, I will send you material as I develop it so that when something new shows up on the site you will know about it. Subscribers will also receive additional strategies and skills that will not be posted on the website.

In addition, if you live in the Boston area I can offer individual and group therapy as well as consultation to help you maintain your progress.

I hope that “Five strategies for overcoming social anxiety” gives you some new ideas about how to become more socially confident.

Best wishes,

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The Center for Social Anxiety
Five Strategies for Overcoming Social Anxiety

1. Don’t believe everything you think

Try to imagine yourself in a social situation that is challenging for you. It may be striking up a conversation with a stranger at a party, asking someone out on a date, or speaking up in a small group. What kind of thoughts, feelings and sensations would show up for you? If you have social anxiety disorder, the distress such situations can create is a lot more intense than it is for those who are shy.

After years of trying to protect yourself from the pain of being anxiously self-conscious, you may have gotten into the habit of anticipating things not working out for you socially. This makes sense. Not only do you have memories of social mishaps, but if you can predict trouble then it gives you some hope that you can avoid it. We all do this quite naturally when we feel threatened. However, studies show that people with social anxiety disorder tend to see trouble whether it is there or not.

There are four typical thought patterns that can distort what you are seeing. They are:

1. **Mental time travel** (ruminating about what has already happened or worrying about what could happen)
2. **Judging** (“that was stupid” or “they don’t like me”)
3. **Social comparison** (“she is so much cooler than I am”)
4. **Preoccupation with standards** (focusing on how you think you should be).

Do any of these seem like you? When you see life through these lenses, you will come up with impressions and perceptions that are negative and biased. Your misperceptions will then affect how you are thinking and feeling, and lead to a cycle of negative thinking and avoidant behavior that can spiral downward and leave you feeling trapped.

To get some distance from your negative thinking imagine that your mind is like a computer monitor. See your thoughts as appearing on the screen. It can help to write these down, starting with the phrase, “My mind is telling me that...” Seeing them on paper may give you the perspective that is missing when they first show up in your awareness. After some practice you can get better at watching your thinking without writing it down. As you practice you begin to appreciate that your mind is a story-teller which constantly creates a narrative about what is happening.

Remember, just because you have a thought doesn’t mean it is true and that you have to believe it.

Meditation is a simple skill that can help you learn to shift your attention from your mental chatter and to notice what is happening in your life at this moment. By learning to let go of your thoughts and put...
your attention where you want it you will feel calmer and more at ease. You will notice your experience as it is, rather than as your mind says it is. Try downloading the free “meditation on the breath” and “meditation on letting go” from the resources section of my website, www.sorensentherapy.com.

2. Look to yourself for assurance

Are you a worthwhile and lovable person? This is a matter of opinion. You developed social anxiety disorder due to many factors, including temperament, perceived differences between yourself and others, and the treatment you received by parents, siblings, peers or other adults. The image you have of yourself as being inadequate was shaped by how you thought you were seen by the world and you began to think that this is who you are.

This negative self-image has become the primary way you think about yourself in many social situations. What continues to feed it is what you believe others are thinking about you and giving power to that belief. You tell yourself that what they think about you is what matters. One strategy for breaking free of the trap of a negative sense of self is to take back the responsibility for determining your own worth.

When you think about it carefully, it is doesn’t make much sense if your opinion of yourself is going to be held hostage to whether or not someone else had a good night’s sleep or is in a mood to see you positively.

Taking the responsibility for determining your self-worth means catching yourself focusing on what others are thinking about you and then redirecting your focus to the question, “what do I think of me”?

A good exercise to help you answer that question is to imagine yourself near the end of your life (make it nice and long!). Think about what you would want your life to have meant if you had lived it fully and in the way you would have liked. If you were writing your memoirs, what would you want to be able to say about yourself?

This manner of self-definition highlights your values. You will see that your values give rise to certain intentions (for example, “I want to be a kind person“). With a clear sense of your values, the question of “what do I think of me?” is really the question “am I living according to my values?” Your sense of yourself gets based on how well your actions fit with those values-based intentions.

Thinking about yourself in terms of your values rather than the impression you make upon others puts you in the driver’s seat. Other people’s responses can be useful in terms of letting you know whether you are “hitting the mark” and acting on your values. However, they are your values and you get to decide how you want to be in this world. Try not to get distracted by the reactions others have to you. Look to yourself to assure yourself whether you are moving in the right direction. If so, then appreciate that. If not, be kind to yourself and try again.

3. Be willing to be imperfect
When we feel like we are flawed or imperfect, we tend to feel bad about ourselves. We worry that we won’t be accepted. People with social anxiety tend to exaggerate their flaws in their own minds and imagine bad reactions from others. Many of my clients think their anxiety symptoms or other aspects of their appearance are much more obvious or off-putting than they actually are.

Yet you may show some flaws which really are having a negative effect on others. One of the hardest things to deal with as you try to overcome your social anxiety will be your awareness that your feelings of social discomfort can actually make you less attractive to people. Some anxiety symptoms like gaze avoidance or the absence of smiling will undermine social interactions from the start by inadvertently communicating unfriendliness. This is a classic example of a self-fulfilling prophecy—you are afraid you will get rejected so you behave in ways that lead you to be rejected which makes you more anxious about being rejected.

The most important step in breaking this cycle is acceptance of yourself as you are. There are some things that you can’t change about yourself and other things which will take time and effort to change. In either case, trying to run away from the present moment (the moment in which your perceived perfection is making its appearance) will ultimately contribute to your distress. Acceptance doesn’t mean that you like or give your approval to your imperfections. Acceptance means that you have some compassion for why you are struggling the way you are in the present moment and that you realize the present is the only moment in which you can act. You can either try to avoid exposing your flaws, or accept your flaws and focus on living your life right now according to your values.

4. Change your inner dialog

As human beings, a lot of the thinking we do gets experienced as if we are talking to ourselves. We ask ourselves questions (“I wonder if she’s mad at me?”) and answer them (“No. I think she is just worried about something”). We notice what is going around us, or within us, and make comments or observations (“Wow. It sure is humid today”). Although nothing is heard, it seems like there is an “inner voice” chattering to us. And sometimes, it may seem like a conversation in our heads, as we express different points of views (“I should get a new computer”, “You really can’t afford one”). We get so used to it that we often don’t notice what the inner dialog sounds like.

When you start to tune in to this internal conversation or commentary you will discover a negative voice that can be critical, demanding and pessimistic. It is as if you have become a bully to yourself, giving yourself a hard time about how you are living your life.

This tendency towards self-rejection is a habit you have developed that was meant to make things better when you were younger. One advantage to blaming yourself is that you will experience a sense of control over your life. As strange as it may seem, it creates a sense of power.

Another advantage to your self-criticism is that you are less likely to be surprised when things don’t work out, and if you are rejected it will sting a little less if you were expecting it. In addition, if you have been using a critical inner voice for a long time, it is easy for this to become a part of your identity (“I’m
such a loser”). While it can be distressing, anything that provides a sense of identity is also valued and clung to because it helps us to understand and make meaning of what is happening in our lives.

The strategy that needs cultivating is speaking to yourself with kindness and compassion. Try to use the same way of speaking to yourself as you would to someone you truly care about. This takes practice. Begin by examining your own capacity for kindness. Think about the moments when you have acted in loving and kind ways towards others (including animals). Recall the tone of voice when you are trying to comfort or encourage them, about your use of touch and gaze to communicate their importance to you, and the words you use to let them know that you care about them. Spend some time writing down your reflections on your own compassion and kindness.

Next, resolve to catch yourself when you are giving yourself a hard time. You might say to yourself “that’s too harsh” or “go easy on the judgment”. Combine this with the habit of spending some time (perhaps just a minute) several times throughout the day just to appreciate something about you. It may be your good intentions, a moment when you took a risk or an instance of being welcoming or patient. If you greet someone or initiate a conversation try saying to yourself, “that was friendly of me”, regardless of how the interaction turns out.

Get in the habit of reflecting upon what is going right and smiling at yourself for that. I am not suggesting you be a Pollyanna and only tell yourself the good things. It is just that you already have had plenty of practice saying negative things to yourself. Cut yourself some slack for your mistakes in your inner dialog and try to recognize and appreciate your positive actions and your strengths.

5. Take the long view

You may want to change but from time to time you question whether you can or you get intimidated by fear. As a consequence, you will avoid putting yourself in anxiety-provoking situations and miss an opportunity to learn. Your self-doubt is quite protective. It gives you a good reason to not expose yourself to situations where experience tells you it won’t turn out well. Staying motivated to work on mastering your social anxiety through practice is a big problem for most of the clients I work with.

In order to stay motivated here are some things to remember. First, you are always changing. Your moments of social anxiety arise from a habitual state of mind that gets triggered. And all states of mind are subject to change. In fact, if you look closely, you can probably see that there are some social situations which are OK for you and others that are not. It may even be the case that on some days a particular social situation might be comfortable for you and on other days it is really distressing.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the negative social outcomes that you experience aren’t happening because there is something wrong with you. They happen due to the state of mind that you are in. Your state of mind is like an unwelcome visitor who shows up on your doorstep. It is how you deal with it that is the source of your difficulties and that is something you can do something about. Accepting, rather than battling, thoughts, emotions and sensations is a highly effective way to quiet down the mental chatter that can fuel your distress.
To change habits is effortful and it takes time. Most of the habits that get in your way have been there for years, and often decades. If you have been indirectly rehearsing in your mind certain patterns of thoughts and feelings several times a day for years it will take a while to put some new and competing habits in place.

Perhaps the most important, but overlooked, secret to sustaining your motivation will be to notice the changes that are taking place. You are in the habit of noticing your flaws and tend to minimize, or not even notice, your successes. For example, if you normally won’t talk to strangers but decide to speak to the cashier at the grocery store, no matter how well the conversation goes the important thing to notice is that you had the courage to try.

If you only notice what could have been better, you will quickly become discouraged and will find it hard to continue putting forth the effort. It helps to be realistic about how slow the process can be, to take small steps, to stick with it and to recruit support from others to encourage you.