

You Don't Have to Be Perfect

Objective

To deliberately do something that would be considered socially inappropriate and to tolerate the discomfort this causes.

You Should Know

Many people with social anxiety have unrealistic expectations about themselves. They are tolerant of other people's flaws and gaffes, but not their own. Perfectionism can exist without social anxiety, of course, but when the two are paired, it can be a crippling combination. Not only do people suffer from not reaching their own internal, self-imposed level of achievement, but they experience distress in a host of social situations based on an external measure of who they think they're *supposed* to be. Meaning, perfect.

For example, at a choral concert, 60 choir members took the stage via a set of steps visible to the nearly 2,500 people on the expansive lawn at the outdoor venue. Marsha, who has a fear of making a fool of herself in public, stumbled on one of the steps and fell, *splat*, bracing herself with her hands. People helped her up and she took her place in the lineup, but she was mortified. She was sure everyone in the choir and everyone in the audience were laughing at her and thinking she was a "stupid idiot." She continued to agonize about it throughout the concert and couldn't enjoy the music.

But here's the catch: It's likely that Marsha was the only one who even gave any thought to it after it happened, much less a critical thought. Probably people felt empathy and hoped she was OK. This is how anxiety can interfere with one's life. But, with awareness and practice, that can change.

What if you were to experience yourself as imperfect by embarrassing yourself *on purpose*? You might feel your anxiety rising at the mere thought. This form of exposure therapy is called "constructive embarrassment." The idea is to expose yourself to uncomfortable feelings and learn to tolerate them—to actually welcome the feeling of embarrassment or humiliation so that you can get used to it and realize that nothing catastrophic happens and that you're only human.

What to Do

Plan to do a few "socially inappropriate" things in public. You might want to invite an understanding friend or group of friends with whom to practice your skills. On the line to the left of each item, rank on a scale from 1 to 5 the level of embarrassment you fear doing it would cause. Choose the 1s and 2s at first and work up to trying a 4 or 5, but don't choose an activity that would cause you to have *extreme* anxiety. Afterwards, record your reflections about the experience on the lines below.

Here are some possibilities. Feel free to add your own situations to the list.

___ Stumble on purpose.

___ Go to a movie after it has already started and ask to climb over people.

___ Jog in place in a park or at a bus stop.

___ Make a phone call and then say you've got the wrong number and hang up.

___ Spill your glass of water at a nice restaurant.

___ Dress casually for a formal event (or vice versa).

___ Talk to yourself out loud at a supermarket.

___ Face the wrong way in an elevator.

___ Hum softly during a staff or group meeting.

___ Appear in public with a speck of food on your face.

___ Wear mismatched socks or shoes.

___ At a meeting or in a class, ask a question that you're worried might make you appear stupid.

___ Take an extra-long time at a green light.

___ Do three separate transactions at an ATM while others wait.

___ Skip instead of walking down the street.

___ Pause for 10 seconds while giving a talk or speaking in public.

___ Order a messy meal when you're on a date.

___ Your own idea:

___ Your own idea:

___ Your own idea:

___ Your own idea:

What is the worst thing that happened doing any of these exercises? Did anyone make comments to you or look at you in a strange way?

What thoughts did you have after you completed this assignment? Do you feel less anxious about the possibility of embarrassing yourself?

Practicing doing the things your fear most is considered to be the best way to overcome your fear and anxiety. Do you think that you can continue this practice? Who can help support you in continuing to practice this kind of activity?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else could you do to make progress in this area?
