

# Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

# What Keeps Social Anxiety Going?



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## Description

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Do you ever feel anxious when you're around other people, or if you might have to be the center of attention? Do you worry that other people will notice something about you – or about the way you behave – and judge you for it? Social anxiety is the name for feeling these kinds of fears in social situations.

Symptoms of social anxiety disorder include:

- Feeling self-conscious and anxious in social situations where you might be exposed to scrutiny by other people.
- Fear that you will behave in a way that will be judged negatively by other people.
- Avoiding social situations, or enduring them with great difficulty.
- Worrying about what other people think of you.

Research studies have shown that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective treatments for social anxiety (Mayo-Wilson et al, 2014). CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they aren't very interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going. This is because if they can work out what keeps the problem going, they can treat it by 'removing the fuel' and interrupting this maintaining cycle.

In 1995, psychologists David Clark and Adrian Wells published an influential model of social anxiety which identified the key components that are thought to explain why some people's social anxiety persists. The *What Keeps Social Anxiety Going?* information handout describes some of these key factors, which maintain social anxiety. It illustrates these maintaining factors in a vicious flower format in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to understand more about the cognitive model is an essential part of cognitive therapy for social anxiety (Warnock-Parkes et al, 2020). Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences of social anxiety.

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## Instructions

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### Suggested Question



*One interesting way of thinking about social anxiety is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people's social anxiety persists. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes some of what is happening for you?*

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## References

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Clark, D. M., & Wells, A. (1995). A cognitive model of social phobia. In R. Heimberg, M. Liebowitz, D. A. Hope, & F. R. Schneier (Eds.), *Social phobia: Diagnosis, assessment and treatment*. New York: Guildford Press, pp. 69–93

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Warnock-Parkes, E., Wild, J., Thew, G. R., Kerr, A., Grey, N., Stott, R., ... & Clark, D. M. (2020). Treating social anxiety disorder remotely with cognitive therapy. *The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist*, 13.

# What Keeps Social Anxiety Going?

People with social anxiety tend to hold an impression of themselves that is very negative. As a result they are very fearful that other people will view them negatively. They also tend to have strict beliefs, such as:

- High standards for how they think they 'should' perform in social situations.
- Strong beliefs about how they think other people will respond to them.
- Negative beliefs about themselves.

Having a negative self-image can prompt you to behave in unhelpful ways. Our beliefs can be so strong that they feel like facts, when actually they are more like opinions. If your self-impression is not entirely accurate it may put you under a lot of unnecessary pressure.

Negative automatic thoughts that people with social anxiety have in social situations include:

- Predictions: "They will think I look anxious."
- Worries: "What if I say something and nobody replies?"
- Judgements: "I'm making such a mess of this."
- Doubts: "I'll never be able to do this."

Negative automatic thoughts and images aren't always accurate. People with social anxiety often fall into the trap of emotional reasoning: feeling something and thinking that it must be true just because it feels that way.

**Your self-impression, self-image, and beliefs**

**Negative automatic thoughts and images**

What keeps it going?

**Social Anxiety**

**Self-consciousness & self-focused attention**

**Avoidance and safety behaviors**

If you pay attention to how you think you are coming across to other people then you might focus your attention inwards - towards your own feelings, thoughts, and judgements about your performance. Some people say they do this so that they can 'catch' themselves making mistakes before other people notice.

Self-consciousness is the opposite of a performance enhancer (ask any sports-person). Worse, it gives you a biased impression of how you are really coming across to people.

If you are socially anxious you might avoid situations that make you feel anxious (avoidance), or you might do things to control how you come across to other people (safety behaviors). You might also stay quiet in groups, or ask questions to keep attention away from you.

Avoidance and safety behaviors are well-intended, but they can lead to a lot of problems:

- They prevent you from learning the truth.
- They heighten your self-focus.
- They sometimes lead to the result that you were trying to prevent.
- They can make you appear unfriendly or uninterested.
- They can draw attention towards you.

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