



Module I

Overview of Social Anxiety

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What is Social Anxiety?

Many people experiencing the symptoms of anxiety can begin to wonder whether there is something really wrong with them and comments from other people such as, 'Just get yourself together', "There's nothing to be frightened of", are not very helpful.

Although you might feel alone in your struggle against anxiety, the reality is that many people experience these emotions either from time to time, or on a more regular basis. In fact, it is estimated that 1 in every 5 people experience significant anxiety at some time in their life.

Anxiety can affect any kind of person at any stage of their life, whether they are an introvert or an extrovert, youthful or elderly, male or female, wealthy or poor. Whatever your distinction, you can become anxious. So remember, you are not alone.

Social anxiety is used to describe anxiety that occurs in response to social situations, whether you are in the situation or thinking about the situation. Of course, many people do feel anxious about some social situations, such as public speaking. Worrying about whether the speech will go well, or what other people will think is quite common. Many of these people go on to give the speech and might feel relieved when it is over. For some people, however, the anxiety may be so distressing that they avoid the situation at all costs.

In clinical practice, the term "**Social Anxiety Disorder**" or "**Social Phobia**" is used to describe this intense and longstanding fear of social situations, which often results in the person avoiding the situation. Often the person is worried that they will be embarrassed or humiliated in some way and that they will be evaluated negatively or criticised by other people. Even if your fear is not so intense that it would be called Social Anxiety Disorder or Social Phobia, this package may give you some helpful suggestions for easing the anxiety that you experience in social situations.

Understanding anxiety

Feeling afraid is very much a part of the experience of being human. You might think of it as a survival instinct where fear occurs in response to a realistically dangerous situation. Think about how you might react if a dangerous animal approached you. Most likely you would respond with fear. In fact, it is often helpful to respond with fear at times like this because when we become afraid, our body goes through a whole series of changes that ultimately serve to protect us. This fear response would probably lead us to either run for our lives or become sufficiently 'pumped up' to physically defend ourselves. As you can see from this example, the experience of fear is part of the process of survival.

There are other times when real physical danger isn't there. Think about a person walking through a poorly lit alley at night. They might feel anxious because they are worried that something dangerous may happen. Now, there may or may not be anything dangerous in the alleyway, but what is important, is that they *believe* there is something dangerous. It is this belief that causes the anxiety.

FIGHT/FLIGHT RESPONSE

The response that occurs when a person is in danger, or believes that they are in danger, has been called the fight/flight response. It helps us to respond to real physical threat. When we are confronted with danger, such as that dangerous animal we spoke of earlier, we might typically run away from the situation, or stand and fight. This allows us to protect ourselves. So anxiety is not, in itself, harmful. It can be quite adaptive in certain circumstances.

When a person's fight/flight response is activated, three major types of responses occur. These include body responses, acting responses, and thinking responses.

Body Responses or Physiology

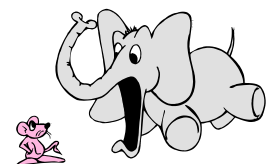
When we become anxious, be it in response to physical threat or social situations, our bodies experience several changes. Think of the common fear of public speaking. People often say that, before they are about to speak, they notice their heart pounding, they start to breathe more quickly, they might get sweaty palms, and might even feel a little lightheaded. These are common reactions that occur when we become anxious.

Think about some of your own physical responses in social situations - what do you notice?

You might think you are alone in reacting this way, but really, we all experience these types of reactions when we experience fear and anxiety. Basically, our bodies are designed to release certain chemicals when we believe a threat exists, in case we need to either run away, or stand and be ready to fight. There are important reasons why these reactions occur.

- An increase in heart rate and strength of heart beat** enables blood and oxygen to be pumped around the body faster so you might feel like your heart is 'pounding'.
- An increase in the rate and depth of breathing** means more oxygen, which is necessary for fight or flight, is taken into the body. You may start to sigh, to yawn, or notice breathlessness, choking or smothering feelings, tightness and pain in the chest. This response also reduces the blood supply to the head, and while not dangerous, you might feel dizziness, light-headedness, blurred vision, confusion, feelings of unreality and hot flushes.
- A redistribution of blood from areas that aren't as vital to those that are**, such as away from skin, fingers and toes towards large vital organs. Your skin might look pale or you might feel cold, or there might be a feeling of numbness and tingling in your fingers and toes.
- An increase in sweating** causes the body to become more slippery, making it harder for a predator to grab, and also cooling the body, preventing it from overheating.
- Widening of the pupils of the eyes** lets in more light and enables you to better scan the environment for danger. You may notice blurred vision, spots before the eyes, or just a sense that the light is too bright.
- Decreased activity of the digestive system** allows more energy to be diverted to fight/flight systems. A decrease in salivation may leave you with a dry mouth and decreased activity in the digestive system may lead to feelings of nausea or a heavy stomach.
- Muscle tension** in preparation for fight/flight and results in subjective feelings of tension, sometimes resulting in aches and pains and trembling and shaking. The whole physical process is a comprehensive one that often leaves the individual feeling quite exhausted.

As you can see, these physical responses are important when facing danger, but most social situations are not physically dangerous! Your body has just become used to setting off your physical alarm system in these situations.



Action Responses or Behaviours

When we feel anxious or expect to feel anxious, we often act in some way to control our anxiety. One way you may do this is by keeping away from social situations. This is called **avoidance**.

Think about the kinds of situations that you don't like to go into. What do you avoid?

Avoiding situations may reduce the anxiety you feel in the short term, but it is likely to have some less helpful long-term effects. Sometimes it stops people from doing things they would like to do, or achieve certain goals. For example, you might have good ideas about work projects, but if you don't share them at team meetings because you are worried about negative evaluation, you might not get the recognition and promotion that you'd like.

What about you? What effect does avoiding social situations have on you?

- I don't get to do things that I would like to do, or that are important to me
- I feel relieved in the short term, but I feel even less confident the next time
- I don't get to overcome my fear of those situations
- I end up regretting that I missed out on certain things
-

A second action response may be to behave differently. For example, you may say nothing because your mind has 'gone blank', you may keep your head down because you think your face is red, or you may shuffle around in your chair because you feel uneasy.

How do you behave differently when you are anxious in social situations?

These action responses may have been used so often that they have become a familiar way of life to you, a habit that you don't really think about. However, you can unlearn the "anxiety habit" and build new habits for feeling more comfortable in social situations.

Thinking Responses or Cognitions

There are a number of thinking responses or cognitive changes that are associated with social anxiety.

Firstly, as a normal part of the fight/flight response, we begin to shift our attention to our surroundings and search for potential threat. This is a helpful response in physically dangerous situations, but it is not so helpful in social situations.

Secondly, some types of thoughts are often associated with social anxiety

1. Over-estimating the chance that negative things will happen in social situations (eg “I’ll make a mistake when I’m talking to people”)
2. Over-estimating the cost of negative events in social situations (eg “If I make a mistake, everyone will think I’m useless”)

People with social anxiety might think that they have to behave a certain way in social situations, and if they don’t they will be seen as stupid, incompetent, and feel embarrassed.

Let’s put these two changes together. If you were worried about people evaluating you negatively, you might start to scan the social environment for signs of threat, in this case, signs that other people think poorly of you. Have you ever been talking in a group of people and seen someone yawning? You might instantly think, “I must be boring them”. However, they may have been up all night with a sick child.

You might also be scanning within yourself to find evidence of threat, such as focusing on bodily sensations like a pounding heart or sweating, and then thinking that everyone will notice. As a result, people with social anxiety tend to be very self-conscious and have a negative view of the way they are coming across to other people.

When you are in anxious social situations, what kinds of thoughts do you have?

These three types of reactions: body, action, and thinking responses, all combine to form the experience of social anxiety. Some reactions may be more noticeable than others may, but they are all important components and will be addressed throughout the modules.

What causes social anxiety?

You have probably asked yourself what causes anxiety and social anxiety. There's no simple answer, of course, as everyone is different. However, there are some important factors that have been identified. These factors can generally be divided into biological and psychological causes.

BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

No single gene has been associated with social anxiety, although based on twin studies and family studies, it does seem that individuals may inherit a vulnerability to developing an anxiety disorder.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Having this vulnerability does not necessarily mean that someone will develop an anxiety disorder. A great deal depends on the lifestyle of that person, the types of life stressors they have encountered and their early learning. For example, if we were taught to fear certain neutral situations as a child, such as social situations, and we have not had the opportunity to unlearn these patterns of behaviour, we may have continued to develop certain patterns of thinking and behaving which contribute to the development of an anxiety disorder.

How is social anxiety maintained?

Anxiety becomes a problem when a person cannot manage to function adequately in their daily life due to the frequency and severity of symptoms of anxiety. Whatever the causes, there are a number of factors that maintain or perpetuate the problem of frequent and severe symptoms of anxiety.

FOCUSING ATTENTION ON NEGATIVE THINGS

People with social anxiety pay attention to cues that may be perceived as socially and personally threatening, which often means focusing intensely on negative things. Do you focus on other people's reactions, wondering what others think or how you look to others? Perhaps you become focused on your own body reactions, such as sweating or shaking. By focusing mainly on these cues, it's easy to find reasons for staying afraid.



THINKING STYLE

As mentioned earlier, people with social anxiety are often particularly afraid that they will be evaluated negatively. They think that other people will think poorly of them, laugh at them, or think they are incompetent. They may believe they are worthless if others think badly of them, which leads to greater anxiety about such social situations in the future.

AVOIDANCE

Avoidance of social situations may reduce anxious feelings in the short term, but this also reduces opportunities to prove to yourself that social situations can be positive experiences. There is no chance to find out that others can enjoy your company or that they value the things you have to say. Avoidance prevents people from disconfirming their fears. The more we don't do something, the more we tell ourselves we can't do something.

Do you recognise any of these factors in how your own anxiety has developed?

What can be done about social anxiety?

MEDICATION

Medication has been used to reduce anxiety symptoms in social situations. While there are a number of different medications that may help to reduce anxiety symptoms, it is often difficult to know which one will work the best. You should always speak to your doctor if you have any queries about medication, and if your doctor prescribes them, make sure you follow all the instructions, and report any side effects.

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIOURAL STRATEGIES

Another powerful treatment option for reducing social anxiety is Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Cognitive and behavioural strategies address the three components that specifically contribute to anxiety in social situations. You may recall that these components include body responses, thinking responses and action responses. In this way, cognitive-behavioural strategies seek to change the anxiety habits that may have developed in response to social situations.

Physical or Body Responses

Remember the physical symptoms that our bodies experience in reaction to anxiety-provoking events? These include rapid breathing, pounding heart, sweating, clammy palms, and muscle tension. One strategy to help reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety is relaxation. In these modules, we will look at how to use calming techniques and relaxation strategies to help reduce the intensity of your anxiety.

Cognitive or Thinking Responses

For people with social anxiety, thinking reactions can occur in the 'here-and-now' of the social situation, and may include focusing on negative cues. Importantly, it is our **perception** of particular cues as negative, which contributes to anxiety. Thinking reactions can also occur when we're worrying about a future event or when we're worrying about what we did or said at a past event. Have you ever noticed that, sometimes, just thinking about something is enough to make you feel a little hot and flustered?

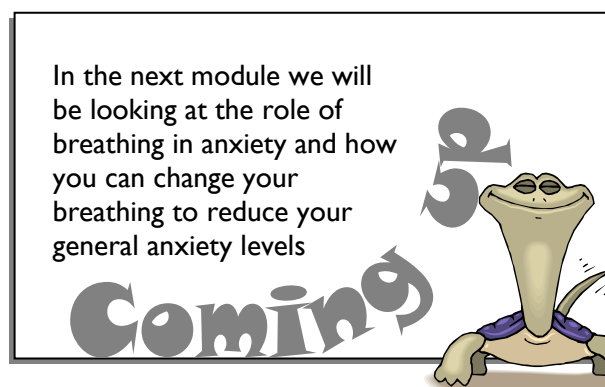
These thinking reactions are also part of a bigger picture of thinking processes. People with social anxiety are very concerned about what other people think about them. It is this concern about negative evaluation that starts the feelings of anxiety, which then prompts the search for threatening information in social situations. In these modules, we will take a closer look at the thinking responses that contribute to social anxiety and how they can be changed.

Behavioural or Action Responses

One of the most important factors that needs to be addressed when overcoming anxiety is the avoidance of social situations. These modules will suggest some ways to gently confront those social situations so that you can feel less anxious when you are in them. After all, if you didn't want to feel less anxious when in social situations, chances are you wouldn't be reading this information!

Module Summary

- Social anxiety is used to describe feelings of anxiety that occur in response to social situations. This may be with a large group of people or just a few individuals, it may be in a particular situation, or it may be generally in response to many types of situations.
- For some people this anxiety may be so distressing that they feel like they can't even go into such social situations, or they may spend much time before and after worrying intensely about it. The terms social anxiety disorder or social phobia are used to describe this intense fear of social situations, which often results in the person avoiding the situation.
- The fight/flight response is a normal human reaction that occurs in response to fear when a person is in physical danger. It is also activated when a person *believes* that there is danger or threat. This includes three major types of reactions:
 - Body responses such as increased heart rate, increased breathing, increasing blood towards muscles and important organs, sweating, and muscle tension.
 - Action responses such as avoidance of feared situations or changing your behaviour in those situations.
 - Thinking responses such as searching for threatening information in anxious situations, which reinforces the general belief that you will be negatively evaluated by other people.
- The causes of social anxiety include both biological and psychological factors. Social anxiety is maintained by an individual's focus on negative things, by their thinking style, and by their avoidance of feared social situations.
- Some medication is available to help reduce the symptoms of social anxiety. In the following modules, we will look at cognitive-behavioural strategies that address the physical/body responses, behavioural responses, and thinking/cognitive reactions that are a part of social anxiety.



About This Module

BACKGROUND

This module was created in 2003 by Patrick Kingsep at the Centre for Clinical Interventions, under the supervision of the Centre's Founding Director, Paula Nathan.

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence-based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for social anxiety is based on the approach that anxiety is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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“SHY NO LONGER”

This module forms part of:

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