

Tackling Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is a common problem, and I used to have a particular fear of group outings and parties. I used to constantly fear saying the wrong thing, and making a fool of myself in some way, so I would tend to say nothing, which in turn made me feel lonely and isolated. However, social anxiety is something which you can overcome. There are several strategies you can use, as well as new ways of looking at yourself within social situations.

One technique is to rate how anxious you feel *before* the feared social event, and then rate your anxiety again once you are in the social situation. While you may experience *some* distress, the chances are that the reality will not be as bad as you had anticipated, and the longer you stay in the situation, the more likely it is that your anxiety levels will subside. Relaxed breathing techniques can help with this, as well as pausing before you speak. If you are feeling self-conscious, it is also important to realise that people are rarely as interested in us and our appearance as we sometimes believe, and that our stress-related symptoms are rarely apparent to others, however bad we feel inside. It is important not to avoid social situations because of our fear; backing away from invitations, interviews and so on, not only limits the opportunities available to us, but reinforces the belief that we cannot cope under stress. Each individual experience of successfully dealing with a situation can then increase confidence for the next social challenge, and so on. Perhaps start off with relatively easy situations, such as having a drink with a couple of friends, and then work up to more challenging ones such as the office party.

I also have a couple of strategies that I still use to this day when in the midst of a social gathering; one is to ask other people questions, so that I can really focus on the other person, instead of on myself. The chances are that I become genuinely interested and absorbed by whom I am talking to, and discovering a shared interest can really help me to connect with them. I also make sure I know where the exit is, even keeping this in view if need be! Very rarely do I feel the need to escape, but it helps to know exactly what I can do if I need a few minutes out to retrieve my equilibrium!

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