



Social Anxiety Disorder

Symptoms, Treatment, and Self-Help for Social Anxiety



Many people get nervous or self-conscious on occasion, like when giving a speech or interviewing for a new job. But social anxiety, or social phobia, is more than just shyness or occasional nerves. With social anxiety disorder, your fear of embarrassing yourself is intense—so intense, in fact, that you may go to great lengths to avoid situations that can trigger it. But no matter how painfully shy you may be and no matter how bad the butterflies, you can learn to be comfortable in social situations and reclaim your life.

What is social anxiety disorder or social phobia?

Social anxiety disorder, also known as *social phobia*, involves intense fear of certain social situations—especially situations that are unfamiliar or in which you feel you’ll be watched or evaluated by others. These situations may be so frightening that you get anxious just thinking about them or go to great lengths to avoid them, disrupting your life in the process.

Underlying social anxiety disorder or social phobia is the fear of being scrutinized, judged, or embarrassed in public. You may be afraid that people will think badly of you or that you won’t measure up in comparison to others. And even though you probably realize that your fears of being judged are at least somewhat irrational and overblown, you still can’t help feeling anxious.

What causes social anxiety?

Although it may feel like you're the only one with this problem, social anxiety is actually quite common. Many people struggle with these fears. But the situations that trigger the symptoms of social anxiety disorder can be different.

Some people experience anxiety in most social situations. For others, anxiety is connected to specific social situations, such as speaking to strangers, mingling at parties, or performing in front of an audience.

Common social anxiety triggers

- Meeting new people
- Making small talk
- Public speaking
- Performing on stage
- Being the center of attention
- Being watched while doing something
- Being teased or criticized
- Talking with "important" people or authority figures

- Being called on in class
- Going on a date
- Speaking up in a meeting
- Using public restrooms
- Taking exams
- Eating or drinking in public
- Making phone calls
- Attending parties or other social gatherings

Signs and symptoms of social anxiety disorder

Just because you occasionally get nervous in social situations doesn't mean you have social anxiety disorder or social phobia. Many people feel shy or self-conscious on occasion, yet it doesn't get in the way of their everyday functioning. Social anxiety disorder, on the other hand, *does* interfere with your normal routine and causes tremendous distress.

For example, it's perfectly normal to get the jitters before giving a speech. But if you have social anxiety, you might worry for weeks ahead of time, call in sick to get out of it, or start shaking so bad during the speech that you can hardly speak.

Emotional signs and symptoms

- ▶ Excessive self-consciousness and anxiety in everyday social situations
- ▶ Intense worry for days, weeks, or even months before an upcoming social situation
- ▶ Extreme fear of being watched or judged by others, especially people you don't know
- ▶ Fear that you'll act in ways that will embarrass or humiliate yourself
- ▶ Fear that others will notice that you're nervous

Physical signs and symptoms

- ▶ Red face, or blushing
- ▶ Shortness of breath
- ▶ Upset stomach, nausea (i.e. butterflies)
- ▶ Trembling or shaking (including shaky voice)
- ▶ Racing heart or tightness in chest
- ▶ Sweating or hot flashes
- ▶ Feeling dizzy or faint

Behavioral signs and symptoms

- ▶ Avoiding social situations to a degree that limits your activities or disrupts your life
- ▶ Staying quiet or hiding in the background in order to escape notice and embarrassment
- ▶ A need to always bring a buddy along with you wherever you go
- ▶ Drinking before social situations in order to soothe your nerves

Social anxiety disorder in children

There's nothing abnormal about a child being shy, but children with social anxiety disorder experience extreme distress over everyday situations such as playing with other kids, reading in class, speaking to adults, or taking tests. Often, children with social phobia don't even want to go to school.

Challenge negative thoughts

While it may seem like there's nothing you can do about the symptoms of social anxiety disorder or social phobia, in reality, there are many things that can help. The first step is challenging your mentality.

Social anxiety sufferers have negative thoughts and beliefs that contribute to their anxiety. These can include thoughts such as:

- ▶ "I know I'll end up looking like a fool."
- ▶ "My voice will start shaking and I'll humiliate myself."
- ▶ "People will think I'm stupid"
- ▶ "I won't have anything to say. I'll seem boring."

Challenging these negative thoughts is an effective way to reduce the symptoms of social anxiety

How to challenge negative thoughts

The first step is to identify the automatic negative thoughts that underlie your fear of social situations. For example, if you're worried about an upcoming work presentation, the underlying negative thought might be: "I'm going to blow it. Everyone will think I'm completely incompetent."

The next step is to analyze and challenge them. It helps to ask yourself questions about the negative thoughts: "Do I know for sure that I'm going to blow the presentation?" or "Even if I'm nervous, will people necessarily think I'm incompetent?" Through this logical evaluation of your negative thoughts, you can gradually replace them with more realistic and positive ways of looking at social situations that trigger your anxiety.

It can be incredibly scary to think about why you feel and think the way you do, but understanding the reasons for your anxieties will help lessen their negative impact on your life.

Unhelpful thinking styles that fuel social anxiety

Ask yourself if you're engaging in any of the following unhelpful thinking styles:

- **Mind reading** - Assuming you know what other people are thinking, and that they see you in the same negative way that you see yourself.
- **Fortune telling** - Predicting the future, usually while assuming the worst will happen. You just "know" that things will go horribly, so you're already anxious before you're even in the situation.
- **Catastrophizing** - Blowing things out of proportion. For example, if people notice that you're nervous, it will be "awful", "terrible", or "disastrous."
- **Personalizing** - Assuming that people are focusing on you in a negative way or that what's going on with other people has to do with you.

Focus on others, not yourself

When we're in a social situation that makes us nervous, we tend to get caught up in our anxious thoughts and feelings. We monitor our bodily sensations and do our best to control them—all the while fearing that the people around us can tell we're nervous and are judging us for it.

The hope is that by paying extra close attention we can better manage the situation. But this excessive self-focus just makes us more aware of how horrible we're feeling, triggering worse anxiety! What's more, it prevents us from fully concentrating on the conversations around us or the performance we're giving.

How can I stop thinking that everyone is looking at me?

Switching from an internal to an external focus can go a long way toward reducing social anxiety. This is easier said than done, but you can't pay attention to two things at once. The more you concentrate on what's happening around you, the less you'll be affected by anxiety.

Focus your attention on other people—but not on what they're thinking of you! Instead, do your best to engage them and make a genuine connection.

Remember that anxiety isn't as visible as you think. And even if someone notices that you're nervous, that doesn't mean they'll think badly of you.

Really listen to what is being said—not to your own negative thoughts.

Focus on the present moment, rather than worrying about what you're going to say or beating yourself up for a flub that's already passed.

Release the pressure to be perfect. Instead, focus on being genuine and attentive—qualities that other people will appreciate.

Learn to control your breath

Many changes happen in your body when you become anxious. One of the first changes is that you begin to breathe quickly. Overbreathing throws off the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your body—leading to more physical symptoms of anxiety, such as dizziness, a feeling of suffocation, increased heart rate, and muscle tension.

Learning to slow your breathing down can help you bring your physical symptoms of anxiety back under control. Practicing the following breathing exercise will help you stay calm when you're the center of attention.

A breathing exercise to help you stay calm in social situations

- ▶ Sit comfortably with your back straight and your shoulders relaxed. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- ▶ Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose for 4 seconds. The hand on your stomach should rise, while the hand on your chest should move very little.
- ▶ Hold the breath for 2 seconds.
- ▶ Exhale slowly through your mouth for 6 seconds, pushing out as much air as you can. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- ▶ Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Focus on keeping a slow and steady breathing pattern of 4-in, 2-hold, and 6-out.

Face your fears

One of the most helpful things you can do to overcome social anxiety is to face the social situations you fear rather than avoid them. Avoidance keeps social anxiety disorder going. It is okay to have feelings that cause you anxiety, but if these feelings are not addressed it will be increasingly difficult to move past them.

Avoidance leads to more problems

While avoiding nerve-wracking situations may help you feel better in the short term, it prevents you from becoming more comfortable in social situations and learning how to cope in the long term. In fact, the more you avoid a feared social situation, the more frightening it becomes.

Avoidance may also prevent you from doing things you'd like to do or reaching certain goals. For example, a fear of speaking up may prevent you from sharing your ideas at work, standing out in the classroom, or [making new friends](/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm).

Challenging social anxiety one step at a time

While it may seem impossible to overcome a feared social situation, you can do it by taking it one small step at a time. The key is to start with a situation that you can handle and gradually work your way up to more challenging situations, building your confidence and coping skills as you move up the “anxiety ladder.”

For example, if socializing with strangers makes you anxious, you might start by accompanying an outgoing friend to a party. Once you're comfortable with that step, you might try introducing yourself to one new person, and so on.

Working your way up the “anxiety ladder”

Don't try to face your biggest fear right away. It's never a good idea to move too fast, take on too much, or force things. This may backfire and reinforce your anxiety.

Be patient. Overcoming social anxiety takes time and practice. It's a gradual step-by-step progress.

Use the skills you've learned to stay calm, such as focusing on your breathing and challenging negative assumptions.

Make an effort to be more social

Actively seeking out supportive social environments is another effective way of challenging your fears and overcoming social anxiety. The following suggestions are good ways to start interacting with others in positive ways:

Take a social skills class or an assertiveness training class. These classes are often offered at local adult education centers or community colleges.

Volunteer doing something you enjoy, such as walking dogs in a shelter, or stuffing envelopes for a campaign—anything that will give you an activity to focus on while you are also engaging with a small number of like-minded people.

Work on your communication skills. Good relationships depend on clear, emotionally-intelligent communication. If you find that you have trouble connecting to others, learning the basic skills or emotional intelligence can help.

Tips for making friends even if you're shy or socially awkward

No matter how awkward or nervous you feel in the company of others, you can learn to silence self-critical thoughts, boost your self-esteem, and become more confident and secure in your interactions with others. You don't have to change your personality. By simply learning new skills and adopting a different outlook you can overcome your fears and build rewarding friendships. See: [Dealing with Loneliness and Shyness](/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm)

Adopt an anti-anxiety lifestyle

The mind and the body are intrinsically linked—and more and more evidence suggests that how you treat your body can have a significant effect on your anxiety levels, your ability to manage anxiety symptoms, and your overall self-confidence.

While lifestyle changes alone aren't enough to overcome social phobia or social anxiety disorder, they can support your overall treatment progress. The following lifestyle tips will help you reduce your overall anxiety levels and set the stage for successful treatment.

Lifestyle changes to reduce anxiety

Avoid or limit caffeine - Coffee, tea, soda, and energy drinks act as stimulants that increase anxiety symptoms. Consider cutting out caffeine entirely, or keeping your intake low and limited to the morning.

Get active - Make physical activity a priority—30 minutes per day if possible. If you hate to exercise, try pairing it with something you do enjoy, such as window shopping while walking laps around the mall or dancing to your favorite music.

Add more omega-3 fats to your diet - Omega-3 fatty acids support brain health and can improve your mood, outlook, and ability to handle anxiety. The best sources are fatty fish (salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines), seaweed, flaxseed, and walnuts.

Drink only in moderation - You may be tempted to drink before a social situation to calm your nerves, but alcohol increases your risk of having an anxiety attack.

Quit smoking - Nicotine is a powerful stimulant. Contrary to popular belief, smoking leads to higher, not lower, levels of anxiety. If you need help kicking the habit, see: [How to Quit Smoking](/articles/addictions/how-to-quit-smoking.htm) (/articles/addictions/how-to-quit-smoking.htm).

Get enough quality sleep - When you're sleep deprived, you're more vulnerable to anxiety. [Being well rested](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) (/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) will help you stay calm in social situations.

When self-help isn't enough

If you've tried the techniques above and you're still struggling with disabling social anxiety, you may need professional help as well.

Therapy for social anxiety

Of all the professional treatments available, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has been shown to work best for treating social anxiety disorder. CBT is based on the premise that what you think affects how you feel, and your feelings affect your behavior. So if you change the way you think about social situations that give you anxiety, you'll feel and function better.

[CBT for social phobia](/articles/anxiety/therapy-for-anxiety-disorders.htm) (/articles/anxiety/therapy-for-anxiety-disorders.htm) typically involves:

Learning how to control the physical symptoms of anxiety through relaxation techniques and breathing exercises.

Challenging negative, unhelpful thoughts that trigger and fuel social anxiety, replacing them with more balanced views.

Facing the social situations you fear in a gradual, systematic way, rather than avoiding them.

While you can learn and practice these exercises on your own, if you've had trouble with self-help, you may benefit from the extra support and guidance a therapist brings.

Group therapy

Other cognitive-behavioral techniques for social anxiety disorder include role-playing and social skills training, often as part of a therapy group.

Group therapy uses acting, videotaping and observing, mock interviews, and other exercises to work on situations that make you anxious in the real world. As you practice and prepare for situations you're afraid of, you will become more and more comfortable, and your anxiety will lessen.

Medication

[Medication](/articles/anxiety/anxiety-medication.htm) (/articles/anxiety/anxiety-medication.htm) is sometimes used to relieve the symptoms of social anxiety, but it's not a cure. Medication is considered most helpful when used in addition to therapy and other self-help techniques that address the root cause of social anxiety disorder.

Three types of medication are used in the treatment of social anxiety:

Beta blockers are used for relieving performance anxiety. While they don't affect the emotional symptoms of anxiety, they can control physical symptoms such as shaking hands or voice, sweating, and rapid heartbeat.

Antidepressants may be helpful when social anxiety disorder is severe and debilitating.

Benzodiazepines are fast-acting anti-anxiety medications. However, they are sedating and addictive, so are typically prescribed only when other medications have not worked.

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