

what is **social anxiety?**

Almost everyone gets a little anxious or embarrassed in front of other people now and then, though some of us are more shy than others. Sometimes, though, the anxiety can be so intense that it stops us from doing the things we enjoy, or starts interfering in our daily lives. If this sounds familiar to you, this information sheet can help to give you a better idea of what *social anxiety* is.

Social anxiety is used to describe feelings of anxiety and fear that occur in response to social situations. Even the most confident of people can get a little anxious before a presentation, or when they're meeting new people, but in social anxiety this distress can be so overwhelming that it feels as though it's difficult to cope. Often, that overwhelming anxiety is experienced when just thinking about the situation or remembering a previous event. You may also have heard the term "social phobia" used to describe these feelings.

Perhaps you feel highly anxious and distressed only in some specific situations, such as presenting to a group of people, or perhaps you feel this anxiety across most situations that generally involve other people. Do you feel extremely anxious in any of the following situations?

- Being the center of attention
- Meeting new people
- Talking to people in authority
- Presentations or talking in front of people
- Parties and social gatherings
- Being watched while doing something, such as signing your name, eating, or drinking

These situations commonly cause distress for people with social anxiety, though there are certainly others. Whatever situation you might feel anxious in, there are a number of symptoms that you may feel in response to social situations.

Thoughts

Do you worry a lot about what other people think, or worry that you will do something embarrassing in front of others? Perhaps you really want other people to like you, or you want to do the right thing by others, and become really worried that you'll "mess it up". You might focus on other people's reactions, wondering how you look or what they are thinking about you. People with social anxiety are often very concerned that other people will think negatively of them and are especially worried about situations where they may be evaluated, criticised or embarrassed.

Physical

When you are in particular social situations, or thinking about social situations, you may experience a number of physical reactions. Perhaps you are sitting at work one day and your boss asks you to sit in on a meeting with some new clients. Your anxiety increases and all of a sudden, you become flustered; you start to feel warm, your breathing becomes irregular, your heart beats faster, you feel a little lightheaded and you have to close your eyes to try and settle yourself down. You may recognise some of these symptoms in relation to your own response to social situations.

- Heart palpitations, or racing and pounding heart
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath or a choking feeling
- Chest pain or a tightness in your chest
- Nausea
- Lightheadedness, dizziness, or feeling faint
- Chills or hot flushes
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Blushing
- Dry throat and mouth

Avoidance



You may have been in a few social situations where you've wanted to hide away from everyone. As a result, you may have avoided these types of situations for some time – trying to escape from as many as you can, and feeling intense distress during the situations you can't avoid.

If you can relate to these symptoms, then social anxiety might be a problem in your life. Talk to your doctor or mental health professional about the kinds of symptoms that you get in social situations, and let them talk to you about what you can do to ease your anxiety.

what can be done about **social anxiety?**

If you have been affected by social anxiety, you might naturally be wondering what you can do about it. There are a number of different options that you may wish to consider. If you are looking for ways that you can start reducing your anxiety in social situations, be sure to talk to your doctor or a mental health practitioner for more information about these and other options available to you.

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 option for reducing social anxiety is to use cognitive-behavioural strategies. These strategies involve addressing the three components that specifically contribute to anxiety in social situations. These components include thoughts, physical reactions and avoidance. In this way, cognitive-behavioural strategies seek to change the anxiety habits that may have developed in response to social situations.

physical reactions

You may have felt a number of physical reactions in response to anxious social situations such as rapid breathing, pounding heart, sweating, clammy palms, and muscle



tension. To help the body restore itself to a calmer state and reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety you can use some relaxation techniques. Some people use yoga or meditation to help them relax. You can also use some simple calming techniques by slowing your breathing down. You'd be surprised how much changing our breathing can change how our bodies respond to anxiety!

thoughts

If you feel very anxious when it comes to social situations, you may find that your thinking influences how anxious you feel. For example, being concerned that people will think poorly of you, focussing on negative feedback, or worrying about future and past events, can all increase your anxiety levels.



By looking at these thoughts, or *cognitions*, and determining how you change unhelpful thoughts into more helpful thoughts, you can start to reduce the anxiety that you feel in social situations.

behaviour

One of the most important factors that needs to be addressed in social anxiety is the avoidance of social situations. The more you *don't* go into these situations, the more you'll believe that you *can't* go into them. That doesn't necessarily mean that you should take on your biggest fear straight away. There are ways to gently confront those situations one step at a time.

behavioural experiments negative predictions

Negative Predictions

Many people who suffer from anxiety, depression or low self-esteem tend to make negative predictions about how certain situations will turn out. You may tend to:

- Overestimate the likelihood that bad things will happen or that something will go wrong
- Exaggerate how bad things will be
- Underestimate your ability to deal with things if they don't go well
- Ignore other factors in the situation which suggest that things will not be as bad as you are predicting

When you jump to such negative conclusions about the future, you will tend to engage in unhelpful behaviours. You may tend to:

- Avoid** the situation totally
- Try the situation out but **escape** when things seem too difficult
- Be overly cautious and engage in **safety behaviours** (see worksheet Biology+Psychology of Panic)

The problem with these strategies is that they prevent you from actually testing out your predictions. This makes it very hard for you to ever have a different experience from what you expected, so you continue to expect the worst.



For example, let us imagine you have been invited to a BBQ and your negative prediction is: *"I will have a terrible time, no-one will speak to me, I will feel like a total fool."*

Your usual response may be to either avoid the BBQ altogether, or to attend but to leave as soon as you feel uncomfortable, or to stand in the corner and speak only to one person you already know. This may help you reduce your discomfort in the short term, but it also contributes to the continuation of your negative predictions, and this means continuation of anxieties.

Testing Our Predictions

What could have been an alternative way to handle the BBQ situation described above?

A different approach could be to go to the BBQ, try your best to have a nice time and speak to others, and use the resulting experience as evidence to test your original negative prediction. **Think of yourself as a scientist, putting your thoughts under the microscope to examine the evidence for and against your thoughts**, instead of assuming that all of your negative predictions are true. Behavioural experiments are a good way for testing these predictions. Next we will go through the steps, using the BBQ situation as an example.



Planning your Behavioural Experiment

1. Be clear about the purpose of the experiment - the point is to test out your negative predictions and help you to develop more realistic and/or balanced predictions.

2. What is the thought or belief that you are trying to test? Rate how strongly you believe this prediction (0-100)
I will have a terrible time at the BBQ. Even if I try to talk to people, no-one will talk to me. (90)

3. What is an alternative prediction or belief? Rate how strongly you believe this alternative (0-100)
I will find at least one person to talk to and will have an ok time. (10)

4. Design the actual experiment - what will you do to test your prediction, when will you do it, how long will it take, and with whom? Try to be as specific as possible. There are no boundaries to how creative you can be, and it is ok to ask for help.

I will go to the BBQ at 8pm, alone, and will stay for at least one hour. I will try to make conversation with at least three people, one that I did not know already. I will only drink one glass of wine.

5. Make sure you set your experiment at an appropriate level. It is best to start simply and increase the challenge step-by-step.

Identify likely problems and how to deal with them.

There might not be anyone I know at the BBQ. But I will at least know the host and I can ask to be introduced to some other people.



Evaluating your Behavioural Experiment

1. Carry out the experiment as planned. Remember to take notice of your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

2. Write down what happened, what did you observe? Consider the evidence *for* and *against* your original prediction. What did this say about your negative prediction

I felt quite nervous at first and wanted to leave. I used breathing to calm myself. The host was friendly and seemed happy to talk to me, and I also spoke to Kelly, who I hadn't seen in some time. Kelly introduced me to her partner Jim and we had a good chat about travel. At one point I worried I had said something stupid, but Jim didn't seem to notice so my worry passed.

3. What have you learned?
I am capable of making conversation and enjoying myself in a casual social situation.

4. Rate how strongly you now believe in your original prediction and the alternative (0-100)
I will have a terrible time at the BBQ. Even if I try to talk to people, no-one will talk to me. (10)
I will find at least one person to talk to and will have an ok time. (80)

improving how you feel

People often believe that the feelings and emotions they experience are caused by external events, situations, and the behaviour of others. For example, we might hear ourselves say, “My partner made me so angry,” “My boss made me so nervous,” “This trip down south made me feel so relaxed,” or “I’m depressed because I didn’t get the job I wanted.” What is the assumption underlying these statements? That someone or something other than ourselves was directly determining the feelings we experienced. However, if we stop to analyse the process that links an external situation to our emotional responses, we will find that there is a step in between.

What Influences My Feelings?

What really makes us feel and respond the way we do, is not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but how we perceive that situation or that person’s actions. It is our thoughts and beliefs about an event that significantly influences our feelings and actions.



Here’s an example. Suppose you went to a party and your host introduces you to Mike. As you talk to him, you notice that he does not look directly at you but often looks around the room. How would you feel if you thought, “Boy, this guy is so rude! He won’t even look at me while I’m talking with him! How nasty!” What if you thought, “Mike must think that I’m really unattractive and uninteresting. I must be a really boring person. Nobody wants to talk to me!” What about if you were to think, “Mike’s probably waiting for a friend to come. Maybe he’s getting a bit anxious.” You probably realised that you felt three different emotions as a result of those three different thoughts. Often, we are not aware of our thoughts and beliefs because they are so automatic and happen quickly. But they are there, and they affect the way we feel.

Why do I feel distressed?

We’ve talked about the way our thoughts affect how we feel. If we are feeling happy and excited, chances are we have been thinking positive thoughts and about positive things. On the other hand, if we are feeling anxious, depressed, and upset, it is very likely that we have been thinking negative thoughts. We call these unhelpful thoughts (simply because they lead to unpleasant feelings or unhelpful actions!). All of us, at times, think things that make us feel sad or anxious, and that is a normal part of life. However, if you often feel distressed or upset, you might need to examine your thinking in order to improve how you feel.

Feelings are not Thoughts

When we first try to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it can be easy to confuse them. We might be used to talking about thoughts and feelings as being part of the same experience, but it is more helpful to separate them and

remember that feelings are not thoughts. For example, you might hear a person saying “I *think* I’m anxious,” but they’re probably *thinking* “Everyone will laugh at me,” and *feel* anxious. More commonly, you might hear someone saying something like “I *feel* that my boyfriend doesn’t appreciate the gift I bought for him,” when they are actually *thinking* “My boyfriend doesn’t appreciate the gift I bought for him,” and *feel* hurt.

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

What sorts of thoughts are unhelpful? Unhelpful thoughts are those that tend to focus on the negative aspects of a situation, or those that overestimate the chances of a negative event occurring, or those that place unrealistic demands on yourself or others. These are also often known as unhelpful thinking styles because they are patterns of thinking that have become a habit and contribute to a person feeling unhelpful negative feelings.

What Can I Do?

Plenty! There are lots of things you can do to help yourself feel better, and this next suggestion has been proven to be pretty effective. If unhelpful thoughts lead to distressing emotions, then it might be quite reasonable to say that the most effective thing to do would be to change those unhelpful thoughts to helpful ones! Yeah? Okay, so, how can you do that?

First, identify how or what you are feeling. Then, ask yourself “What am I thinking? What conclusions am I making?” to see how and why you are feeling distressed. Remember, unhelpful thoughts will lead to you feeling upsetting emotions.

The next step is to challenge your thinking by exploring other possible explanations and looking at a situation from different points of view. You might ask yourself, “What other ways are there of viewing this situation? How might someone else view this situation? What other explanations could there be?”



The final step is to ask yourself, “How can I revise my original thoughts to take into account these other possible viewpoints?” Then, think of an alternative explanation. This becomes your new, balanced, and helpful thought. A balanced and helpful thought or belief is one that takes into consideration alternative viewpoints and helps you feel better. Replace your original, unhelpful thought with this new, balanced, and helpful belief. Once you have done this, you will probably find that you feel better and your mood will be improved.

thinking & feeling

People often believe that the feelings and emotions they experience are determined by external events, situations, and the behaviour of others. For example, we may hear ourselves say, "My boss made me so nervous," "My partner made me so angry," "This trip down south made me feel so relaxed," or "I'm depressed because I didn't get the job I wanted." What is the assumption underlying these statements? That someone or something other than ourselves was directly determining the feelings we experienced.

We come to these conclusions automatically without asking ourselves if this assumption is true. However, if we stop to analyse the process that links an external situation to our emotional responses, we will find that there is a step in between.

How Our Thoughts Influence Our Feelings

What really makes us feel and respond the way we do, is often not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but how we perceive that situation or that person's actions. It is how we see something or someone and what we think about it or them that really influences how we feel. It is our thoughts and beliefs about an event that significantly influences our emotions and actions.

Here's an example. Suppose you went to a party and your host introduces you to Mike. As you talk to him, you notice that he does not look directly at you but often looks around the room. How would you feel if you thought, "Boy, this guy is so rude! He won't even look at me while I'm talking with him! How nasty!" What if you thought, "Mike must think that I'm really unattractive and uninteresting. I must be a really boring person. Nobody wants to talk to me!" What about if you were to think, "Mike's probably waiting for a friend to come. Maybe he's getting a bit anxious." You probably realised that you felt three different emotions as a result of those three different thoughts. Often, we are not aware of our thoughts and beliefs because they are so automatic and happen quickly. But they are there, and they affect the way we feel.

What am I Feeling?

It is often difficult to know exactly what we are feeling, and sometimes it can also be difficult to put it into words. The list below contains words that describe feelings, and this might be a useful starting point in you being able to understand the connection between your thinking and your feelings.

Words That Describe Feelings

Tense	Enraged	Frightened	Cheerful
Annoyed	Happy	Panicky	Euphoric
Unhappy	Exhilarated	Frustrated	Mad
Exuberant	Keyed-up	Scared	Uneasy
Anxious	Irritated	Flat	Sad
Depressed	Joyful	Tired	Discouraged
Angry	Excited	Nervous	Jealous

This is only a limited list but it should give you an idea of the kinds of words we could use to describe our feelings.

Automatic thoughts

Just as we are not always conscious of the way we walk or how we drive a car, we are often not aware of our thinking. Some of our thinking is so habitual that it is automatic, and just like driving, when things are automatic, we might not be conscious of them. All of the time, our brains are turning over thoughts and ideas. However, we are not consciously aware of most of them because it happens relatively fast and we are not accustomed to slowing them down. Our automatic thoughts, however, play an important role in our emotional well-being.

There are three kinds of automatic thoughts:

Neutral thoughts, e.g. "I think I will buy some bread today."

Positive thoughts, e.g. "This is something I can do really well."

Negative thoughts, e.g. "I often find it hard to concentrate – I must be really stupid."



Automatic thoughts often reflect worries and concerns, however they can be about anything at all, anything we have ever seen, heard or learned. In addition, it can be anything we know about from any source at all. Obviously, though, negative automatic thoughts are the ones that can cause us emotional distress. People who are depressed tend to think negative thoughts about themselves, the world about them, and their future, and it is these thoughts that can be changed to lift your depression.

Feelings are not Thoughts

When we first try to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it can be easy to confuse them. We might be used to talking about thoughts and feelings as being part of the same experience, but it is more helpful to separate them and remember that feelings are not thoughts. For example, you might hear a person saying "I *think* I'm anxious," but they're probably *thinking* "Everyone will laugh at me," and *feel* anxious. More commonly, you might hear someone saying something like "I *feel* that my partner doesn't appreciate the gift I bought for him," when they are actually *thinking* "My partner doesn't appreciate the gift I bought for him," and *feel* hurt.

Being aware of your feelings and your thoughts is the first step towards feeling better. If thinking influences feelings, then it makes sense that if you want to change the way you feel, you need to change the way you think. Look out for the information flyer entitled "Changing the Way You Think" for more details on how to do this.

unhelpful thinking styles

When a person experiences an unhelpful emotion (eg, depression or anxiety), it is usually preceded by a number of unhelpful self-statements and thoughts. Often there is a pattern to such thoughts and we call these, "unhelpful thinking styles". One of the things we have noticed is that people use unhelpful thinking styles as an automatic habit. It is something that happens out of our awareness. However, when a person consistently and constantly uses some of these styles of thinking, they can often cause themselves a great deal of emotional distress. This information sheet describes a number of "unhelpful thinking styles". As you read through them, you might notice some thinking patterns and styles that you use consistently. Some of these styles might sound similar to one another. They are not meant to be distinct categories but to help you see if there is a kind of pattern to your thoughts.

Mental Filter:

This thinking style involves a "filtering in" and "filtering out" process – a sort of "tunnel vision," focusing on only one part of a situation and ignoring the rest. Usually this means looking at the negative parts of a situation and forgetting the positive parts, and the whole picture is coloured by what may be a single negative detail.

Jumping to Conclusions:

We jump to conclusions when we assume that we know what someone else is thinking (mind reading) and when we make predictions about what is going to happen in the future (predictive thinking).



Personalisation:

This involves blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong or could go wrong, even when you may only be partly responsible or not responsible at all. You might be taking 100% responsibility for the occurrence of external events.

Catastrophising:

Catastrophising occurs when we "blow things out of proportion", and we view the situation as terrible, awful, dreadful, and horrible, even though the reality is that the problem itself is quite small.

Black & White Thinking:

This thinking style involves seeing only one extreme or the other. You are either wrong or right, good or bad and so on. There are no in-betweens or shades of gray.

Shoulding and Musting:

Sometimes by saying "I should..." or "I must..." you can put unreasonable demands or pressure on yourself and others. Although these statements are not always unhelpful (eg "I should not get drunk and drive home"), they can sometimes create unrealistic expectations.

Overgeneralisation:

When we overgeneralise, we take one instance in the past or present, and impose it on all current or future situations. If we say "You always..." or "Everyone...", or "I never..." then we are probably overgeneralising.

Labelling:

We label ourselves and others when we make global statements based on behaviour in specific situations. We might use this label even though there are many more examples that aren't consistent with that label.



Emotional Reasoning:

This thinking style involves basing your view of situations or yourself on the way you are feeling. For example, the only evidence that something bad is going to happen is that you feel like something bad is going to happen.

Magnification and Minimisation:

In this thinking style, you magnify the positive attributes of other people and minimise your own positive attributes. It's as though you're explaining away your own positive characteristics

what are core beliefs?



By now you are probably becoming used to the process of challenging your thinking in a range of situations. You know how to identify the thoughts that are causing you distress and how to challenge them and replace them with more balanced thoughts. However, you might notice that there are times when it is harder to believe the new balanced thought and the old unhelpful thoughts seem to be very powerful. You might notice that this happens in certain kinds of situations.

A possible explanation for this 'difficulty in letting go' of an unhelpful thought is that there may be a strong core belief at the root of that unhelpful thought. **Core beliefs** are the very essence of how we see ourselves, other people, the world, and the future. Sometimes, these core beliefs become 'activated' in certain situations. Here's an example:

Erica is able to challenge her thinking in most situations. However, she has noticed that she has trouble challenging her thinking in situations involving her flatmates and friends. In these situations, she has recognised that her thinking is often about being unlikeable. In fact, when she really looks hard at her thinking, she can see that often the underlying self-statement is, "I'm unlovable."

Core beliefs, such as the one from the above example, develop over time, usually from childhood and through the experience of significant life events or particular life circumstances. Core beliefs are strongly-held, rigid, and inflexible beliefs that are maintained by the tendency to focus on information that supports the belief and ignoring evidence that contradicts it. For example, Erica focuses on any feedback from her flatmates that isn't positive and then uses this to confirm that yet again she is unlikeable. Even neutral statements from her flatmates and friends are often interpreted as negative. Over the years, this narrow focus gives strength to the belief and Erica no longer thinks to question it. It is just totally and absolutely accepted. It is not surprising, then, that these types of beliefs are the hardest to shake.

Identifying Themes from Thought Diaries

So, how can you start identifying your core beliefs? The first step is to look over your Thought Diaries to see if your 'hot' thoughts have any common themes. You might notice that there are certain patterns to your thoughts – similar themes that occur in the B columns. Look closely at these to identify the patterns. You may become aware of one or two common themes found in the things you say about yourself, others, and the world.

Identifying A Core Belief

The process of identifying a core belief is not a great deal different from what you have already been doing in your thought diaries. Essentially, the idea is to extend the hot thought further to reveal the bottom line or root of what you might be thinking. Use questions such as: "If that's true, what does that mean?" "What's bad about that?" "What does that say about me?"

This process is like sifting through the layers of self-talk to get at what is at the bottom layer. Now, you are ready to challenge your core beliefs. Even though these beliefs are strongly held, it is important that they are challenged, just like any unhelpful thoughts. Once you have fully identified what you are telling yourself, you can begin to see if your core beliefs hold up against all that you have experienced. This process of challenging your core beliefs may not be an easy one. If you find the process too difficult or distressing, do consider seeing a mental health professional and discussing this with them.

Challenging Your Core Beliefs

To evaluate and challenge your core beliefs, ask yourself "What experiences do I have that show that this belief is not completely true all the time?" List as many experiences, and be as specific, as possible. Remember to write down everything even when you're not sure if they are relevant. When you have considered all the experiences you have written down, develop an alternative, balanced core belief. Remember that these experiences show that your unhelpful core belief is not completely true all the time. What would be an appropriate balanced and helpful core belief? Write this down.

Behavioural Experiments

You could also try doing a behavioural experiment to challenge those hard-to-budge unhelpful core beliefs. The purpose of doing an experiment is to find out how true your core beliefs are. Here's how you could conduct an experiment.

1. Write down the core belief you want to test
2. Think of a few tasks you could do to test your core belief
3. Write down what you would expect would happen if your core belief were true
4. Carry out the tasks
5. Record what actually happened when you carried out the tasks
6. Compare the actual results with your prediction and write down what you might have learned from the experiment. Then, write down a new balanced belief that fits with your conclusion.

Following Through

You might find it useful to write your balanced core beliefs onto cards that you can carry around with you as a reminder when this type of thinking is triggered. Once you've developed balanced core beliefs, follow through on them. Balanced core beliefs require careful nurturing and 'tender loving care.' Affirm yourself by using positive self-statements, remind yourself of all the evidence against the unhelpful core belief. Also, **act against** your unhelpful core belief. Ask yourself, "If I really believed my balanced belief, what are the things I would do?" Then, go out and do them. The more you do these things, the more you will come to believe your balanced beliefs. Over time, these new core beliefs will be integrated into your belief system.

analysing your thinking

We've talked about the way our thoughts affect how we feel. If we are feeling happy and excited, chances are, we have been thinking positive thoughts and about positive things. On the other hand, if we are feeling anxious, depressed, and upset, it is likely that we have been thinking negative thoughts. We call these unhelpful thoughts (simply because they lead to unpleasant feelings or unhelpful actions!). All of us, at times, think things that make us feel sad or anxious, and that is a normal part of life. However, if you often feel distressed or anxious, you might need to examine your thinking to improve how you feel.

If unhelpful thoughts lead to distressing emotions, then it might be quite reasonable to say that the most effective thing to do is to change those unhelpful thoughts to helpful ones!



So, how can you do that? To start influencing the way you feel, you need to learn to be aware of, and "capture," those unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, with the ultimate aim of changing them. To do that, let's start with doing an ABC analysis.

The ABC analysis begins with identifying the '**A**' which stands for '**Activating Event**.' Simply write down an event or a situation in which you experienced a strong negative emotion, such as, depression. Record the situation the same way a video camera might record it – just the facts. This means that you do not include your thoughts about why the situation occurred, who was responsible, and how you felt about it. Just describe the event simple, without any 'frills.'

The next step is to identify the '**C**' which stands for '**Consequences**,' and this includes both your feelings and your actions/behaviour. Write down the words that best describe your feelings. When you have written down these words, rate the intensity of the emotion from 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more intense the emotion. Have a look at all those feelings and then choose the feeling that best represents the emotion you actually felt at the time and underline it. You might also want to note any actions that you carried out, for example, drawing all the curtains, putting on the answering machine, and going to bed.

Now, bearing in mind the situation and the feelings you experienced, identify the '**B**,' which represents your '**Beliefs**' or thoughts, expectations, perceptions, and attitudes. Ask yourself "What was I thinking of when the event occurred?" "What was going through my mind at the time?" Write down all of these thoughts in a list. When you have completed this task, read through each statement and then underline the thought that is most associated with the primary emotion you felt during the '**A**'. We'll now call it your hot thought. Now rate how much you believe this thought on a scale from 0 to 100.

Let's look at an example. Imagine walking into a party and feeling anxious. To do an ABC analysis, you might ask yourself, "How am I making myself anxious? What am I thinking?" You might identify a thought such as, "I don't want to be here." If you only had this thought, you'd probably not experience a strong emotion but only feel mildly anxious. If you do experience a strong emotional response to this thought, it probably indicates that there are other thoughts underlying this thought. Therefore, the thought, "I don't want to be here" is only an initial thought, and you would need to discover what other unhelpful thoughts were present to invoke such a strong emotional response.

How to Uncover Your Unhelpful Thoughts

By asking yourself a number of questions, you can uncover any other unhelpful thoughts underlying an initial thought. Let's use the example of being at the party to identify the unhelpful thoughts underlying the initial thought "I don't want to be here." The following is a description of the thoughts that might be going through your head as you uncover other unhelpful thoughts. The questions in bold are your unhelpful thought discovery questions.



"I don't want to be here".

"I don't want to be here because...?"

"...people will look at me and know that I am depressed"

"...and that is bad because...?"

"Well, they will think something is wrong with me"

"...and what is bad about that..?"

"....They will think I'm crazy!"

"...and what does that say about me?"

".....that I must be crazy."



Your task is to become an expert at identifying your unhelpful thoughts. Sometimes, one or two thoughts might not represent the other unhelpful ones you might have had. As such, to get to those other thoughts, you might need to ask some of the following questions, called Thought Discovery Questions:

"What is bad about that?"

"What is it that I see happening in this situation?"

"What am I concluding about myself or others in this situation?"

"... and that is bad because ..."

"... and what does this say about me ...?"

It is best to be as specific as you can, even if some of your unhelpful thoughts sound stupid or embarrassing when you think about them. Discovering your unhelpful thoughts, no matter how silly they sound, is important in learning how to better manage your mood.

After you have done this, the next step is to do some 'Detective Work' and 'Disputation.' At this point, it is important that you understand how to identify your feelings and thoughts surrounding a particular situation, especially one in which you experienced unhelpful, negative emotions. When a person experiences unhelpful emotions, they might get a stronger physical reaction in their body, such as a tightness in the chest when anxious, an increase in blood pressure when angry, or a sense of heaviness when depressed. Emotions such as depression, guilt, fear, rage, and anxiety might also lead to avoidance and unhelpful behaviours towards yourself and others, get in the way of effective problem solving, and contribute to long term difficulties such as hypertension, heart disease, interpersonal problems, and psychological problems. Doing the ABC analysis is taking the first step toward learning to better manage your mood and helping yourself feel better.

changing your thinking

In the handout 'Thinking & Feeling,' we established that it is our thoughts that influence our feelings, emotions, and behaviours – the thoughts and feelings connection. We also discussed and identified some unhelpful thinking patterns and styles that we frequently use. Often, a depressed person will think negative thoughts that are characterised by these unhelpful thinking patterns, which lead them to feel depressed, miserable, and distressed. This, in turn, maintains and perpetuates the depression.

The key to changing the way we feel is found in challenging and changing our unhelpful thoughts and beliefs. This begins with you taking a good hard look at them. Imagine that you are a detective and a lawyer, and your unhelpful thoughts and beliefs are to be investigated or on trial.

To assess whether or not your thoughts and beliefs are valid, you need to gather and examine evidence. As such, we liken this process to that of being a detective. This is the fourth step (or **D**) that follows on from the ABC Analysis.

Detective Work

“**D**” stands for “Detective Work” where you look for evidence that does or does not support your thoughts and beliefs. Like all good detectives, we need to find out the facts, and gather the evidence. Here are some helpful questions:

- Where is the evidence (or proof) that my thoughts/beliefs are true?
- Are there any evidence that disproves my thoughts/beliefs?
- How do I know that my thoughts/beliefs are true?
- Are there facts that I'm ignoring or I've overlooked?
- What other explanations could there possibly be?
- How realistic are my thoughts, beliefs, and expectations?



Disputation

“**D**” also stands for “Disputation.” Remember, you are also like a lawyer, asking questions that challenge your thoughts, beliefs and expectations, ultimately testing and challenging whether or not they stand true, and whether they help or hinder you. Here are some other helpful questions to ask yourself:

- What other ways are there of viewing the situation?
- How might someone else view the situation?
- If I were not depressed, how might I view the situation differently?
- Realistically, what is the likelihood of that happening?
- Is it helpful for me to think this way?

Detective work and disputation is about trying to be objective about our thoughts. It is about analysing them, assessing, and evaluating them to see if they are indeed valid and true, as opposed to accepting these thoughts and believing them without question.

The End Result

We've spent some time examining the link between thinking and feelings, and discussed how to identify your unhelpful thoughts and thinking styles. We've also talked about looking for evidence that might prove or disprove your unhelpful beliefs as well as considering other alternative ways of viewing the situation. Now let's look at how you can change the way you are thinking in order to improve how you are feeling.

By this time, you would have learned how to describe an **A**ctivating Event, identify your automatic and unhelpful **B**eliefs and thoughts (including the Hot Thought) that have contributed to your experiencing distressing emotions (**C**onsequences), and recognise a few unhelpful thinking styles you might have used. You would have also used the **D**etective Work and **D**isputation section to challenge your hot thought. Now, take a good look at the evidence you have listed and the answers to the other challenging questions. Is there enough evidence to believe that your hot thought is true all of the time? Are there other alternative explanations?

At this point, ask yourself, “How can I revise my hot thought to take into account all the evidence I have listed?” Then, write out an alternative explanation. This becomes your new, balanced thought. A balanced and helpful thought or belief is one that takes into consideration all the evidence, objective information, and alternative viewpoints. This is the fifth step of the ABC analysis – the **E**nd Result, where you replace your original, unhelpful thought with this new, balanced, and helpful belief.

After you have written down your new, balanced thought or belief, ask yourself, “How do I feel now?” Look at the most intense emotion you identified in section **C**, and re-rate how intense that emotion feels for you now. Often, you will find that it is not as extreme and distressing.

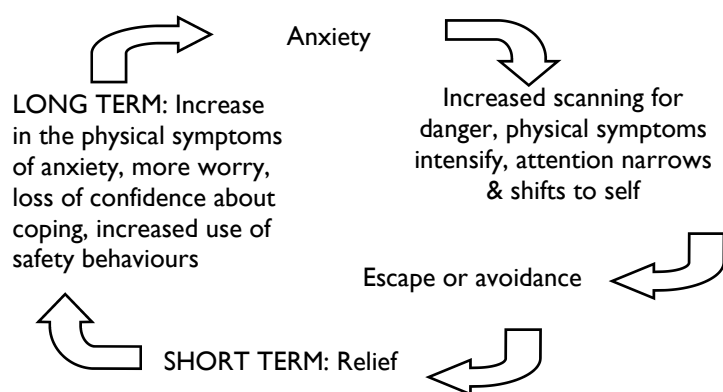
Finally, read through the Detective Work and Disputation section again, and re-rate how much you believe the hot thought now.

This final step of replacing your unhelpful (hot) thoughts with balanced thoughts is very important. Challenging your beliefs and evidence testing is the process of change, but the final step is where you **MAKE** the change. You'll probably find that this process becomes easier after some practice. So keep it up. Keep practising and remember that you can be your own expert at managing your moods!

the vicious cycle of anxiety

The essence of anxiety is worrying about some *potential* threat. It is trying to cope with a future event that you think will be negative. You do this by paying more attention to possible signs of potential threat, and looking internally to see whether you will be able to cope with that threat. When you notice your anxious symptoms, you think that you can't cope with the situation, and therefore become more anxious. This is the start of the vicious cycle of anxiety.

The Vicious Cycle of Anxiety



How Avoidance Contributes to Anxiety

If you feel anxious, or anticipate feeling anxious, it makes sense that you will do things to reduce your anxiety. People sometimes try and reduce the anxiety by avoiding the feared situation altogether. This avoidance instantly decreases the anxiety because you have not put yourself in a distressing situation. However, while avoidance makes anxiety better in the short term you have also made the anxiety worse in the long term.

An illustration of this is when you avoid going to a supermarket to do the shopping because that's where you experience fear. As a result you successfully avoid the distress you associate with supermarkets. In the short term, you do not feel anxious. However in the long term you become even more unwilling to confront anxiety. You continue to believe that emotion is dangerous and should be avoided at all costs. You do not disconfirm your catastrophic predictions about what may happen in the shopping centre. You continue scanning your environment for signals of danger and signals of safety. In this way your anxiety may increase and generalise to other situations.

How Safety Behaviours Contribute to Anxiety

In addition to avoidance many people use "safety behaviours" or subtle avoidance to help cope with anxiety. These may include relying on medication, the security of your mobile phone, always having an exit plan for potentially-anxious situations, or making sure you have someone else with you.

These safety behaviours also play a part in the vicious cycle of anxiety. When you become dependent on them you do not learn that emotion per se is not dangerous. You do not learn that distressing emotions tend to come down from their apex of their own accord. You try to suppress emotion, which has the contradictory effect of heightening the emotion, increasing the distress. Also can you imagine how stressing it would be if one day your safety behaviours were not available to you? This predicted catastrophe will probably increase your avoidance. Ask yourself, what do you learn in the safety of your living room? The answer may not be encouraging!

Reversing the Vicious Cycle of Anxiety

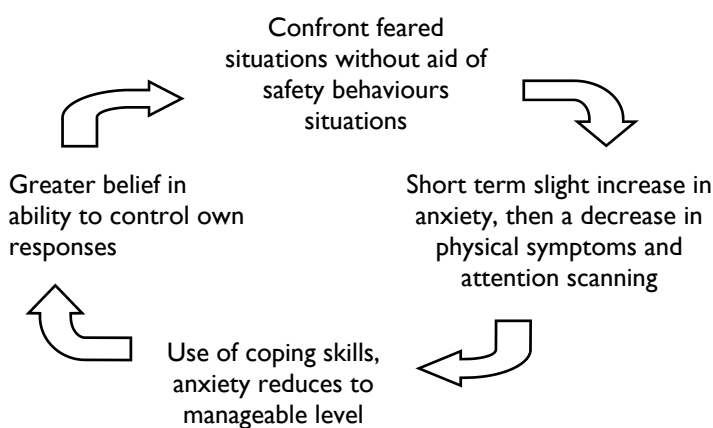
Vicious cycles play an important role in maintaining anxiety. However, you can turn this cycle around to create a positive cycle that will help you overcome anxiety. One important step in this cycle is gradually confronting feared situations. This will lead to an improved sense of confidence, which will help reduce your anxiety and allow you to go into situations that are important to you.



Some people might encourage you to tackle your biggest fear first – to "jump in the deep end" and get it over and done with. However, many people prefer to take it "step-by-step". We call this "**graded exposure**". You start with situations that are easier for you to handle, then work your way up to more challenging tasks. This allows you to build your confidence slowly, to use other skills you have learned, to get used to the situations, and to challenge your fears about each situational exposure exercise. By doing this in a structured and repeated way, you have a good chance of reducing your anxiety about those situations.

When the anxiety cycle is broken, it will look like this:

Reversing the Vicious Cycle of Anxiety



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Situational exposure

One of the ways that people avoid feeling anxiety in certain situations is to avoid those situations wherever possible. However, by not exposing yourself to those situations you don't get the chance to disconfirm your fears, which in turn can make those fears even stronger. If being in those situations is important to you, you will need to face your fears in a real situation and begin to turn social activity into a positive experience. This information sheet is designed to show you how you can begin to do that.

Graded Exposure

Some people might encourage you to tackle your biggest fear first – to “jump in the deep end” and get it over and done with. However, many people prefer to take it “step-by-step”, what some people call “**graded exposure**”. By using graded exposure you start with situations that are easier for you to handle, then work your way up to more challenging tasks. This allows you to build your confidence slowly, to use other skills you have learned, to get used to the situations, and to challenge your fears about each situational exposure exercise. By doing this in a structured and repeated way, you have a good chance of reducing your anxiety about those situations.

Situations That You Avoid

The first thing to do is to think about the situations that you fear and try to avoid. For example, some people might fear and avoid going to social places, or being assertive with others. Make a list of these situations.

Once you have made the list, indicate how much distress you feel in those situations by giving them each a rating on a scale of 0 to 100.

0 – You are perfectly relaxed

25-49 – *Mild*: You can still cope with the situation

50-64 – *Moderate*: You are distracted by the anxiety, but are still aware of what's happening

65-84 – *High*: Difficult to concentrate, thinking about how to escape

85-100 – *Extreme*: The anxiety is overwhelming and you just want to escape from the situation

Planning Your Goals

Now you can start to turn the situations you avoid into goals that you'd like to achieve. For example, a situation that you avoid might be “Going to pubs”, which has a distress rating of 75. A goal for this might be “To go out to a pub on a weekend night with friends and stay there for at least 2 hours”. When you are developing a goal, it helps to make them SMART:

Specific: It needs to be as clear (eg compare “To eat in public” with “To eat lunch in a local restaurant on my own.”)

Measurable: It needs to be easily assessed (eg compare “Being friendly” with “Staying for 2 hrs” - what does ‘friendly’ mean?)

Achievable: It needs to be possible and probable to achieve

Relevant: It needs to be important to you

Timebound: It needs to have an end date for completion

Building Steps Towards Your Goal

Now that you have a personal, realistic, achievable, measurable, and specific goal that you'd like to achieve, you can plan your “graded exposure” program. This involves breaking the goal down so that you can work step-by-step towards your major goal. Of course, goals with high distress (eg a rating of 80+) will need more steps than a medium distress goal (eg a rating of 40+). You can break your goal into smaller steps by changing WHO is there, WHAT you do, WHEN you do it, WHERE you do it, and HOW long you do it for. Follow the SMART criteria for developing each step. Here's an example.



GOAL: To go out to a pub on a weekend night with friends and stay there for at least 2 hours	DISTRESS 0-100
	80

STEP		DISTRESS 0-100
1	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekday afternoon</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a soft drink and stay for 10min	35
2	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekday afternoon</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a soft drink and stay for 30min	45
3	Go to the local pub on a <u>weeknight</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), staying from 7pm to 8pm	55
4	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekend night</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), and stay for 30 minutes	65
5	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekday night</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), staying from 8pm to 10pm	70
6	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekend night</u> (some of the friends don't know about the problem), staying from 8pm to 10pm	80

Situational exposure

Climbing Steps Towards Your Goal

Once you have developed the steps that you can take towards your main goal, you can make an appointment with yourself to start on your first step. Here are a few tips for how you can progress through your situational exposure steps.

before the first step

- 1) **Coping with anxiety.** Before you start on a situational exposure exercise, it is useful to have developed ways of coping with the distress you might feel in the situation. Using well practised breathing techniques can help to reduce the physical response to anxiety. Reducing your general level of anxiety through muscle relaxation techniques can also help to prepare you for entering the situation.
- 2) **Challenging negative thoughts.** Another way to prepare yourself is to challenge negative thoughts that you might have about yourself or the situation. If you spend time working through these thoughts you can come up with some helpful ways of thinking about the situation.

These strategies are discussed in other information sheets in this series.

completing a step

- 1) **Expect some anxiety.** When you enter the situation – at any step - remember that you'll probably experience some anxiety or discomfort. That's why it's important to start small, and work your way up.
- 2) **Use your skills.** Just as used your coping skills to prepare for the situation, use them while you are in the situation. Use your breathing to reduce your physical anxiety response and challenge negative thoughts that you might have.
- 3) **Stay in the situation.** While it might be tempting to leave if you feel uncomfortable, try to stay in the situation until the anxiety goes down. In this way you can see that, as frightening as the feelings are, they are not dangerous, and they do subside.
- 4) **Stay involved.** 'Staying away' can happen in many different ways, such as sitting away from others, or avoiding eye contact. Stay involved in the situation by noticing what is happening and really experiencing the situation. Really taking part in these situations is the only way to make sure you get used to the anxiety.
- 5) **Stay sober.** Staying involved means being fully aware of what is happening. This means not taking alcohol or drugs to try to "mentally escape" the situation.



climbing the steps

- 1) **One step at a time.** Climbing a stepladder is not about taking one giant leap, it's about taking one small step at a time. You begin with the least difficult step and gradually work your way up the step ladder getting used to the anxiety you feel at each step. Your primary aim at each step is to complete that step and that step alone.
- 2) **Over and over again.** Do a step frequently and repeatedly, and try to do them in close succession to make sure you are comfortable with the situation before you move onto the next step. This might take 3 or 4 times.
- 3) **Use your skills.** Work through any unhelpful thoughts about the situation after you have completed each step, or repeated a step. Allow yourself to unwind with a relaxation session.
- 4) **Acknowledge the steps you've made.** When you are comfortable with a particular step, admit to your successes and acknowledge the steps that you've made so far.
- 5) **Stepbacks.** We all have our up and down days, and sometimes you might think you've taken a 'step-back' because the situational exposure exercise didn't go as well as you hoped. If you are having difficulties with a particular step then it might be useful to take a "step back" and work on the previous step again or design an "in between" step between the one you've completed and the difficult one. That's why doing a step over and over is so helpful. Remember – take it one step at a time.

use a diary to record your progress

A diary can help you to keep track of the steps you've completed, and how you can cope with any difficulties you've had. You could use the following columns

- **Situation:** Describe the step and the situation
- **Expected Distress:** Indicate the distress level you expected (0-100)
- **Actual Distress:** Indicate the level of distress you *actually* experienced
- **Outcome:** Indicate whether you completed the step and the skills you used that were helpful, OR, if you had difficulties, describe how you can prepare for the next time.

If you're having difficulties with situational exposure tasks, talk to a professional so that they can guide you through the process.