

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION



How to gain social confidence

Signs of social anxiety:

- uncomfortable in, or avoiding social situations;
- self-conscious, feeling watched;
- 'over-thinking' own behaviour, worrying before and after an event;
- fear of being judged or doing something embarrassing; ☹ anxiety interferes with work/social activities/relationships;
- physiological symptoms e.g. muscle tension, aches and pains, blushing, sweating, trembling, nausea, difficulty speaking.

What's my mind doing to me?

When we are self-critical, our mind responds as if to a threat, heightening anxiety with the urge to escape the immediate situation. If we can activate self-compassion instead, our mind experiences feelings of greater safety.

How do I learn to be more self-compassionate?

Mindfulness, based on ancient forms of meditation, has recently been recognised in the West as useful for our emotional and physical health. The following are two principles of Mindfulness:

1. Distress tolerance – allowing yourself to experience distress will help you manage the discomfort next time, so you gradually become de-sensitised. Avoiding challenges gives relief in the short-term but avoids learning the skills to cope, and confirms the fears, strengthening the power of the anxiety.
2. Non-judgement – tolerating your anxiety without self-criticism.

Mindfulness exercises to accustom your mind to kindness and compassion

These techniques require practice and repetition, like learning any new skill. The basic premise is to focus on the here-and-now, rather than worrying about past or future events.

Sensory focus: Use a slow, regular deep breathing technique: put your hand on your tummy and feel your diaphragm rise and fall. A sensory focus on the breath in through your nostrils is a good focal point. Your mind will inevitably wander, which is normal. When you notice this, gently escort your attention back to the sensation of breathing.

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Become aware of bodily sensations: Are you cold? warm? comfortable? Is the floor hard? What sounds can you hear? Become accepting of the environment, and of yourself.

If this feels difficult to begin with, you can use something concrete to focus on e.g. a tennis ball, or smooth stone, noticing the texture of it, to practise sensory awareness.

Mindfulness needs to be practised in specifically assigned calm moments, so try making the exercises part of your routine – before falling asleep? /in the shower? /walking onto campus, in to lectures?

Once you're used to the technique, try using it before anxiety-provoking situations.

To protect yourself from anticipated disappointment, shame or feelings of inadequacy, you may behave submissively, trying to avoid provoking anger or ridicule. The danger of this is often estimated as far higher than it really is.

When you keep from others information about yourself, your needs and wishes, feeling misunderstood and 'used' becomes almost inevitable. Surprising as it may sound, it's helpful for you and for others if you're more assertive and less self-sacrificing. Clearly, this is going to feel like a risk, and to be able to take risks you need a safe haven to retreat to, to achieve a sense of balance when you anticipate stress.

Safe Place meditation:

Visualise a comfortable, safe, quiet place e.g. indoors: a log-fire, favourite pictures on the wall, perhaps a pet lying beside the fire... Or outdoors: a quiet place such as a beach at sunrise, or a sunny morning in the woods. Try to gather as much sensory information as possible, the sound of waves, the smell of surf and ozone; the smell of pine trees, the branches underfoot....

This is your opportunity to create the ideal landscape for your 'retreat', which can be returned to whenever you feel stressed or socially under pressure. With practice you can feel soothed and calm without needing to retreat physically.

How can I start dealing differently with others?

Here are some strategies to test out, to gradually develop different ways of interacting with others, to confront your social anxiety and stop it determining your behaviour or relationships.

Try making a conscious effort to:

- look people in the eye while they're talking, to show interest;
- initiate social contact – start small, ask someone friendly for a coffee after a seminar;
- be assertive, so others know how to be friends with you, and respect you;
- invite people to share an activity that's already taking place;
- share your thoughts and feelings within a friendship.

Some of these will feel more possible than others. Everything can be rewarding, surprisingly quickly.

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Useful resources:

“The Compassionate-Mind Guide to Building Social Confidence”, Lynne Henderson, 2011, New Harbinger Publications Inc. (this leaflet is based mainly on this book)

“The Mindful Path through Shyness”, Steve Flowers, 2009, New Harbinger Publications Inc.
www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=40

www.shakeyourshyness.com/shypeople.htm

The University Counselling and Wellbeing Service tel: 0118 378 4216. Website:
www.reading.ac.uk/internal/counselling/cou-home.asp

Counselling and Wellbeing: Email: counselling@reading.ac.uk or visit us at the university website:
www.reading.ac.uk/counselling Telephone: 0118 378 4216

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