

Overcoming Social Anxiety

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to
Build Self-Confidence and
Lessen Self-Consciousness

Larry Cohen, LICSW
Cofounder & Chair, National Social Anxiety Center (NSAC)
Director, NSAC District of Columbia
nationalsocialanxietycenter.com
socialanxietyhelp.com

Core fear of social anxiety:
JUDGMENT

(evaluation, scrutiny,
criticism, rejection,
embarrassment)

Experiencing some social anxiety is
NORMAL and HELPFUL.

It keeps us humble and
sensitive to others.

Society couldn't function
without social anxiety.

Social Anxiety Disorder (social phobia):

when the fear of judgment inhibits your life

(eg. pursuing friendships and romantic relationships;
meeting people; socializing; recreation;
working and pursuing career;
performing in front of others; speaking in/to groups;
doing activities when others can see;
using bathrooms; being sexual;
asserting yourself; being in public)

ANXIETY:
our innate response to *perceived* danger

THE ANXIETY FORMULA:

anxiety intensity =

how *likely* and *severe* we think the danger is ÷

how well we think we can *cope* with it

THOUGHTS

What we **think** affects
how we feel and act



CBT

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

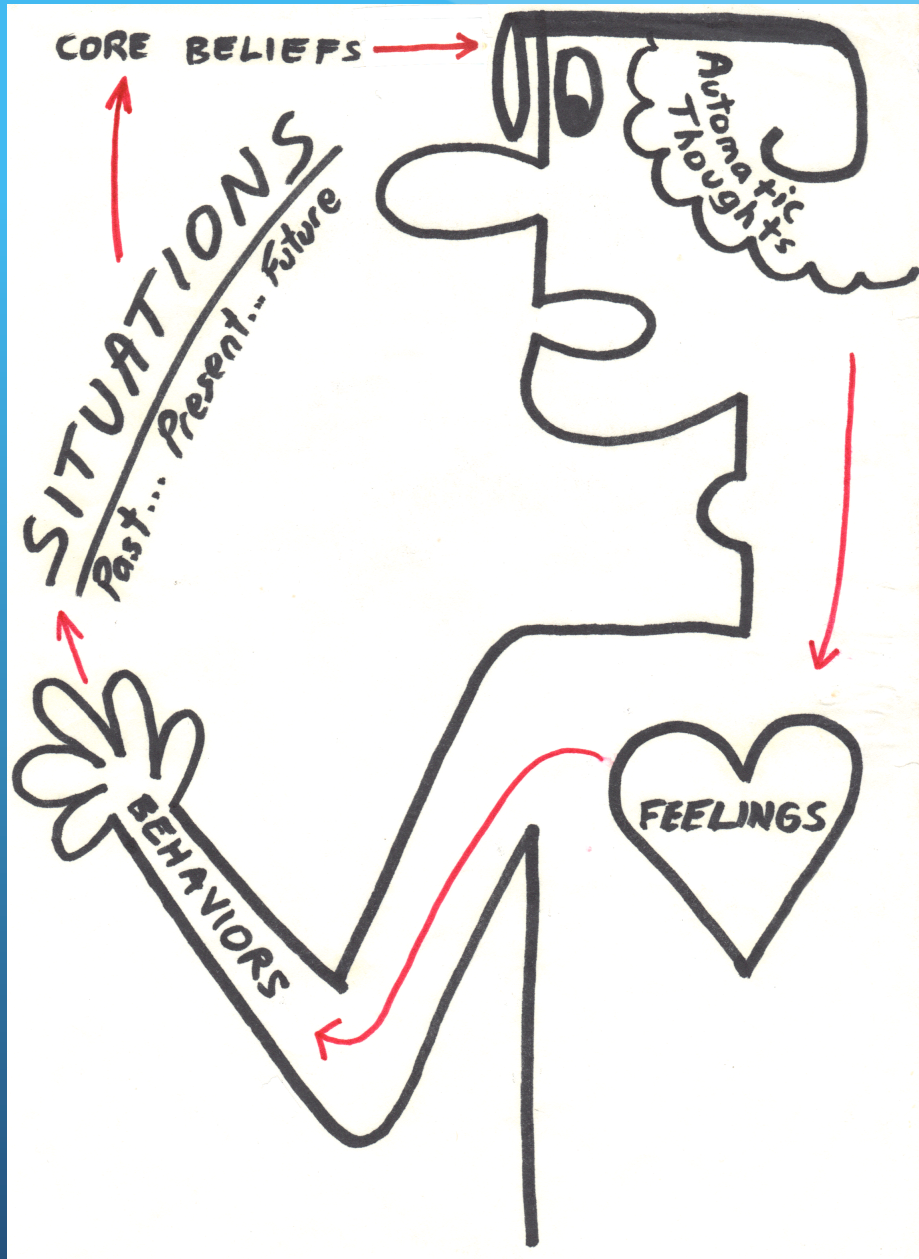
EMOTIONS

What we **feel** affects
how we think and act

BEHAVIORS

What we **do** affects
how we think and feel





SITUATION (TRIGGER)

attending a party (or other mingling activity)
where I know very few people

FEELINGS

- nervous: 90%
- tense: 75%
- embarrassed: 60%
- jittery: 50%

HOT THOUGHTS

- I won't know what to say. 80%
- I might say something stupid. 75%
- I'll appear tense and nervous. 80%
- People will think poorly of me, and won't enjoy talking to me. 100%
- I've got to find a way out of this. 75%

CORE BELIEFS

- I'm socially inept.
- I'm bad at meeting people and making small talk.
- If people see my anxiety or other flaws, I'll make a bad impression and they won't like me.

SAFETY-SEEKING BEHAVIORS

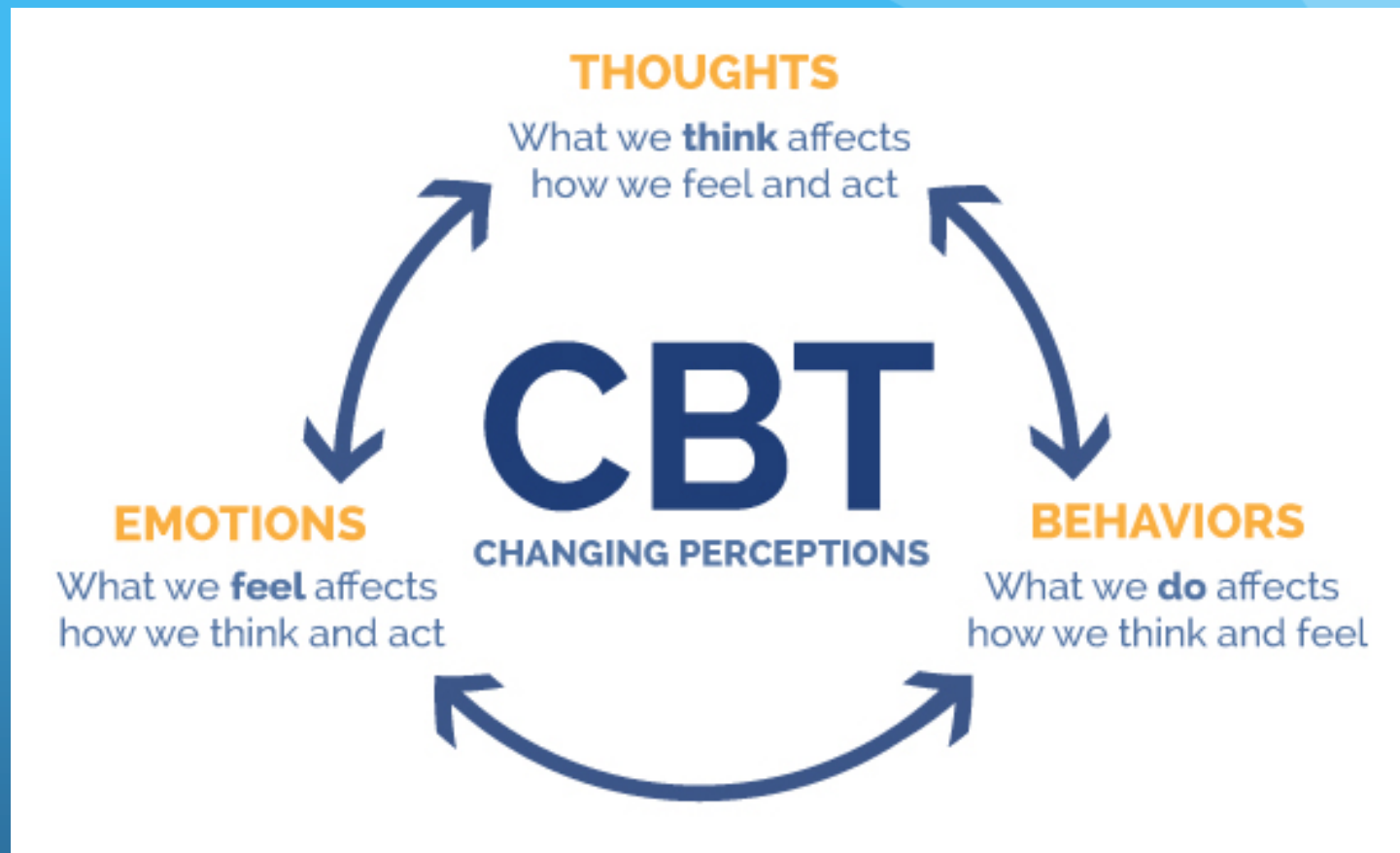
- don't initiate conversations
- stay off by sidelines
- avert eye contact
- withdraw, say very little
- self-conscious focus:
 - try to script what to say next
 - focus on my symptoms and try not to appear nervous

CONSEQUENCES OF MY SAFETY-SEEKING BEHAVIORS

- People don't approach me because they think I'm not interested, or that I'm unfriendly.
- Conversations are awkward, not flowing and short.
- I don't get to make new friends or get dates.
- My anxiety, self-consciousness and embarrassment increase during the activity.
- I feel depressed and ashamed afterwards.
- I ruminate about the bad parts off and on for weeks (or longer!), which hurts my self-confidence and mood.
- I don't get to learn that my fears are greatly exaggerated and that I can cope well with them. So I don't build self-confidence or lessen my social anxiety.



*How do I
break the
vicious cycle?*



Change our thoughts and behaviors in order to lessen anxiety and build self-confidence.

THE FOUR KEY STRATEGIES

- **Mindful focus and thought defusion:**
getting out of your head and into the moment
- **Cognitive restructuring:**
making your thoughts and beliefs more realistic, helpful and compassionate
- **Assertiveness:**
standing up for yourself when your fears come true
- **Experiments (exposures):**
minimizing your safety-seeking behaviors in anxiety-provoking situations in order to test and change your thoughts and beliefs, and to achieve your personal goals

MINDFULNESS

Paying attention to something in the present moment with interest rather than judgment.

THOUGHT DEFUSION

Being aware of our thoughts without engaging them, and with emotional detachment.

When socially anxious:

Paying attention with interest, not judgment, to the persons, conversation or activity in the moment, while treating your thoughts and feelings like background noise.

PRACTICING MINDFULNESS AND THOUGHT DEFUSION FOR SOCIAL ANXIETY

- Curiosity training
- Attention Training Technique
- Thought defusion strategies

[See my handouts: Mindfulness Practice for Social Anxiety; Mindfulness Practice Log; Brief Cognitive Strategies, p. 2. To purchase Attention Training Technique, download the recording and guidance notes here for £12: <http://mct-institute.com/attention-training-technique>]

COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

Various strategies to modify our thinking
(automatic thoughts and underlying beliefs)
so that it is more realistic, helpful & compassionate.

WAYS TO DO COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

- Worksheets
- Coping cards (or phone notes) and recordings
- Oral self-messaging of healthy thinking
- Apps
- Role playing or writing arguments between unhealthy and healthy thoughts or beliefs
- Imagery to practice applying healthy thinking
- Pride and gratitude log
- Evidence log to change beliefs
- Experiments to test thoughts and beliefs

[See my handouts: Cognitive Restructuring Worksheet, blank and sample; Cognitive Distortions and Challenging Questions; Cognitive Restructuring - How to Do It Effectively; Brief Cognitive Techniques, p. 1.; Cognitive-Behavioral Experiments for Overcoming Social Anxiety, #7-8; Pride and Gratitude Log; Inventory of Self-Defeating Core Beliefs; How to Write Healthy New Core Beliefs; client core belief samples; Cost-Benefit Analysis; Gathering Evidence; Imagery to Strengthen Healthy New Core Beliefs. Also see various CBT apps, such as: CBT Referee; iCBT; Cognitive Diary.]

COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING EXAMPLES

Hot thoughts:

I won't know what to say. I might say something stupid.

Constructive thoughts:

If I focus with interest on the person and the conversation, and treat my thoughts and feelings like background noise, I will likely have things to say that pop into my mind naturally. Occasional gaps in conversation are normal. Everyone says silly things on occasion. In the unlikely event I do say something silly, I'll just say "oops" and continue the conversation, and it will likely have no impact.

COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING EXAMPLES

Hot thoughts:

I'll appear tense and nervous. People will think poorly of me, and won't enjoy talking to me. I've got to find a way out of this!

Constructive thoughts:

My anxiety isn't nearly as visible to others as it feels to me. If I focus with interest on the person and the conversation and ignore my anxious feelings and thoughts, we'll likely have a decent conversation. If someone doesn't like me or the conversation, that's OK. I don't like everyone or all conversations, either! Regardless of how this goes, it will be good practice, and I'll be proud of myself for taking a step forward in my life rather than avoiding.

COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING EXAMPLES

Unhealthy core beliefs:

I'm socially inept. I'm bad at meeting people and making small talk

If people see my anxiety or other flaws, I'll make a bad impression and they won't like me.

Healthy core beliefs:

My social skills are decent when I'm calm and focusing mindfully. I can build skills as needed with practice.

Like all people, I have strengths and weaknesses. People don't expect perfection among the people they like, any more than I do! If someone doesn't like me, it's just a matter of subjective taste, not a judgment of my worth.

EXAMINING HOT THOUGHTS & BELIEFS

Find cognitive distortions in them, eg.:

- All-or-nothing / black-or-white / perfectionistic thinking
- Overgeneralizing
- Disqualifying the positive
- Mind reading
- Fortune telling
- Magnifying and minimizing
- Catastrophizing
- Emotional reasoning
- Shoulds, musts
- Labeling
- Personalizing

EXAMINING HOT THOUGHTS & BELIEFS

Use challenging questions to debate them, eg.:

- What's the evidence supporting and refuting my thoughts?
- How likely is it that this bad thing would come to pass? How could I cope with it if were to happen?
- What's the worst that could happen? What's the best that could happen? What's the most likely to happen?
- What would an impartial, independent observer think?
- What would I say to a good friend in this situation? What would a good friend say to me?
- What alternative possibilities are there?
- Is an "old button" of mine being pushed which is effecting how I see and respond to this present situation?

HEAD-HELD-HIGH ASSERTION

Identifying and practicing what you would say and do to stand up for yourself when your fears come true

- Worksheets
- Practice in role plays
- Practice in imagery
- Practice like an actor preparing for a part

[See my handouts: Head-Held High Assertion Worksheet, blank and sample; Cognitive-Behavioral Experiments for Overcoming Social Anxiety, #8 and #9.]

ASSERTION EXAMPLES

Fear come true:

I start blushing/sweating when mingling with new people at a social event, and someone points that out to me.

Head-held-high assertion:

It's true that I do blush and sweat easily when I'm uncomfortable. We all have quirks, and that happens to be mine. [Then continue the conversation.]

ASSERTION EXAMPLES

Fear come true:

I say something stupid or incorrect during a conversation, and the other person gives me a weird look. I assume he/she thinks poorly of me and has lost respect for me.

Head-held-high assertion:

I'm sorry, that was a silly thing for me to say. I sometimes say silly things, just like everyone does. Oh, well. Let's move on. [Then continue the conversation.]

ASSERTION EXAMPLES

Fear come true:

I go blank when speaking at a meeting because I am distracted by my anxiety. I can't continue speaking, and people start looking at me strangely. I presume they must be thinking poorly of me, and that they no longer respect me.

Head-held-high assertion:

Excuse me. I'm afraid I just lost track of what I was saying. Oh, well. I'm going to go back to my previous point and continue from there. I'd appreciate your patience and attention. [Then continue speaking at the meeting.]

MINDFULNESS



COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING



ASSERTION



EXPERIMENTS (EXPOSURES)

where it all comes together

Putting ourselves in anxiety-triggering situations while we minimize safety-seeking behaviors and focus mindfully on the conversation and activity, in order to:

- Test out and change our thoughts and beliefs to make them realistic, helpful and compassionate
- Reduce our anxiety and avoidance
- Achieve our personal goals
- Increase our assertiveness
- Increase our self-confidence

CHOOSING & PREPARING FOR EXPERIMENTS

- Pick experiments to work on your personal goals and to challenge your hot thoughts or unhealthy beliefs
- Prepare with cognitive restructuring worksheet or experiment worksheet, including setting behavioral goals to do during the experiments. (Mindful focus is always one goal.)
- If an experiment feels too hard, choose an easier one (or easier goals within your experiment), rather than avoid altogether. It's still a step forward, whereas avoidance is a step backwards because it reinforces your unhealthy thinking.

[See my handouts: Cognitive Restructuring Worksheet, blank and sample; Post-Experiment Worksheet, blank and sample; Experiment Worksheet, blank and sample; Cognitive-Behavioral Experiments for Overcoming Social Anxiety; Some Ideas for Social Anxiety Experiments; Paradoxical Experiments for Social Anxiety; Experiments to Test Unhealthy Core Beliefs. More paradoxical experiment ideas on rejectiontherapy.com/game and comfortzonecrusher.com.]

TYPES OF EXPERIMENTS & GOALS

Straightforward experiments:

Goals are chosen by identifying constructive alternatives to your safety-seeking behaviors.

Paradoxical experiments (aka “social mishap” experiments; “shame-attacking” experiments):

You make it your goal to seek out your fears so that you see:

- your fears don't come true very often
- when your fears do come true, you can handle them well.

Mixed experiments:

These experiments have both straightforward and paradoxical goals.

EXAMPLES OF STRAIGHTFORWARD GOALS

- Initiate conversations with strangers
- Focus mindfully during conversation
- Say what comes to mind naturally, rather than script it
- Speak longer and elaborate; tell stories
- Speak more personally with someone; come out to someone
- Join group conversations already in progress
- Speak up in meetings, classes
- Present to groups (eg. at work, class, church or Toastmasters)
- Disagree with someone; express a different opinion
- Share your contact information with a new person
- Invite someone out for the first time (socially or on date)
- Call and have a conversation with someone
- Mingle at a group social activity or networking event
- Interview for a job
- Ask for a favor or help; ask for a raise
- Compliment or criticize someone; tell someone you're attracted to him/her
- Kiss someone; initiate physical intimacy; be sexual with someone
- Work, write, talk on the phone, eat, shop, dance, exercise, drive or urinate in the presence of others
- Sing, act or otherwise perform before an audience

EXAMPLES OF PARADOXICAL GOALS

- Ask “stupid” questions on purpose
- Make obvious mistakes which others can see
- Do or say foolish things around others
- Make yourself appear anxious when interacting with others (eg. sweat, blush, jittery hands, quivering voice, etc.)
- Tell someone you’re nervous while speaking to them
- Ask people to give you critical feedback (eg. when you do something incorrectly on purpose)
- Ask people favors with the goal of being turned down
- Ask people out with the goal of getting rejected
- Dress inappropriately on purpose
- Act clumsy around others
- Do annoying things around others

AFTER THE EXPERIMENT:

*focus on what you can learn
rather than ruminate about your imperfections*

Worksheet:

Complete Post-Experiment Worksheet or remainder of Experiment Worksheet. This will help you determine what you can learn about your hot thoughts and unhealthy beliefs based on the evidence garnered from your experiments.

Be a good parent/friend to yourself:

1. Pat yourself on the back for the positive things you did.
2. Rather than criticize yourself and ruminate about anything negative you did, identify what you learned from the experiment, and what you would do similarly or differently the next time.

Back at the party:

applying the strategies to turn things around

