

BEFRIENDING THE SOCIAL SCARIES

workbook



A guide to help you understand and
overcome social anxiety

HEY THERE!

Do social situations increase your anxiety? Does this anxiety interfere with your ability to make new friends and enjoy your student experience? If so, you are not alone!

One of the tricky things about social anxiety is that many people experience it, but rarely come together to talk about it because ... well, anxiety!

A certain amount of social anxiety is completely natural, and most people report experiencing it at certain points in their lives. Others experience social anxiety that can feel constant, debilitating, and more than just shyness.

Wherever you're at on this spectrum of the social scaries, you might find this workbook helpful. Read on to learn more about social anxiety, tools for overcoming it and how to connect more with the world around you in a calm, centered and gratifying way. There's lots of info here, so feel free to complete it little by little, at your own pace.

Enjoy!



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FEATURES OF SOCIAL ANXIETY

While some people are naturally more outgoing and others more reserved, this does not mean that only one type of person experiences social anxiety. All of the below experiences are normal at times, but they can become distressing when they have an ongoing impact on your daily work, school or other activities.

This activity is meant as a self-reflection rather than a diagnosis. Remember, social anxiety impacts many of us at times, and it ebbs and flows throughout our lives! With this in mind, check off any of the below features that you are experiencing regularly to gauge where you're at with your social anxiety right now.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Fear that you may embarrass yourself	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nausea / stomach upset
<input type="checkbox"/>	Deep fear of interacting with strangers	<input type="checkbox"/>	Muscle tension
<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoiding events or social interactions	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nervousness with eating in public
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rethinking previous conversations over & over	<input type="checkbox"/>	Heart palpitations
<input type="checkbox"/>	Fear of people being mad at you	<input type="checkbox"/>	Being overly critical and judgmental of oneself
<input type="checkbox"/>	Fear of physical symptoms like shaking or blushing	<input type="checkbox"/>	Expecting the worst outcome from social situations
<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoiding social activities because of fear of embarrassment	<input type="checkbox"/>	Shortness of breath



GETTING TO KNOW YOUR SOCIAL ANXIETY

DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE

Everyone's social anxiety looks a little bit different. We all have different social situations that trigger us, and different ways of responding to social "threats", both internally and externally. The first step to managing our social anxiety is identifying how our personal social anxiety is built.

Read on to learn about the different components within the model of social anxiety. Then, in the blank spaces, fill in what makes up your own model of social anxiety.



SOCIAL TRIGGERS

Some people's social anxiety is triggered by large groups or public activities whereas others become more nervous during private interactions. Some common triggers are: one-on-one conversations, going to parties or social gatherings, putting your hand up to speak in class, public speaking engagements, initiating conversations, dating, being watched while eating or drinking, shopping, phone calls, using public restrooms.

What triggers your social anxiety?



GETTING TO KNOW YOUR SOCIAL ANXIETY

AVOIDANCE

Many of us experiencing social anxiety will avoid social situations to prevent our fears from happening. The problem is, if we avoid social situations altogether, we never get to challenge our fears and show ourselves that they may not come true. Avoiding social situations also prevents us from connecting with others and can cause practical issues in our lives.

Take a moment to list some situations you avoid because of your anxiety.

SAFETY BEHAVIOURS

Not all situations are avoidable. In these cases, many of us will use certain behaviours to help us feel better. These 'safety behaviours' don't take us out of the situations, but still prevent us from testing out our fears about social situations. Some examples are drinking or using drugs, staying quiet when spending time with people, coming up with reasons to leave events early, over-preparation and perfectionism. These behaviours can help in the short-term, but may not be as helpful in the long-term.

What are some of your safety behaviours?



GETTING TO KNOW YOUR SOCIAL ANXIETY

HOW YOU THINK YOU APPEAR TO OTHERS

Most people who struggle with social anxiety have a certain image in their mind of how they come across to others - that people are judging them and can tell they are feeling socially anxious. These fears are understandable, but much of the time, we all come off to others far better than we think we do!

What are some of the ways you think you appear to others?

WHERE YOU PLACE YOUR ATTENTION

A significant, but often missed part of social anxiety is where we focus our attention. When we feel anxious, some of us focus a lot on our own internal reactions - how we feel and our scary thoughts about the situation we are in. Others focus a lot on the “threats” around us like people who may be judging us, or a large intimidating group of people. The problem is that this kind of attention doesn’t allow us to be present and mindful of the activities we are engaging in.

Where do you place your attention when you are in social situations?

A COMPASSIONATE APPROACH



Many of us feel frustrated and resentful toward our social anxiety, which makes sense! It is often the thing that prevents us from engaging fully in life and can cause a lot of uncomfortable feelings. However, just like it helps to show empathy toward a friend who is struggling, it can help to get to know our anxious parts with curiosity and compassion. Often our social anxiety is working hard to try to protect us! It just may not feel that way sometimes.

Reflect on the questions below to start getting to know and befriend your social anxiety:

1. Where do you feel your social anxiety in your body?
2. What is your social anxiety trying to do for you?
3. How old is your social anxiety? How long has it been around? What was happening at the time it first showed up in your life?
4. What is your social anxiety afraid would happen if it did not do its job?

Finish off by letting it know you appreciate what it is trying to do for you.





REGULATING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Let's take a quick pause. Many symptoms of anxiety are a response to a dysregulated nervous system influenced by high stress, trauma, conflict, poor sleep and a number of other factors. When our nervous system is on edge, in "fight or flight" and constantly on the lookout for danger cues, it is very difficult to rest and refocus. So, before we get started on learning some new strategies, take a moment to check in on how you are feeling. If you are feeling, anxious, agitated or on edge, try these simple techniques to bring yourself back into balance:



TAKE SOME DEEP BREATHS

Taking a few deep breaths is a quick way to regulate your nervous system and calm your mind. Deep breathing sends signals to your brain that no emergency is happening, and it is ok to relax.

Box breathing technique: inhale to a count of 4, hold breath for a count of 4, exhale to a count of 4, hold lungs empty for a count of 4, repeat.



GET OUTSIDE

Research shows that taking a 10-20 minute walk outdoors lowers our stress hormone cortisol. Lower levels of stress hormones allow our bodies to enter the rest state, which helps us to focus and stay grounded.

Try going for a quick walk outside. As you do, connect with your senses by focusing on the sights, smells and sounds around you (even if they are city sounds).



MOVE YOUR BODY

Even moderate exercise and movement has been found to decrease stress hormones and increase neurotransmitters like serotonin, which help with feelings of wellbeing and information processing.

Whether you enjoy yoga, weightlifting, or just a quick stretch, try moving your body to centre your mind.

COMPONENTS OF SOCIAL ANXIETY

Our thoughts, feelings and behaviours all play a big role in our social anxiety. More specifically, our thoughts can influence the way we feel in social situations, which then influence the ways we behave. Let's take a look at how this can play out for us in our everyday lives.

THOUGHTS

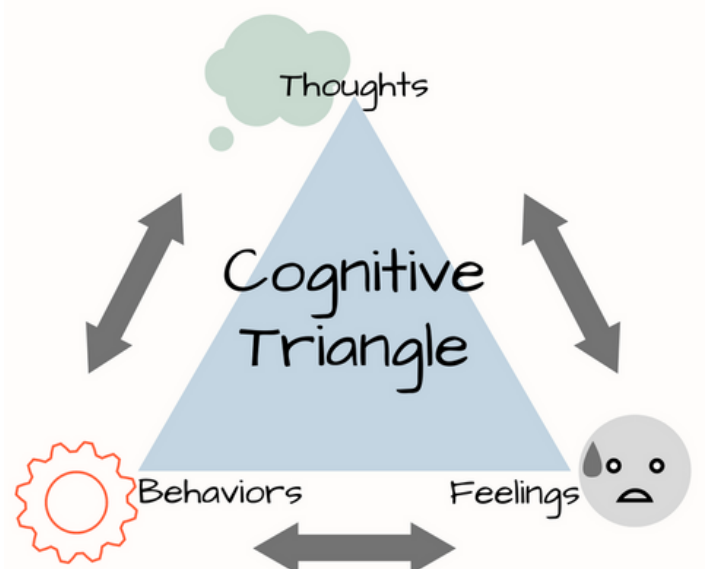
We all can have an infinite number of thoughts about certain situations, and everyone may think differently about the same situation. For example, you are invited to a party where you will not know many people attending. You might think "Oh no! I will be alone and feel awkward all night. This is going to be terrible." Alternatively, you might think "I have been wanting to meet some new people and this could be a great opportunity."

BEHAVIOURS

These thoughts and feelings then impact our behaviour. Maybe they have enough influence to decide whether you go to the party or stay home. Even if you do decide to go to the party, your thoughts about feeling awkward may prevent you from engaging in conversation with anyone. This may further reinforce your thoughts that going out is a bad idea.

FEELINGS

Each of the thoughts we just explored comes with a feeling. If you tell yourself you are going to be alone and have a terrible time, you are likely to feel sad, scared and ashamed. On the other hand, if you think of the party as a positive opportunity, you may feel hopeful, happy, excited and brave. The things we tell ourselves very quickly have an impact on our mood.





Gently Challenging Your Thoughts

Although our anxious thoughts can be powerful, the reality is that our thoughts are not 100% true 100% of the time. While we want to take the time to recognize and validate how we are feeling, gently challenging the accuracy of our anxious thoughts can help shift our associated emotions and create a more balanced outlook. Try the exercise below, following the example provided, to start gently challenging your anxious thoughts about an upcoming social situation. When you are done the exercise, reflect on whether your feelings have shifted, even slightly, about the situation and if this may influence your decision making. Repeat this activity with various anxious thoughts.

Trigger situation: What is happening?	Anxious thoughts: What thoughts are going through my mind?	Emotion: What am I feeling? Where do I feel it in my body?	Contrary evidence: What evidence does not support these thoughts?	Alternative / helpful images (visualize this outcome in your mind)
<p>I'm going to attend a HOEM event where I don't know many people</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People will ignore me on purpose • If I talk, people won't like me • Everyone will stare when I walk in 	<p>I am feeling scared, inadequate, full of dread, and a heavy pit in my stomach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I make eye contact, people do often make small talk with me • I don't actually have anyone I know for a fact hasn't liked me • People are usually too busy doing their own thing to stare 	<p>A couple people look at me when I enter the room because the door makes a noise. Then they go back to talking. I join them and introduce myself. Everyone smiles and asks what program I'm in / school I go to. I really click with a couple new people and others just focus on their own conversation.</p>



WHAT IS AVOIDANCE?

As we mentioned briefly at the beginning of this workbook, avoidance behaviours are things we do to try to avoid uncomfortable feelings and reduce our anxiety. Sometimes avoidance behaviours even include completely avoiding the situation altogether. Some typical things we may avoid if we experience social anxiety include: groups of people, going to appointments, making phone calls, attending class, speaking in class, etc. This usually results in an immediate, short-term relief of anxiety.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH AVOIDANCE?

01

We never get to test out anxious thoughts

When we avoid social situations, we never get to test out whether our anxious thoughts are accurate. Often, our anxious thoughts never come true. Even more, even if an anxious thought does come true, we often cope better than we think we will. Avoiding prevents us from experiencing this.

02

We do not get positive social experiences

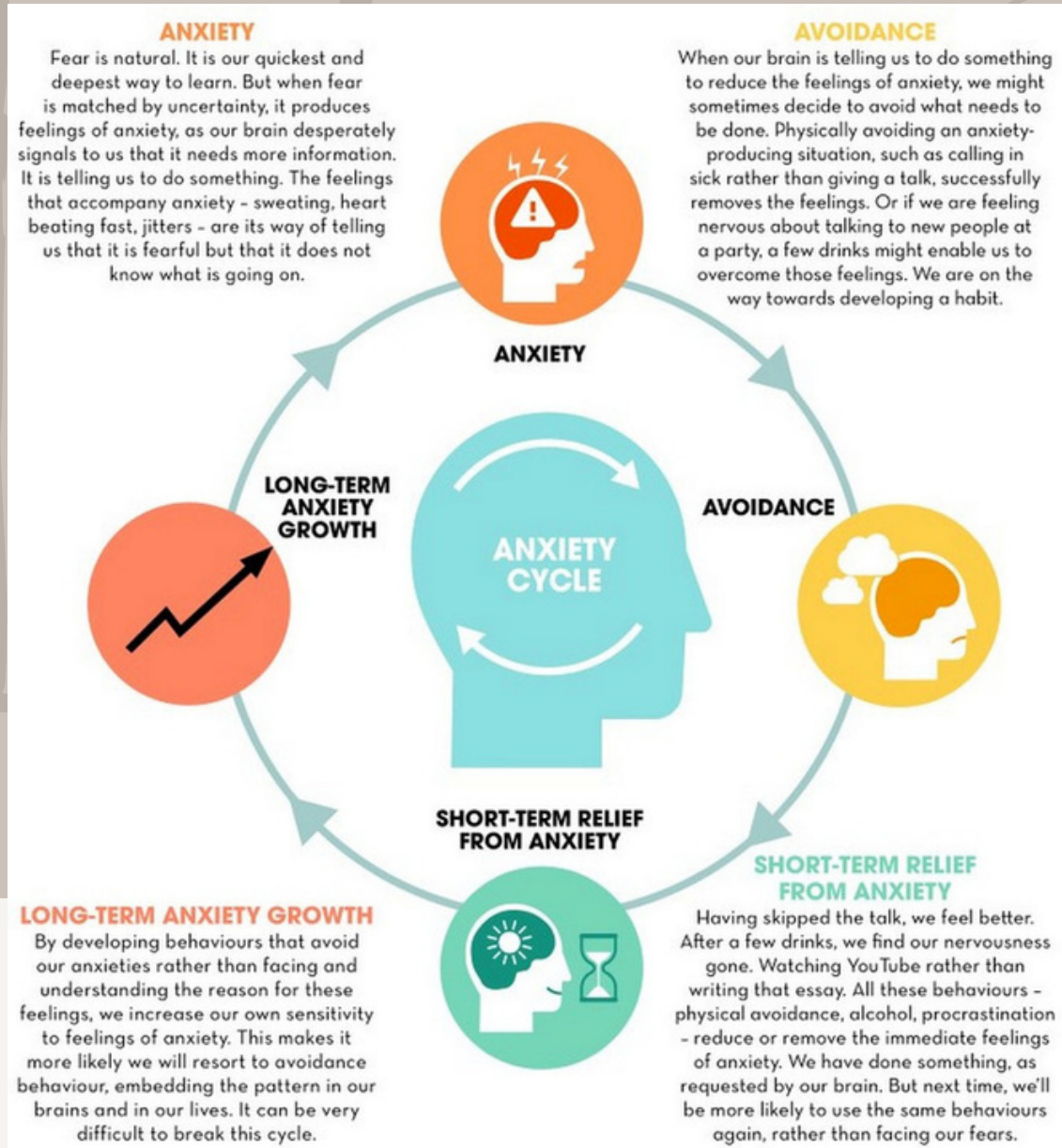
Even better, not only do anxious thoughts not always come true, but sometimes we even have positive experiences! Avoidance prevents us from using these positive experiences as future motivation.

03

Avoidance can spread

While avoidance may start in one part of our lives, as we start avoiding situations, we lose more and more confidence. This loss of confidence then shows up in other areas of our lives and may cause us to avoid even more social situations with friends, family and loved ones.

CYCLE OF AVOIDANCE



Source: <https://www.reddit.com/media?url=https%3A%2F%2Fi.redd.it%2Fjkqh9ds4ekia1.jpg>

To address avoidance, it's crucial we begin interrupting the cycle ...

Behavioural Experiments

Behavioural experiments provide a structured way to start breaking out of this avoidance cycle. Rather than jumping all the way into our fears, we can take a step by step approach that simultaneously helps us feel more comfortable, and gently challenges the anxious predictions we may be holding. Use the chart and examples below to plan an experiment to test out one of your anxious social fears. It is helpful to start with an experiment within that fear where the anxiety level is rated lower, then work your way up.

Social Fear	Experiment	Anxiety Level	Evidence to Observe	Result (fill in after experiment)
Talking to new people	Eat at a restaurant and have a short interaction with the server	5/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Am I able to think of what to say to the server?• Will the server respond back to me kindly?• Will people at the tables around me be paying attention?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I was able to think of something engaging to say in the moment• Everyone around me just kept eating their food• I initially felt anxious, but I coped well with the feeling
Talking to new people	Attend the first half hour of a HOEM event	8/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Will groups of people laugh at me?• Will I have enough to say for a full half hour?• Will it be awkward if I am silent for certain moments?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People were laughing, but it was at jokes other people were telling• I didn't speak for the entire half hour, but that flowed with conversation normally. No one noticed when I was silent

Getting Out of Our Heads

Have you heard of mindfulness? Many people have heard the word, but aren't sure how to do it. Mindfulness is a necessary practice for social anxiety because it helps to get you away from that mental noise and into the present moment. This takes practice! And the goal isn't to get it perfect. Instead, the goal is to continuously notice where our attention goes without judgment and gently refocus it.

Here are some practical steps for practicing mindfulness to combat our social anxiety:

1. Name It to Tame It: By simply naming how you feel, it helps create space between you and the feeling. Try describing how you feel without needing to rationalize or justify it. "I am feeling anxious, agitated and nervous right now. I feel a tightness in my chest."
2. Connect with your body: Something as simple as feeling your feet on the ground or noticing the points where your body connects to your seat can help ground you in the present moment.
3. Engage in what you are doing: Connect to your senses even when engaging in tasks that feel routine or mundane. If you are washing dishes, notice how the water feels on your hands. Notice how the soap smells. How do the bubbles look in the sink? Notice where the light refracts off of them. Not only will this help you have an appreciation for the everyday things, but it will direct your attention elsewhere outside of your anxious thoughts.

Try this three step activity at least once a day. It doesn't need to take long. Just a few minutes can make a big difference. An important note: It won't be helpful to use your safety behaviours for this exercise. Instead, in social situations you would want to engage fully in the activity at hand, like having a conversation or doing a group activity.





MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

Like we've mentioned throughout this workbook, it will take practice to get used to using these new skills. It's also perfectly normal to experience some hiccups along the way. For example, you might feel like you are doing really well with your social anxiety, then a big circumstance in your life changes and your social anxiety increases. This is normal, and instead what we can do is come up with a plan to help get us back on track if this does happen. There are a few components to consider when creating a plan to deal with potential setbacks. Use the spaces below to develop your plan.

Remember, we don't want to avoid situations that trigger our social anxiety. Instead, we want to approach them feeling prepared to use our new tools, knowledge and resources.

TRIGGERS

When are setbacks for my social anxiety likely to occur? What types of situations and life circumstances tend to trigger my social anxiety most?

WARNING SIGNS

How will I know when my social anxiety is getting worse? What will the emotional, physical and behavioural signs be?



MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

ACTION PLAN

Once we notice the triggers and warning signs of a potential setback, the next step is to come up with some actions we can take to help get us back on track. This includes both our personal self-care strategies and the tools we've practiced throughout the workbook!

SELF-CARE

Self-care activities help us maintain our mental health in a routine way that feels good and comforting. Examples of activities include talking to friends, taking a soothing bath, doing something creative, exercising, or anything else that helps calm you. What are a few self-care activities you can practice regularly?

NEW SKILLS

It is natural that you may have connected better with some activities in this workbook versus others. Which new skills from this workbook will you realistically turn to if you are experiencing a social anxiety setback?

We hope you enjoyed this workbook and that it helped you start understanding and working through your social anxiety with a little more ease.

To suggest a workbook or workshop topic you'd like to see next, get in touch with HOEM's Mental Health Consultant, Delaney.

Take care, HOEMies! <3



Thank You!

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