

Be Yourself Overcoming Social Anxiety



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Living with Social Anxiety

Twenty-year-old Jolanta has lived with social anxiety for years. In school, she was unwilling to speak up in class and was harshly critical of her performance in every social situation. “I was always afraid of doing the wrong thing in a social situation, and I constantly preoccupied myself with questions like, ‘Why am I like this? Why can’t I just be like those who don’t mind speaking up?’ I’d immediately assume there’s something wrong with me,”⁴⁵ she says. Stress and anxiety over potential social interactions hung over her daily.

Over the years, Jolanta has learned how important it is to take care of her mental health and be kind to herself. She tries not to compare herself to others and instead focuses on her interests and goals. As a result, Jolanta has become more confident and resilient. “Something that has definitely helped me build my self-esteem is discovering myself. My interests and values help build a solid foundation for my identity so that when an embarrassing situation arises (and believe me, it has been many, many times), I take it light-heartedly because I’ve grown confident in who I am,”⁴⁶ she explains.

For Jolanta, small steps have made a big difference. Making small changes in her life and slowly building her confidence have had a significant effect on her ability to manage her social anxiety. “It’s crucial for you to understand that you don’t have to take everything on at once. Instead, choose

small steps that feel comfortable to you while still putting yourself out there,”⁴⁷ she suggests.

Challenge Negative Thoughts

Many people find that one of the most important steps toward successfully living with social anxiety is being able to challenge and interrupt negative thoughts. People with social anxiety often dwell on what could possibly go wrong in social situations. They worry about saying something rude, tripping, spilling a drink on themselves, laughing at the wrong time, getting sick in front of others, or any number of things that could embarrass or humiliate them. Although these things do happen from time to time, people who can manage their anxiety have learned to keep them in perspective. They do not let negative thinking and worrying about “what ifs” overwhelm them.

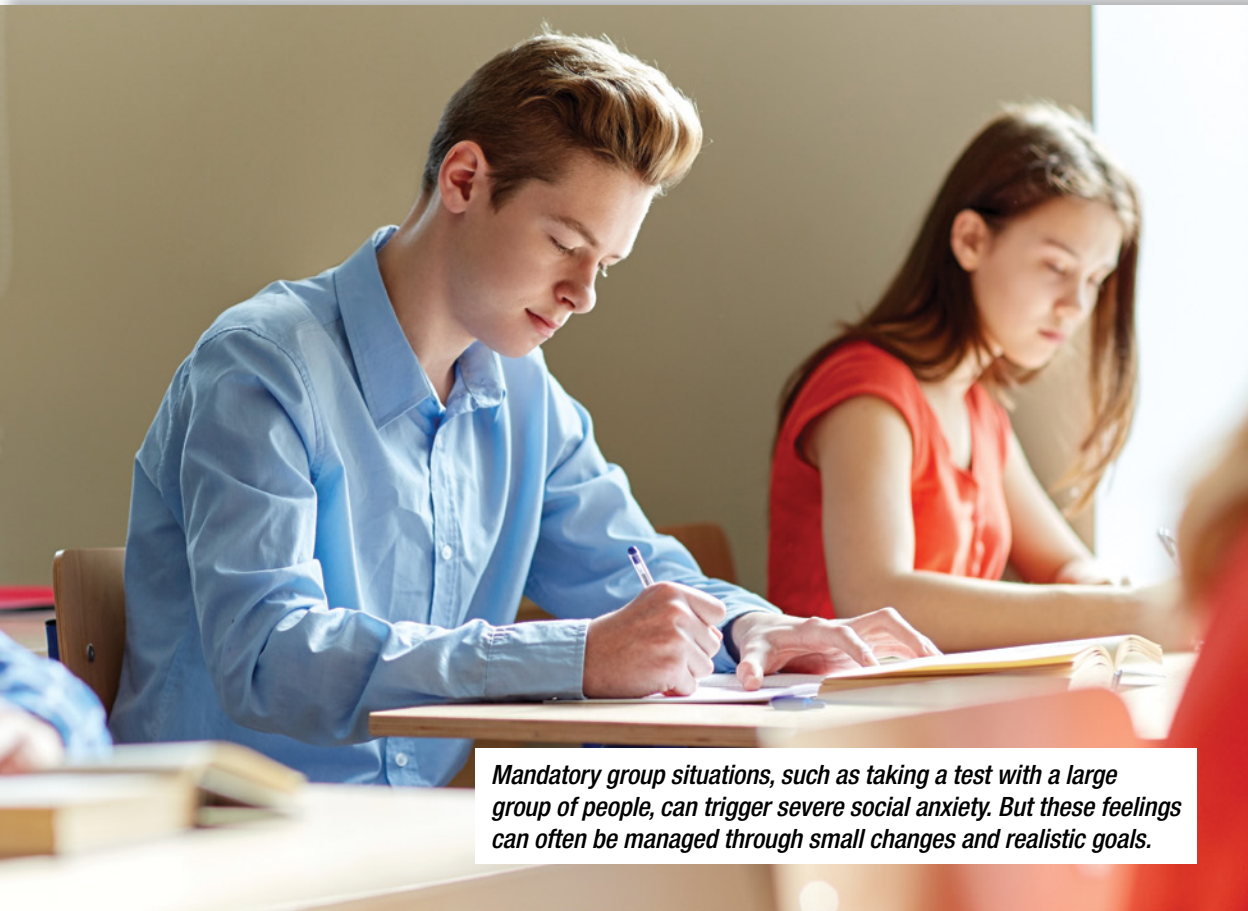
When negative thoughts start creeping in, people can challenge and replace them with more positive thinking. They can start by asking themselves simple questions about the worrisome situation and giving honest answers. If they are going to meet new people for the first time, they might worry that they will say something to embarrass themselves or turn others away. They might see themselves making one mistake after another and regretting that they chose to engage with others. To prevent these negative thoughts from snowballing, people can ask themselves questions such as “What makes me think I will say something embarrassing?,” “How many times have I been to a party and not done something embarrassing?,” “What is the worst that could happen?,” and “What would you tell a friend worrying about the same thing?” The answers can be calming and help those with social anxiety realize that the risk is not so great and the reward can be new, comfortable relationships.

Small Changes and Realistic Goals

Trying to manage social anxiety can feel overwhelming. It is natural to avoid situations that cause stress and anxiety. However, consistently avoiding these situations can make social anxiety

worse over time. The more people expose themselves to anxiety-inducing social situations, the more comfortable they will feel with social interactions in the future.

For Emily, a young adult with social anxiety, taking a test in a large classroom with many other students triggered severe anxiety. She worried that she would do or say something embarrassing and would be trapped in the room with everyone staring at her. She increasingly avoided these situations and started taking tests alone in a separate classroom. However, when she started college, Emily was determined to overcome her social anxiety. She practiced mindfulness exercises and breathing techniques to calm her fears until she felt ready to tackle the classroom. She knew she could do it when she successfully sat in a lecture with hundreds of students. “Since then, it got gradually easier to work through my social anxiety. I still have the intrusive thoughts . . . but once I showed myself that I *could* fight my fears, it got



Mandatory group situations, such as taking a test with a large group of people, can trigger severe social anxiety. But these feelings can often be managed through small changes and realistic goals.

easier to let go of them and even easier to ask for more help,”⁴⁸ she says.

It is perfectly acceptable to start with small changes and set realistic goals for oneself. For example, a small change could be making eye contact with a stranger or giving someone a compliment. With effort, small changes can add up to large changes and long-term goals.

“It got gradually easier to work through my social anxiety. I still have the intrusive thoughts . . . but once I showed myself that I could fight my fears, it got easier to let go of them and even easier to ask for more help.”⁴⁸

—Emily, a young adult with social anxiety

After years of suffering with social anxiety, Julie hit rock bottom as a young adult in her thirties. Her anxiety had gotten so bad that she was afraid of almost everything. Going for a bike ride, taking a walk down the street, attending her son’s baseball game,

and any activity in which people could see her triggered anxiety and fear. At this point, Julie knew she needed to make changes in her life. She researched social anxiety disorder and started CBT. She relates how she slowly began exercises to challenge her negative thoughts and fears:

I started out by doing small things. Driving and going places by myself (other than work) had been almost impossible. I started driving to the mall by myself. Step by little step, I was able to go into a department store and return an item without a receipt . . . even though I knew I would probably have to be assertive.

I would eat in the mall’s food court by myself. I was afraid to do this, but I would tell myself rational things like “if people want to watch me eat, they have a problem” or “no one is looking at me, and it’s OK.”⁴⁹

These affirmations helped Julie gain coping skills and change her negative mindset.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One of anxiety's physical symptoms is tight muscles. Many people find that a practice called progressive muscle relaxation helps to ease muscle tightness and calms anxious thoughts. To start, a person sits in a comfortable position and focuses on breathing. The person tenses a muscle group, such as the right arm and hand, and holds it for several seconds. Then, the individual relaxes the muscles and lets go of any tension. Slowly, the person repeats this cycle for each muscle group throughout the body. For twenty-year-old Eve, progressive muscle relaxation is an easy way to calm anxious thoughts, especially when she feels overwhelmed. "Muscle tension is one way your body responds to feelings of anxiety. This technique is a way to own that tension and let it dissolve. It's something to focus on and distract yourself with," she explains. With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation can help a person become more attuned to his or her body tension and learn how to release it.

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Managing Daily Challenges

If people with anxiety know they will be attending a job interview or a work party, planning can help reduce some of the anxiety that might arise. They can think about the event and who will be attending. In advance, these individuals can come up with ideas on what to say or do. They may even try role-playing with a trusted friend or family member to practice conversations they might have. Planning and practicing before a social event are great ways to help a person feel more prepared.

For Rakshitha Arni Ravishankar, an adult with social anxiety, work-related parties are particularly stressful events. She relates how she manages her social anxiety at these events by planning before she goes:

I personally dread them because I'm always unsure of how to initiate conversations beyond my work life—and be interesting at that. This lack of structure or predictability can feel

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