

Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

Module 2

Overcoming Negative Thinking

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Introduction | 2 |
| The Thought-Feeling Connection | 2 |
| Challenging Your Negative Thoughts | 3 |
| Thought Challenging Record Example | 5 |
| Thought Challenging Record | 6 |
| Module Summary | 7 |
| About the Modules | 8 |

This information provided in this document is for information purposes only. Please refer to the full disclaimer and copyright statements available at www.cci.health.wa.gov.au regarding the information on this website before making use of such information.

Introduction

In Module 1, we talked about six factors that keep social anxiety going by increasing our sense of threat in social situations. This module will focus on what you can do about the first of these factors: the negative thoughts you may be having about social situations. In this module you will learn how to identify and challenge your negative thoughts. This can help you to recognise when you are overestimating the level of threat in a social situation, and to think about the situation in a more realistic way.

The Thought-Feeling Connection

Our thoughts play a very important role in determining how we feel emotionally. There is a range of different thoughts we could have about any given situation. This means that in a given situation there is a range of feelings we could have, depending on how we think about the situation.

Here is an example. Imagine that it is your birthday and your parents have invited you over to their house for dinner. As you arrive, you notice that it is all dark and there are no lights on. You knock on the door and ring the doorbell but no one comes to answer the door. You turn the doorknob and find that the door is unlocked. You step in and find that the house is in total darkness. Suddenly, you hear a chorus of voices shouting, "Surprise!" The lights come on and you see a group of your friends and relatives singing "Happy Birthday" to you. Below are two different ways of thinking about this situation, and some different emotions that one might feel as a result of thinking in these different ways.



| Example event: <i>Surprise birthday party</i> | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Thoughts | Emotions |
| <u>Thought 1</u> <i>Oh NO! I can't believe my parents would do this to me! Everyone's staring at me, and I'm not even dressed up. I just want to get out of here.</i> | <i>Anxious, embarrassed</i> |
| <u>Thought 2</u> <i>Wow! What a really nice surprise! People must think I'm pretty important to throw me this party!</i> | <i>Happy</i> |

Another important thing to note about our thoughts is that they are not always true. Sometimes our thoughts about a situation will be accurate, sometimes they will be partially accurate, and sometimes they will not be true at all. Therefore, there will be times when our feelings are based on an inaccurate view of a situation. This happens for everyone some of the time. It is also a big part of why people with social anxiety feel anxious in social situations.

People with social anxiety have thoughts about social situations that overestimate social threat in two ways:

- Overestimating probability, i.e., overestimating the likelihood of your social fears coming true.
- Overestimating cost, i.e., overestimating how bad it would be if your social fears did come true.

Overestimating probability and cost increases our social anxiety: the higher the threat we perceive, the more anxious we will feel.

Next we will discuss how to recognise when you are overestimating the threat in a social situation, and to view the situation in a more accurate and realistic way. This can help to reduce your anxiety about the situation.

Challenging Your Negative Thoughts

In order to address the thoughts that are making you anxious, the first step is to identify what those thoughts are. Most people have thoughts in their minds before, during, and after anxiety-provoking social situations. You may be very aware of such thoughts or you may not. Because these thoughts are often anxiety-provoking, you may even try to avoid thinking about them. However, once we are aware of them we can challenge them and overcome our fears, so it is important that we start paying attention to them so we can then do something about them. Take the metaphor of boxing with a blindfold on – it is pretty hard to do when you can't see your opponent. If you take off the blindfold your opponent may look scary, but you are in a much better position to plan a strategy for how to overcome them.

Practice using the Thought Challenging Record to challenge your anxious thoughts about social situations. This involves eight steps:

1. Trigger situation: What is the social situation you are feeling anxious about? Briefly describe what is happening and who is there.

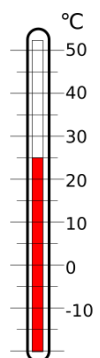
2. Negative thoughts: Describe the negative thoughts going through your mind. This will often be in the form of negative predictions about what you fear happening in the situation (e.g., predictions about how you will come across to others or what others will think about you). Here it can be very helpful to use mental imagery, by actually closing your eyes and imagining what you see happening in the social situation you are anxious about. A major benefit of doing this is that it can help you to be much more specific about your fears.

Many of the negative thoughts people have when they are socially anxious refer to something bad happening in general or to some general negative label. For example, we might think “I will look like an idiot” or “They will think I am an idiot”. The problem is that when we make such a general statement, it is unclear exactly what we mean. Specifically, what does looking like an “idiot” actually mean? Our fears remain quite vague, which makes it difficult to find ways to challenge them and test them out. On the other hand, if I were to bring to mind a mental image of what I feared happening, it might include details like “I see myself shaking, stuttering, turning bright red, having nothing to say” (which is more specific than “looking like an idiot”) or “I see others laughing at me, criticising me, turning away, and avoiding speaking to me” (which is more specific than “They will think I am an idiot”). The more specific and detailed you can be when describing your negative thoughts, the better position you will be in to challenge them effectively.

3. Anxiety Level: Rate the intensity of your anxiety from 0 (no anxiety) to 10 (extreme anxiety).

4. Contrary Evidence: Look for evidence that suggests your original thought may not be 100% true, and consider alternative ways of viewing the situation.

It is easy to fall into the trap of only recognising or remembering experiences that confirm our fears, while ignoring contrary experiences. The best way to counteract this bias or ‘filter’ is to think about evidence that does not support your negative thoughts. The types of questions you can ask yourself are:



- *Have I had any experiences that show that this thought is not completely true all of the time?*
- *Are there any small things that contradict my thoughts that I might be ignoring?*
- *Have I been in this type of situation before? What happened? Is there anything different between this situation and previous ones? What have I learned from prior experiences that could help me now?*
- *Is my thought based on facts, or am I 'mind reading'? What evidence do I really have?*
- *Am I jumping to any conclusions that are not completely justified by the evidence?*
- *If someone who loves me knew I was having this thought, what would they say to me? What evidence would they point out that would suggest that my thoughts were not 100% true?*
- *What is the worst thing that could happen and could I cope with this? Would life go on? What could I do that would help?*
- *Are there other ways of looking at this situation?*
- *What are all the possible explanations in this situation? Are there any alternatives to mine?*
- *What's the best that could happen?*
- *What's the worst that could happen? What's so bad about that?*
- *Even if it is true, is it helpful to think this way? What would be a more helpful way to think?*
- *If the roles were reversed, how might I judge the situation/other person?*



5. Realistic Probability and Consequences: Given the contrary evidence and alternative perspectives, what is most likely? What are the most likely consequences?

6. Helpful Image: Describe as a picture the most likely outcome in the situation. If the situation plays out in the way that is most likely, what will that look like?

7. Visualise the Helpful Image: Now spend a few moments visualising this *helpful* (most likely) image of the situation.

8. Re-rate Anxiety Level: Re-rate the strength of your anxiety after you have visualised the helpful image.

On the next two pages you will find an example of a completed Thought Challenging Record, followed by a blank one for you to use. Challenging our negative thinking is something we can get better at with practice. Also, there will probably be a range of negative thoughts in different social situations that contribute to your social anxiety, and which could all potentially benefit from some thought challenging. For these reasons, lots of practice and repetition is important, particularly while you are still mastering the skill. As a guide, completing three to four Thought Challenging Records per week is recommended. If you have any upcoming social situations that you are feeling anxious about, this would be a good place to start. There may be other types of social situations that would make you anxious, but which you do not currently engage in due to your social anxiety. If this is the case, these types of situations would also be good examples to work on with a Thought Challenging Record. Challenging your negative predictions about could help you to become more willing to enter these situations in the future as you progress through these modules.

Thought Challenging Record – Example

| 1. Trigger Situation | 2. Negative Thoughts | 3. Anxiety Level | 4. Contrary Evidence | 5. Realistic Probability and Consequences | 6. Helpful Image | 7. Visualise the helpful image as if it were actually occurring now | 8. Re-rate Anxiety |
|---|--|--|--|--|---|---|---|
| <p>What is happening? Where am I?</p> <p>I'm about to go into the lunch room at work.</p> | <p>What thoughts are going through my mind?</p> <p>Everyone will stare at me as I walk in.</p> <p>They will all interact with each other, but I won't say anything.</p> <p>They will deliberately ignore me.</p> | <p>How anxious do I feel (0-10)?</p> <p>8/10</p> | <p>What evidence do I have that does not support these thoughts? Alternative ways to view the situation?</p> <p>People don't always look up whenever I enter a room.</p> <p>I am often quiet and don't say anything unless someone asks me a question, but not always.</p> <p>Sometimes people do make small talk with me.</p> <p>It would be pretty rude to just stare at someone who had just walked in.</p> <p>If they don't include me it might be because they are caught up in the conversation they are already having.</p> | <p>How likely is it that my negative predictions will actually occur? If something bad happened, then so what? Would it really be that bad? Would I cope?</p> <p>It is likely (50%) that some people will look at me, but not everyone. It is unlikely they will actually stare (i.e., look longer than 3 seconds)</p> <p>It is very likely (90%) that I will be quiet and not say anything unless I'm spoken to.</p> <p>It is possible (30%) that someone will try to speak with me.</p> <p>If some people do look at me I will feel uncomfortable, but then they will probably just go back to what they are doing.</p> <p>If no one speaks to me then I will just read my magazine.</p> <p>My colleagues are unlikely to ignore me in a rude or critical way.</p> | <p>Describe as a picture the most realistic outcome and/or a more helpful image</p> <p>A couple of people glance as I walk in the room and then go back to their conversation.</p> <p>I sit at the table and a couple of people say hi. I listen to the conversation.</p> <p>One person asks me a question. I focus on eating my lunch and making the effort to talk, and ask them a question back.</p> <p>My colleagues are mostly friendly and are just interested in whatever conversation is going on.</p> <p>The times I am silent are OK by everyone.</p> | | <p>Re-rate anxiety level (0-10)</p> <p>5/10</p> |

Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

Thought Challenging Record

| 1. Trigger Situation What is happening? Where am I? | 2. Negative Thoughts What thoughts are going through my mind? | 3. Anxiety Level How anxious do I feel (0-10)? | 4. Contrary Evidence What evidence do I have that does not support these thoughts? Alternative ways to view the situation? | 5. Realistic Probability and Consequences How likely is it that my negative predictions will actually occur? If something bad happened, then so what? Would it really be that bad? Would I cope? | 6. Helpful Image Describe as a picture the most realistic outcome and/or a more helpful image | 7. Visualise the helpful image as if it were actually occurring now | 8. Re-rate Anxiety Re-rate anxiety level (0-10) |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|---|--|
| | | | | | | | |

Module Summary

- Our thoughts play a key role in determining how we feel emotionally.
- No one's thoughts are 100% accurate, 100% of the time. This means that everyone sometimes has feelings that are based on an inaccurate view of a situation.
- People with social anxiety often have thoughts about social situations that are inaccurate in two ways: overestimating the probability of their social fears coming true, and overestimating the cost (how bad it would be if their social fears did come true). This is a major reason why people with social anxiety feel anxious in social situations.
- One way to change your negative thoughts about social situations is to challenge them using a Thought Challenging Record. This involves identifying what you are thinking, challenging your negative thoughts, and developing more realistic thoughts about the situation.

Coming Up...



In the next module we will discuss how avoiding situations you are anxious about keeps your anxiety going. We will introduce a strategy to help you start testing your fears through approaching the situations you are anxious about.



About the Modules

CONTRIBUTORS

Samantha Bank (MPsych¹)
Clinical Psychologist

Melissa Burgess (MPsych¹)
Clinical Psychologist

Dr Adelln Sng (MPsych¹; PhD²)
Senior Clinical Psychologist

Dr Mark Summers (MPsych¹; PhD²)
Senior Clinical Psychologist

Dr Bruce Campbell (MPsych¹; DPsych³)
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Dr Peter McEvoy (MPsych¹; PhD²)
Senior Clinical Psychologist
Professor, School of Psychology, Curtin University

¹Masters of Psychology (Clinical Psychology)

²Doctor of Philosophy

³Doctor of Psychology (Clinical)

Some of the materials in the modules of this information package were taken from:

McEvoy, P. & Saulsman, L. (2017). *Imagery-Based Cognitive Behaviour Group Therapy for Social Anxiety Disorder (IB-CBGT)*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Examples of this are reported in:

McEvoy, P. M., Hyett, M. P., Bank, S. R., Erceg-Hurn, D. M., Johnson, A. R., Kyron, M. J., Saulsman, L. M., Moulds, M. L., Grisham, J. R., Holmes, E. A., Moscovitch, D. A., Lipp, O. V. Campbell, B. N. C., & Rapee, R. M. (in press). Imagery-enhanced versus verbally-based group cognitive behavior therapy for social anxiety disorder: a randomized clinical trial. *Psychological Medicine*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720003001>

Rapee, R. M., Gaston, J. E., & Abbott, M. J. (2009). Testing the efficacy of theoretically derived improvements in the treatment of social phobia. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 77, 317– 327.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

McEvoy, P. M., Saulsman, L. M., & Rapee, R. M. (2018). *Imagery-enhanced CBT for social anxiety disorder*. Guilford Press.

Hackmann, A., Bennett-Levy, J., & Holmes, E. A. (Eds., 2011). *Oxford Guide to Imagery in Cognitive Therapy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kemp, N., Thompson, A., Gaston, J., & Rapee, R. (2003). Cognitive behavioural therapy-enhanced for social anxiety disorder: group treatment program. Centre for Emotional Health, Macquarie University.

Saulsman, L. M., Ji, J. L., & McEvoy, P. M. (2019). The essential role of mental imagery in cognitive behaviour therapy: what is old is new again. Invited review for *Australian Psychologist*, 54, 237-244. doi: 10.1111/ap.12406.

“STEPPING OUT OF SOCIAL ANXIETY”

This module forms part of:

Bank, S., Burgess, M., Sng, A., Summers, M., Campbell, B., & McEvoy, P. (2020). *Stepping Out of Social Anxiety*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 978 0 9757995 1 2

Created: October, 2020