

Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

Module 6

The Role of Attention

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Introduction

Human beings are hardwired to detect and attend to threat in our environment to ensure our survival. For people who are socially anxious, living in a social world means that threat can appear almost everywhere! When we perceive a social situation to be threatening, it makes sense that we focus all of our attention on responding to the threat. It is important to detect threat in an environment with *real* threat; however problems can arise when our attention is unnecessarily focused on *perceived* rather than *real* threats. As you have learned so far, when you experience social anxiety, you will often overestimate the likelihood of something going wrong when socialising. As a result, your attention regularly locks onto any potential social threat when you are trying to socialise, which can keep your anxiety going. In this module, we aim to help you recognise where your attention is focused in social situations and practice refocusing onto more helpful places.

Before you start learning how to refocus your attention, you first need to become aware of where your attention wanders more generally when you are in social situations. To do this, we will introduce you to two areas that attention can be focused.

Self-focused attention

Most people with social anxiety notice that most of their attention is self-focused. For example, you may focus on physical sensations of anxiety (e.g., racing heart, sweaty palms), negative thoughts or images about your performance (e.g., “this person isn’t interested in anything I have to say”, an image of yourself trying to speak but messing up your words and going bright red), or what you are going to say or do next (e.g., rehearsing conversation topics).



Environment-focused attention

People with social anxiety might also scrutinise their environment for any social threat. For example, you might look around for people who are laughing at or criticising you. Ambiguous social feedback such as a frown, yawn, glance at a watch or pauses in conversation could lure your attention. This feedback is then often interpreted as evidence to confirm predictions that you are being judged negatively by others.

Where do you notice your attention is focused in social situations? Write down what you have noticed in the space provided below.

How Do Self- and Environment-Focused Attention Maintain Social Anxiety?

Many people who experience social anxiety say that they focus their attention on themselves in an attempt to improve their social performance, or on the environment to protect themselves from anything bad happening. The problem with self- and environment-focused attention is that it keeps you focused on threat when you are trying to socialise. As a result, your ability to engage in (and enjoy!) social conversations can suffer.

Self- and environment-focused attention maintain social anxiety by:

1. Distracting you from the task at hand: When you are self- and environment-focused you are less able to pay attention to what is being said in conversations and less able to come up with your own contributions. You may miss cues that it is your turn to speak, not pick up on potential leads for further questions/comments you could make in the conversation, and be more likely to draw mental blanks when it is your turn to speak. This can have a negative impact on the quality of your conversations.
2. Increasing your perception of social threat: If you are always looking out for threat in the environment, then it can increase your sense that something bad will happen.
3. Missing non-threatening feedback: When you are so preoccupied with social threat, you may miss positive and neutral feedback from others. This is because your attention is limited. You simply can't take in all of the information around you. Our brains can only encode and remember what we pay attention to. If you are only ever attending to threatening information, then your memory of the social experience can become negatively biased. For example, you may only remember how awful it felt or the negative evidence you collected to the exclusion of any positive feedback!
4. Misinterpreting ambiguous feedback: If you are looking for social threat, you may be more likely to interpret neutral feedback from others as negative. For example, if you start a conversation looking for signs that you are boring then you are more likely to interpret someone yawning (ambiguous behaviour) as proof that you are boring versus thinking that perhaps the person is just tired.



You may also notice that your attention gets stuck focusing on past social situations that you think went badly, or future social situations that you expect to go badly. This often leads to more self-focused attention, which in turn increases anxiety.

Our aim is to help you become aware of when you are being too self- and environment-focused, and as best you can, redirect your attention back to the task at hand. But what exactly is the task at hand when we are trying to socialise?

Task-Focused Attention

In social situations, task-focused attention usually involves paying attention to the conversation. This could be one-on-one or in a group environment. It involves absorbing oneself in the moment, concentrating on the topic of the conversation, listening to what the other person is saying, noticing common interests, making links to your own experience, and following your natural curiosity about what the other person is saying.

So how do we stay task-focused?

Attention Training



Remaining task-focused in social situations can be very hard to do, especially when we are feeling anxious! As such, it can be helpful to practice training our attention daily with non-social activities. It may be useful to think of your attention a bit like a muscle. We need to practice strengthening the

attention ‘muscle’ by ‘training it in the gym’ using different exercises, so that when the time comes you are ready to use it in the ‘big race’ (i.e., to be task-focused in social situations).

Attention training is a strategy aimed at improving your awareness of where your attention is focused and your ability to refocus it where you want. It involves paying attention to the present moment by ‘coming to your senses’. By this we mean noticing what you can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch in the moment. We can practice training our attention at any time of the day, regardless of what we are doing. For example, we can pay attention to:

- The breath
- Sensations while walking
- Taste/smells of food/drink
- Sensations of water on body while swimming
- Sensations of water on body during a shower
- Feel of the water and plates while washing dishes
- Sensations of the chair on your body as you sit
- Sensations of the bristles and smell and taste of the toothpaste whilst brushing your teeth



The goal of attention training is not to be 100% task-focused on the present moment – that is impossible! Instead, the goal is to catch when your attention wanders and shift it back to the task at hand. It doesn’t matter how many times your attention wanders – this is what minds do. It is the noticing and redirecting back to the task that is most important. Each time you notice your attention wandering, it may be helpful to anchor your attention back to the task by focusing on the following:

- **Touch:** what does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on your body do you have contact with it? Are there areas of your body with more or less contact with the task?
- **Sight:** what do you notice about the task? What catches your eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the contours... the colours?
- **Hearing:** what sounds do you notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task?
- **Smell:** what smells do you notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there?
- **Taste:** what flavours do you notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours?



When you notice that your mind has wandered during attention training, be careful not to criticise yourself for this. After all, it is completely normal. Instead, think of every ‘wander’ as another opportunity to practice the skill of bringing your attention back to the task at hand.

Take a moment now to think about everyday routine tasks that you do (e.g., dishes, hanging out laundry, eating, driving, showering) and that you could use as an opportunity to practice attention training. Write your ideas down in the space provided below.

We recommend that you practice attention training at least once daily, and preferably several times per day. These exercises can be brief (as little as two minutes). The good thing about attention training is that you don't have to add anything extra into your day. It's just about changing how you pay attention to the things you are already doing. You may find it helpful to monitor a sample of these exercises and make notes of what you notice on the 'Attention Training Record' provided on the next page.

Over time, attention training will help you:

- Become aware of your focus of attention more generally
- Make deliberate choices about where you want to deploy your attention
- Focus on the task at hand in the present moment, which leaves less attentional resources to focus on other, less helpful or relevant things

A quick point on safety behaviours...

When practicing attention training, it is important that you do not use your training activity as a safety behaviour to minimise anxiety in social situations (refer back to module 5 if you need a refresher on safety behaviours). For example, we don't want you to be focusing on your breath or the taste/smell of food when socialising, even if it makes you feel less anxious in the short-term. This will take your attention away from the task at hand. In social situations, the task at hand is typically the conversation or interaction you are having with your peer/s. It is important you focus as much of your attention on the conversation as possible, even if it is more anxiety provoking to start with.

Attention Training Record

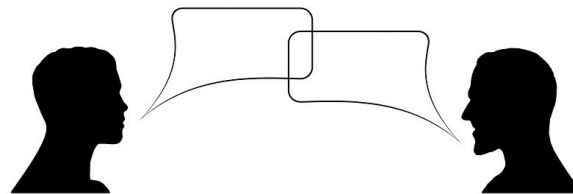
Date/Time	Attentional Task (e.g., breath, walking, eating, brushing teeth, dishes)	Duration	Concentration Level (0-10)	Comments What did you notice? When your attention was task-focused, how much attention was left over to focus on other things? How frequently did your mind wander? How easy/difficult was it to redirect your attention back onto the task at hand? Do you notice anything changing with practice?

Attention Focusing

Once you have practiced training your attention using everyday activities, you are well equipped to apply this skill to social situations. We call this attention focusing – you’ve done the training in the gym and now it’s time to focus your strengthened muscle in the big race!

When socialising, once you become aware that your attention is self- or environment-focused, it is important to direct your attention back onto the task at hand. Remember, in social situations the task typically involves getting absorbed in the conversation, focusing on the other person when they are speaking, and then switching to your own message when you are speaking. Again, it’s all about noticing when your attention wanders and bringing it back to the present task. This is not easy to do when you are feeling anxious and it requires regular practice!

We recommend that you practice attention focusing in future social interactions. Devote as much of your attention on to the conversation as possible. You may find it helpful to try to recall the details of a conversation, as this is a good marker of task-focused attention. We also encourage you to reflect on the impact of your practice over time on your anxiety within social interactions and the quality of your social performance.



Module Summary

- When you experience social anxiety, it is common to direct your attention to yourself or your environment in an attempt to detect potential social threat.
- Self- and environment-focused attention can maintain social anxiety by distracting you from the task at hand, increasing your perception of social threat, and leading you to miss non-threatening feedback or misinterpret neutral feedback.
- Attention training is a skill aimed at increasing your awareness of your attention and improving your ability to redirect it to the task at hand. You can practice attention training with all sorts of routine daily tasks. Remember that the goal of attention training is not to maintain 100% focus on the task, but to notice when your mind has wandered, and to gently redirect it back to the task, no matter how many times this happens.
- Practicing focusing your attention on the conversation when socialising can help to reduce your anxiety, improve the quality of your social performance, and make your social interactions more enjoyable.

Coming Up...

In the next module we will look at how misperceptions about how you appear to other people can worsen your social anxiety. We will introduce strategies to help you get a more accurate idea about how you come across to others.



About the Modules

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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 (IBC-BGT)*. 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.

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