

# What Will They Think Of Me?

By Dr. Larina Kase



## OVERCOMING SOCIAL ANXIETY

Do you feel anxiety in social situations?  
Does the anxiety or fear of rejection block you from spending time with others?

The most commonly reported fear is that of public speaking. Many people feel butterflies in the stomach, sweaty palms and a racing heart if they have to speak in front of a group. A little anxiety before you give a big speech actually pumps you up and helps prepare you for a great performance.

However, some people can't manage the intense anxiety they feel when facing certain social situations. For them, walking into a room of people, giving a presentation, or even simply talking to strangers may cause a surge of anxiety that is excruciating. This anxiety condition is called social phobia.

### What is Social Phobia?

Social phobia, also known as social anxiety disorder, is the fear of social situations, like attending a party or a group for dinner, or performance situations like giving a speech or acting in a play. People with social phobia are afraid that they will embarrass or humiliate themselves. They are worried and terrified about what others will think of them.

Social phobia is very harmful for its' sufferers. It sometimes stands in

the way of speaking up at work, meeting new people, enjoying social gatherings, having fulfilling relationships, and sharing your ideas with others.

The three components to every form of anxiety include:

1. thoughts
2. physical reactions
3. behaviors

Let's begin by exploring the fearful thoughts that create and maintain social phobia.

### The Thoughts

Those with social phobia are overly concerned that people will evaluate them negatively. They worry that others will view them as stupid, boring, rude, offensive, uninteresting, unattractive, arrogant, awkward, or any other negative attribute.

Along with worries about being viewed in these unfavorable ways, people with social anxiety are concerned about negative effects of public humiliation. For example, you might worry about whether or not someone would want to date you. Or you might fear losing your job. You might think that people would spread rumors about you and it would be hard to go out in public.

### The Physical Reactions

Along with the troubling thoughts described, those with social phobia experience several uncomfortable physical sensations when they are in feared social situations. Some of the common symptoms include blushing, sweating, feeling nauseated, shaking or trembling, diarrhea, fast heart rate, light-headed/dizzy, or feeling hot or cold.

When you experience these sensations, two concerns result: First, you worry that the physical symptoms will be noticeable to others and therefore embarrass you. Second, you dislike the feelings and seek to reduce them, which leads to our next discussion...

### The Behaviors

Of course, because you feel miserable in specific situations, you avoid them. The more you avoid something, the more difficult that activity becomes, and the vicious cycle of social phobia is created.

There are actually two ways that you may be avoiding uncomfortable activities. The first is obvious: You get invited to a party, but you know that you'll be anxious and uncomfortable at the party so you don't go. The second is less obvious: You get invited to a party

and you go, but while you are there, you avoid talking about yourself because you're afraid that you'll say something embarrassing.

## Who Has Social Phobia?

Fifteen million adults in the United States experience social phobia. Social phobia occurs equally in men and women.

There are essentially two types of social phobia. One is called "generalized social phobia," which means that you become nervous in most social situations. Your fear is not specific to certain situations, and you worry about public humiliation when you are around people in general.

The other type is more restricted, you may be comfortable in most social situations, but you experience significant fear in specific situations, such as public speaking in front of a group.

## What Causes It?

Certain people are more likely to have problems with anxiety. Those whose close relatives have anxiety problems may be more likely to develop a problem with anxiety also. This may be due to biological traits that family members have in common. Certain traits may affect the function of brain chemicals that regulate mood states like anxiety, shyness, nervousness, and stress reactions.

Some people are born with a cautious personality style and have a tendency to be shy and sensitive to new situations. This may contribute to social phobia. Others may learn a cautious style depending on experiences they have, the way others react to them, or the behaviors they see in others. Low self-confidence and a lack of coping skills to manage normal stress can also play a role in social phobia. Those who tend to be worriers, perfectionists, or have a hard time dealing with small mistakes may also be more likely to develop it.

## Commonly Feared Situations

There are many social situations that trigger anxiety reactions for people with social phobia. Some of these include:

- ✓ Introducing yourself to a stranger
- ✓ Speaking up in meetings
- ✓ Giving speeches and presentations
- ✓ Expressing your opinions, especially if they are controversial
- ✓ Asking someone on a date
- ✓ Individual (1:1) conversations
- ✓ Group conversations
- ✓ Attending or hosting parties
- ✓ Eating or writing in public
- ✓ Spontaneous or impromptu speaking
- ✓ Asking questions (in stores, class, etc.)
- ✓ Talking with a boss or authority figure

Some people are uncomfortable in social situations but do not have social phobia. The difference has to do with the level of impairment that occurs. If some things make you mildly anxious but are not causing a great deal of distress or avoidance, then it may not be social phobia that you experience. Consider social anxiety to be a spectrum ranging from zero anxiety, to normal levels of social anxiety, to social phobia. Regardless of where you fall on this spectrum, the tips in the next section will help you.

If social anxiety has been getting in the way of your work, relationships, or happiness, then we recommend that you consult with your primary care physician or mental health professional to see whether it is a good idea to pursue treatment. Social phobia is a medical disorder and there are very effective treatment options ranging from medications to cognitive behavioral therapy.

## How to Change

Now that you have a solid understanding about what social phobia is, we'll switch gears and discuss how to change.

### Step 1:

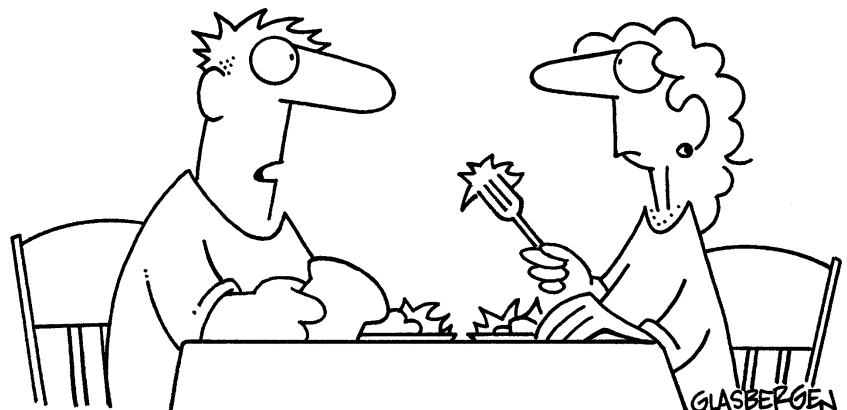
#### What *Exactly* are You Afraid of?

Earlier you learned how certain thoughts are related to feelings of social anxiety. For example, thinking, "I'm sure that Joe notices my nervous twitch and shaky voice," is likely to lead to feeling nervous.

The first step is to be aware of your fearful thoughts. You likely have quick, fleeting thoughts that go through your head when you face an uncomfortable social situation. It is challenging to recognize these thoughts, but once you do, you can work on changing them.

Question and challenge these thoughts. Ask yourself, "How do I know that Joe will notice my twitching?" or "Do I have any evidence that people notice my shaking voice or that if they do, they automatically judge me negatively?"

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**"You don't appreciate the nice things I do. Yesterday I burped 'I love you' in Morse Code and you didn't even thank me!"**



Once you are aware of your initial fearful thoughts, you can dig deeper and find out what you're really afraid of. Ask yourself, "What's so bad about that?" Using the example above, you may think, "Well, if Joe saw me twitch and realized that I'm nervous, he may assume that I lack confidence. He'd assume that I'd have similar difficulties in front of customers and hesitate to give me good assignments. Eventually my career would plateau and then start to backslide. I'll never achieve my ambitions and I'll end up broke and alone."

See how digging deep can uncover your true fears? It's important to be aware of these underlying fears because once you are, you can use the same process of examining the evidence described above. You can also ask yourself these key powerful questions:

1. "How likely is that to happen?"
2. "If that did happen, how would I handle it?"

You'll see that the fear is unlikely to come true, or be as horrible as you initially thought. Even if it did come true, you'll realize that you can handle it and that it won't create a catastrophic outcome.

### Step 2: The Secret to Reducing Self-Consciousness

One of the most interesting research findings about social anxiety is that self-consciousness can be altered by changing how we focus our attention.

When you become nervous, you focus on yourself. You notice your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and you wonder how you're coming across. This makes you more self-conscious and therefore more nervous.

So the key to reducing social anxiety and self-consciousness is to get your attention off of yourself. Use your five senses to focus on what's going on around you. Pay attention to the sights, sounds, and smells in the environment. Get lost in the conversation. You'll see that you are not only less nervous, but you are also better able to communicate. This is because you'll be making the other person feel important and listened

to, which is key for successful communication.

### Step 3: The Safety Behaviors that Backfire

Earlier I mentioned how you may avoid certain situations. This is called a "safety behavior." When you become uncomfortable you try to make yourself feel better and try to hide your anxiety from others. Unfortunately, these behaviors typically don't work. They backfire. They are designed to help you feel safe but they actually make you feel more nervous.

Some examples of safety behaviors include:

- ✓ Being afraid of saying something stupid or boring.

*Saftey behavior:* you plan everything out in your mind before you speak.

- ✓ Being afraid of blushing.

*Saftey behavior:* you wear a lot of make-up or a turtle-neck (to hide chest flushing).

- ✓ Being afraid of forgetting a point during a speech.

*Saftey behavior:* you put all of your notes on PowerPoint slides and read them to your audience.

- ✓ Being afraid of people noticing your shaking hands.

*Saftey behavior:* you hold your hands very still, clench them together, or put them in your pockets

Can you see how these safety behaviors can backfire and actually create more problems than they help? The goal is to get rid of all safety behaviors. You will no longer feel that you're relying on crutches and your social confidence will increase dramatically.

### Step 4: Put the Post-Mortems to Death

After an anxiety-provoking social situation, do you find yourself reliving the experience? Do you go over and over the conversations in your mind? Do you think of what you should have said? Do you scold yourself for what you did say?

If so, you have experienced a

"post-mortem." Like a safety behavior, it may seem that post-mortems help you, but they actually hurt you. They make you more nervous and anxious.

The goal is to get rid of them. What works best is to get yourself busy with something else that makes it impossible to analyze yourself. Grab some lunch. Watch a movie. Chat on the phone with a friend. Get immersed in your work. Do anything other than reflect on how your talk or social situation went, especially right afterwards when you are still anxious.

### Step 5: The Path to Social Eloquence

You may have heard that "practice makes perfect." There is more to overcoming social anxiety than simply putting yourself in social situations. What works best is to put yourself in social situations *and* use the four skills listed above. It is important that you confront your feared situations numerous times. Start slowly.

### On Your Way to Social Success

You now know what social phobia is and how to overcome it. Don't let it block you from the relationships, work, and life that you want.

To summarize, the way to overcome social anxiety is first to recognize and challenge your fears. Second, during times of social anxiety, pay less attention to yourself, and focus on what is happening around you. Third, do not avoid social situations and be careful not to use safety behaviors. Fourth, end post-mortems because they do not help.

Practice as much as possible using these skills in any social or performance situation where you are uncomfortable. You'll soon find that discomfort will be replaced by comfort, and awkwardness will be replaced by social eloquence. GB

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