

# Overcoming your social phobia

John Winston Bush, PhD

New York Institute for Cognitive and Behavioral Therapies

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**SOCIAL PHOBIA** (also called social anxiety disorder) is an excessive fear of what other people might think of us. Our opinions of each other *should* matter — if they didn't, we'd be living in a corner of hell, not a civilized society. But when someone is suffering from social phobia, he or she is feeling an *exaggerated* concern for public opinion — one that goes far beyond what we need in order to relate to other people for our mutual benefit.

In social phobia, we are aware of fear or gnawing anxiety — in the actual presence of other people, in anticipation of being in their presence, or when we imagine them being somewhere else but thinking of us. But though it might seem otherwise, it is not actually their physical presence or being in their thoughts that we dread, nor is it even being the direct focus of their attention. It is how they might *judge* us if we give them the chance — by being in their presence, by calling attention to ourselves, or doing something to remind them of us.

We imagine — or most often, unconsciously assume — that they will see us as ugly, stupid, weak, awkward, unwelcome, worthless, or cursed with some other undesirable quality. In time, we may even come to believe (at least in our less rational moments) that we really *are* as bad as all that.

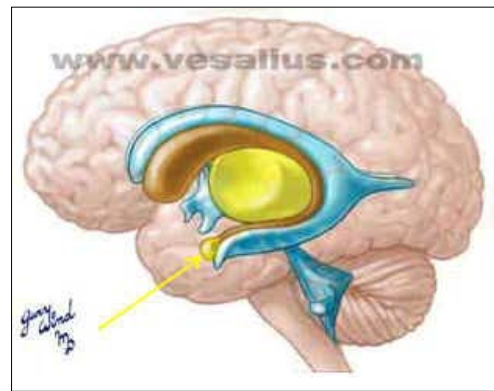
Strictly speaking, it isn't even people's judgments that we fear, but our own *emotional reactions* to their judgments, whether the judgments are real or imaginary. At bottom, what we are afraid of is the private (often quite secret) experience of *feeling embarrassed, ashamed, guilty, disgraced, rejected or humiliated*.

These can be very painful, even crippling, emotions, and it might make sense to try to head them off when there is a real likelihood of their happening. But in social phobia, we have these reactions even when no one is judging us negatively, and we expect to have them in future situations where they are objectively unlikely. In addition — and in a sense this is the worst of it — we believe or assume that such feelings have to be *unbearable*, rather than being experiences we can cope with, take in stride and put behind us in a reasonable amount of time.

## How is such craziness possible?

Good question. You'd think that the minds of humans, whose brains have made us the dominant species on our planet, would be immune to such absurdities. But as it turns out, even otherwise competent brains are capable of something as senseless as making us afraid of routine contacts with other people. Current neuroimaging and related research points to two factors that in combination can result in social phobia:

- *Hypersensitive amygdalas.* We have two bits of brain tissue, each about the size of the smallest segment of our little finger, that have been “wired” for sentry duty. They are shaped roughly like almonds<sup>1</sup>, and there is one on each side of the brain, in the temporal lobes — so called because they are located behind our temples. (In this cutaway picture<sup>2</sup>, the bulge at the lower tip of the gold loop where the yellow arrow is pointing.) Their job is to pick up on signs of possible danger.



If our amygdalas detect danger where it isn't, or react as if we were in great danger when the peril is actually slight, they are going to send *false*

*alarms* to the parts of our brains that mobilize us for self-protection — responses that include running away, freezing, hiding, and fighting. In social phobia, false alarms somehow come to be triggered by the sight or sound of other people, or even by remembering or imagining ourselves in the presence or thoughts of other people.

- *Unbalanced communication between brain regions.* No doubt due to the strong evolutionary bias in favor of staying physically alive, human brains are so arranged that danger signals take priority over our capacity to carry on other activities, including high-level conscious thinking. In the world of our prehistoric ancestors, the smart but unwary were likely to end up impaled on an enemy's spear — survival of the skittish, you might say.

The result is that there are more brain-cell fibers sending information from the amygdalas and nearby structures to the frontal cortex — the region behind our foreheads where we do our rational thinking — than there are running in the other direction. This enables the amygdalas' danger signals to hijack our thought processes rather effectively. They

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<sup>1</sup> *Amygdala* is the Greek word for almond.

<sup>2</sup> Courtesy of [www.vesalius.com](http://www.vesalius.com).

have about a half-second jump on cortical activation, which is all they need to take over the ship and set off a vicious cycle in which fear alternates with struggling to escape or tame the fear, with unpredictable and sometimes very painful consequences.

For most of us in today's world, however, there aren't too many hostile tribes in the vicinity. Thus if our amygdalas very often over-react to situations involving other people, social isolation and lost opportunities rather than an extended lifespan are likely to be the result.

### So now what do I do?

Oh, you mean that lovely explanation hasn't cured your social phobia already? Well, all right, if you insist; here are the things that (with one possible exception) you will need to do to become more comfortable with your fellow humans. They're grouped under five headings:

- Cognitive — correcting some of your thoughts, beliefs and assumptions about how others see you, and about the stake you have in their opinions of you.
- Behavioral — entering and remaining in the presence of other people long enough for your fears to subside. (Which they will do all by themselves if you go about it in the right way.)
- Defusion and mindfulness — activities, to be described below, that will make it easier to carry out your cognitive and behavioral tasks.
- Medication — another way for *some* people to help carry out their cognitive and behavioral tasks, but assumed unnecessary until shown otherwise.
- Personal values — clarifying what it is you care about, and what you would want to work toward if given a chance.

Now let's look at what you'll be doing in more detail.

#### Cognitive: Catching yourself in certain common errors and learning how to correct them

A number of errors in thinking and reasoning are made by literally everybody, though they seem to be more prominent among people whose bad luck has brought them social phobia or other emotional disorders. I have given thumbnail descriptions of the most popular ones in Appendix A, but will limit myself in this handout to that listing. You will find them discussed in great detail in Dr David Burns's book, *Feeling Good*, which I recommend that you buy in the next day or two. In addition, I have listed in Appendix B

Dr Albert Ellis's celebrated *12 Irrational Ideas*, which Ellis chose precisely because so many people are in their grip at least some of the time.

Here are some of the things you will find about your cognitive processes:

- What you predict will happen, especially if you are emotionally aroused at the time you make your prediction, will usually prove to be more extreme than what actually happens. While this “outcome shrinkage” can also apply to positive predictions, the effect — especially if you have an anxious tendency — is more pronounced with negative predictions. Things will usually work out better than you imagine.
- Memory is selective and subject to many distortions. It is *not* a simple, unadorned record of past events. When you remember something, it's not like playing a tape that faithfully recreates your original experience. Instead, what your brain does is *construct* a scenario or “screenplay” of the occurrence — using incomplete and sometimes incorrect information, filling in the gaps with assumptions about what “must have happened,” and reflecting the effects of such factors as hindsight (always 20:20), the mood you were in at the time of the original events, the mood you are in at the time you summon up the memory, and other common biases. In short, it can easily be like a historical novel or movie — a mixture of fact and fiction.
- In social phobia specifically, you are vulnerable to what's called the “spotlight effect” — a tendency to exaggerate the degree to which people's attention is focused on you, together with a distorted idea of how they are judging you and your behavior, how much they will remember of what you did, and whether they care how well or badly you performed.
- A companion bias to the spotlight effect is an unflattering and often inaccurate appraisal of your own abilities and performance.
- As you can see, you need to be skeptical of your cognitions, especially at emotional moments. To do this, you need to overcome the mother of all biases: the tendency when emotionally aroused to take your thoughts and feelings at face value even more than you usually do.

You should understand that correcting cognitive errors is not likely by itself to do the whole job of freeing you from undue social anxiety. But it will almost certainly help, and much of its value lies in giving you a preview of how you will think when your therapy is further along, plus a taste of how much better you will feel as a result of cultivating the skills you will be trained in.

## Behavioral: Learning, day by day, to be courageous until it doesn't take much courage anymore

Here is the heart of the treatment. Your recovery from social phobia will depend crucially on *how often and how consistently* you are willing to enter and remain in the presence of other people long enough for your fears to subside *spontaneously*. This will mean gradually giving up your self-protective — but also self-defeating — tendency to under-participate in normal social encounters.

You will not be asked to plunge into situations that are beyond your coping ability. It will be more like learning to swim starting at the shallow end of the pool. We will, working together, draw up a list of situations that offer opportunities to interact with other people, in particular the ones that arise most often in your life or that you can most readily arrange on your own initiative. Examples:

- Returning a greeting from a neighbor or co-worker.
- Saying hello to a neighbor or co-worker without waiting to be greeted first.
- Asking a retail clerk where to find something in the store.
- Asking directions of a stranger.
- Accepting an invitation to lunch with a small group where other people will do most of the talking.
- Accepting a compliment with a word of thanks.
- Giving someone a small compliment.
- Responding to a simple question with a brief answer if you have one.
- Responding to a question you honestly can't answer with a simple admission that you're sorry but you don't know.

If these behaviors and others like them seem too easy or trivial to make a dent in your social anxiety, ask yourself if you already perform them consistently and comfortably. If in fact you do, then we're ready to make lists of more challenging situations. If not, try to perform them at every possible opportunity until you are fairly comfortable doing them on a regular basis. Remember that Rome wasn't built in a day — and neither will be your social self-confidence. The most important thing is getting the practice — the more frequently and consistently the better.

I said earlier that your fears will subside all by themselves if you go about things in the right way. Here's what I meant:

There are two processes, called *habituation* and *respondent extinction*, that are built into the neural circuitry in your brain. They are both available to make you less fearful of social situations.

- Habituation is what occurs when you repeatedly encounter an *inherently disturbing* situation and it gradually becomes less disturbing all by itself. Example: Being yelled at so often that you get used to it and eventually can shrug it off. (You will go on disliking the experience, but your fear and the urge to avoid it at all costs will no longer be so compelling.)
- Respondent extinction is a similar process that occurs with *learned* reactions, such as becoming frightened at the sight or thought of other people, when at one time (whether you can still remember it or not) you recognized them as safe and even fun to be with.

Habituation and respondent extinction will usually occur automatically — *if* you don't do too many things that interfere with them. Here are some things that usually do interfere with them; you have probably been doing some of them yourself:

- Under-participation: Avoiding social situations, rushing through them, cutting them short, or being physically present but thinking and acting in ways that insulate you emotionally from normal social interaction. Examples of the last form of under-participation: drinking to excess or using drugs, daydreaming, staring out the window or at your shoes, watching TV or studying your host's stuffed rhinoceros collection while others are busy socializing, finding a quiet corner where you can be a wallflower...the list is virtually endless. (Oh, here's one more: trying so hard to be gregarious that you're not really being yourself.)
- Becoming absorbed in and carried away by emotion-steeped thoughts, memories and fantasies. Signs that this is happening: you rehash and elaborate on your memories, create might-have-been scenarios, vividly imagine what you would like to do in future situations, and the like. (The shorthand term for this is *ruminat*ion; let's leave it to the cows.)
- Doing what might *seem* to be the opposite of being absorbed in and carried away by thoughts, memories and fantasies, but actually has much the same effect: struggling with them, or (a variation) trying to force them out of your mind. Why are they so much the same? Because, either way, you're *emotionally engaged* with them.

Now, what do all these activities have in common? First, they blur or blunt or draw your *attention* away from any social opportunities that may be right in front of you, right in that moment. Second, they involve making *judgments* about yourself, other people and their behavior, and your physical surroundings.

Natural and automatic as it is to do these things (often unconsciously or barely consciously), being inattentive and making judgments interfere with the equally natural processes of habituation and respondent extinction. By treating yourself, the situation, and your reactions to it as a big deal, you are unwittingly *making* them a big deal.

What can you do instead?

- First, beginning right now, spend a few minutes each day doing nothing more than quietly observing your inner experience — your thoughts, memories, fantasies, images, emotions, moods and bodily sensations. You will notice how often and easily you are distracted from the present moment, and how automatically you form one judgment after another. When you discover that your attention has wandered from the present moment, *gently* bring it back. As for judging, don't try to make yourself stop — *just notice* that you're doing it, and then go back to observing your experience in the moment. A good way to do this is to find a quiet place where you won't be intruded upon, and dedicate a few minutes to experiencing how your mind works when you stop and take notice of it.
- As you become more aware of your distractibility and judgmental thinking, look for opportunities in your everyday life to focus attention in the present moment and cultivate an attitude of *acceptance* towards whatever your experience brings you. The more you can do these things, the more your social anxiety will give way to the normal processes of habituation and respondent extinction — leaving you better able to enjoy interacting with other people rather than dreading or avoiding it.

There are other things you will need to do to carry out the behavioral aspects of your recovery from social phobia, but these have been the main ones; the rest we will have to work out as we go along. Meanwhile, please take on the above as your first “homework” assignment, and at our next meeting tell me what you experienced. You may feel you succeeded at it; fine and good. If you're not sure — or especially if you're afraid of how I'll judge your efforts — that's also fine. Why? Because reporting back to me will require you to be at least a little bit courageous — and that itself is grist for the respondent-extinction mill.

## DEFUSION AND MINDFULNESS

These are probably unfamiliar terms to you — not surprising, since they refer to processes that have only recently been recognized by psychologists as potent strategies for overcoming social phobia and other emotional difficulties. Here are brief definitions:

- **Defusion** — This is what happens when you discover (in your own direct experience, not just as an intellectual proposition) the difference between your cognitions, emotions and bodily sensations and the reality they are supposed to represent faithfully but often don't. You become progressively better able to recognize thoughts as "just thoughts," feelings as "just feelings" and sensations as "just sensations." The point is not that thoughts, feelings and sensations are wholly misleading; that is not necessarily or even usually the case. But because they are a good deal less reliable than they seem to be, it is vitally important that you learn not to take them literally or at face value just because they occur. We are talking here about cultivating a *realistic detachment and skepticism* about your cognitions, emotions and physical sensations.
- **Mindfulness** — One definition: bringing your complete attention to your present experience on a moment-to-moment basis. Another: paying attention in a particular way — on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. The homework assignment described above is intended as your introductory exercise in mindfulness. Later, you will have an opportunity to cultivate mindfulness in other ways and in other contexts, so that it becomes a regular part of your daily life.

Both defusion and mindfulness are powerful ways of weaning you away from behavior that interferes with the natural habituation and extinction of your fears about other people, and of opening the way to pursuing your personal values in life more effectively.

## MEDICATION

Lately there have been a lot of ads promoting the serotonin regulator paroxetine (*Paxil*) for social anxiety disorder. It seems to work for some people, and other drugs may eventually also be shown to help. However, if experience with other psychiatric drugs is any indication, patients who rely on medications alone can expect a higher risk of relapse following the end of active treatment than those who make CBT (cognitive behavior therapy) the mainstay or sole component of their treatment.



Moreover, there are unanswered questions about how much of paroxetine's effect reflects actual drug action, and how much is due to placebo processes. Finally, because medications have side effects and can cause withdrawal symptoms, the ultimate goal is to help you manage anxiety without any medication if possible.

CBT is about learning new skills, and pills don't create skills. Only people can do that. Whether you will be referred for medication (or be encouraged to stay on it if you are already being medicated) will depend largely on how well you respond to CBT.

## PERSONAL VALUES

Everybody needs to have certain directions in life that he or she values above others. Without a clear sense of one's own values, it is hard if not impossible to choose specific goals and pursue them in a coherent way so that life becomes enjoyable, both when one is "successful" and when one is not. (Wouldn't you like to be able to enjoy your life regardless of what happens?)

Right now, you probably want above all else to be rid of your social phobia. Fine — but what then? What do you want to *add* to your life that makes it worthwhile to cut your anxieties down to size? Part of our work together will be to clarify your personal values, so that the enterprise has meaning in the larger context of the kind of life you would like to lead. That, after all, is the main point, isn't it?

## Appendix A: Checklist of cognitive distortions

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1. **All-or-nothing thinking:** You look at things in absolute, black-and-white categories.
2. **Overgeneralization:** You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. **Mental filter:** You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives.
4. **Discounting the positives:** You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities “don’t count.”
5. **Jumping to conclusions:** (a) Mind reading — you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there’s no evidence for this. (b) Fortune-telling — you arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly.
6. **Magnification or minimization:** You blow things way up out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately.
7. **Emotional reasoning:** You reason from how you feel: “I feel like an idiot, so I must really be one.” Or “I don’t feel like doing this, so I’ll put it off.”
8. **“Should” statements:** You criticize yourself or other people with “shoulds” or “shouldn’ts.” “Musts,” “oughts,” and “have-tos” are similar offenders.
9. **Labeling:** You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying “I made a mistake,” you tell yourself “I’m a jerk,” or “a fool” or “a loser.”
10. **Personalization and blame:** You blame yourself for something you weren’t entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behavior might contribute to a problem.

## Appendix B: 12 irrational ideas

© 1984 Albert Ellis, PhD. Adapted from *Reason and emotion in psychotherapy*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel.

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1. It is an absolute necessity to have love and approval from others almost all the time.
2. You must be unfailingly competent and perfect in all you undertake.
3. People who harm you or commit misdeeds are evil, wicked and villainous individuals, and you should severely blame, damn and punish them.
4. It is horrible, terrible or catastrophic when things do not go the way you want them to go.
5. External events cause most human misery, and you have little ability to control your feelings or to rid yourself of depression, hostility and similar feelings.
6. You will find it easier to avoid facing many of life's difficulties and self-responsibilities than to undertake some rewarding form of self-discipline.
7. If something seems dangerous or fearsome, you must become preoccupied with and upset about it.
8. Your past remains all-important, and just because something once strongly influenced your life, it has to keep determining your feelings and behavior today.
9. People and things should turn out better than they do, and you have to view it as awful and horrible if you do not quickly find good solutions to life's problems.
10. You can achieve happiness by inertia and inaction or by passively and uncommittedly “enjoying yourself.”
11. You must have a high degree of order or certainty to feel comfortable.
12. You give yourself a global rating as a human, and your general worth and self-acceptance depend upon the goodness of your performance and the degree to which people approve of you.