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Tips for Wellbeing Series No 4

Social Anxiety

How to be more relaxed in social situations

What is social anxiety?

Almost everyone gets a little anxious or embarrassed at times, although some people are more shy than others. Sometimes, though, anxiety can be so intense it stops us from doing things that we enjoy doing, or interferes with our daily lives.

This extreme anxiety may be felt in particular social situations, or in a range of situations, such as: at parties, meeting strangers, going to new places, shopping centres, or performing.

It may result in worried or negative thoughts, and in physical symptoms such as sweating, rapid or constricted breathing, rapid pulse, trembling, or blushing.

What can be done about it?

- > Consult a counsellor or doctor.
- > Learn relaxation techniques such as meditation, mindfulness and/or breathing exercises.

Some examples:

- > *5 Breaths* - Take a breath, noticing it going into your lungs, then when exhaling, let the muscles of your shoulders go soft and say a soothing word such as 'relax'. Repeat 4 times.
- > *Counting* - Count each breath until you reach 10. Then go back to 1 and count again. Or count something you can see – the number of chairs in the room, for example.
- > *3 Things* - Notice 3 things that you can see in your present environment. Then notice 3 things you can hear. Then 3 things you can feel on your skin.

- > Notice any anxious thoughts leading up to and during situations. Try some strategies to create more helpful thoughts, such as:
 - Write down what the situation is and what the anxious thoughts are.
 - In another column, write down the thoughts you would find more helpful in this situation. This may be the kind of reassuring and encouraging thing you might tell a good friend who was facing this situation.
 - You might try observing the anxious thoughts and how they affect you, telling yourself they are just thoughts and they will pass, like a cloud in the sky.
 - Read some books for more information (see list below).
- > Don't avoid the situations you fear, but try taking small steps to expose yourself to challenging situations while using the relaxation and new thinking techniques.
- > Possible medication, in consultation with your doctor.
- > Learn some new social skills, such as ways to start and maintain conversations.
- > If public speaking is the issue, join a group like Toastmasters which teaches these skills.

For further reference

Websites:

- > *Self-help for anxiety* - ecouch.anu.edu.au
- > *Shy No Longer – Centre for Clinical Interventions Coping With Social Anxiety* - cci.health.wa.gov.au/Treatment/Social-Anxiety-Course
- > *Tips on social skills* - verywellmind.com/social-anxiety-disorder-4157220

Books:

- > *Change Your Thinking* by Sarah Edelman (2006) ABC Books.
- > *How to Start A Conversation and Make Friends* by Don Gabor (2011) Touchstone.
- > *Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Social Anxiety and Shyness* by Jan E. Fleming (2013) New Harbinger.

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