Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

Module 1

Understanding Social Anxiety

Introduction

Do you worry a great deal about how you come across to others and what people will think about you? Do you find certain everyday social situations so anxiety-provoking that they are distressing for you? Do these concerns lead you to avoid social situations to a degree that interferes with the life you want to be living? If so, you may find it helpful to work through this workbook, either on your own or with the support of a clinician. The modules cover a set of strategies that research has shown to be effective in reducing social anxiety. The aim of this module is to provide you with information about social anxiety disorder and what keeps it going.

What Is Social Anxiety?

Social anxiety is anxiety that occurs in response to social situations. The anxiety may occur before, during, or after the social situations, and quite often at all three times. A certain amount of social anxiety is completely normal, with around 90% of people acknowledging that they feel shy at certain points in their lives. Most people feel anxious about some social situations, such as public speaking and job interviews. They worry about whether the speech or interview will go well, or what other people will think. Most people will also feel relieved when it is over. For some people, however, the anxiety may be so distressing that they avoid the situation at all costs.

'Social anxiety disorder' or 'social phobia' refers to an intense, longstanding, and debilitating fear of social situations. Often people with social anxiety disorder will avoid social situations if they can. They believe that they will be evaluated negatively or criticised by other people, and may fear that they will be embarrassed or humiliated in some way. They find that their social anxiety is getting in the way of the life that they want to be living.

People with social anxiety will differ from each other with respect to the range and severity of their problems. We will use the term 'social anxiety disorder' in these modules to reflect a level of social anxiety that interferes with people's lives in an important way. They may fear most social situations or one or two specific situations. The types of social situations found to be anxiety-provoking will also vary from person to person. Some common types of situations that people with social anxiety may find anxiety-provoking include:

- One-on-one conversations
- Interacting in groups
- Going to parties or social gatherings
- Initiating/maintaining conversations
- Meeting new people

- Dating
- Public speaking
- Being watched while writing, eating or drinking
- Walking down the street in view of others
- Shopping

- Phone calls
- Initiating social catch-ups
- Using public toilets
- Sitting facing other people on a bus or train
- Being assertive with others

If you find any of the above situations anxiety-provoking because of concerns about how you will come across or what people will think about you, and this anxiety is interfering with your life, you may find it helpful to keep reading these Stepping Out of Social Anxiety modules.

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What Causes Social Anxiety?

There is no single or simple answer to the question of what causes social anxiety disorder. Contributing factors are many and they can vary for different individuals. However, there are some important factors that can increase someone's chance of developing social anxiety disorder. These factors can be divided into biological and psychological causes.

Biological factors such as a family history of anxiety disorders or depression increase your chances of having an anxiety disorder. The more of your family members that suffer with anxiety or depression, and the closer they are to you genetically, the more likely you are to develop an anxiety disorder. We are also born with our own temperaments, which may be inherited to some degree. Many people with social anxiety disorder report that they were shy or inhibited as very young children. While most children will grow out of early shyness, if they are shyer and more timid than their peers this also increases their chances of developing social anxiety disorder later in life.

Having a biological vulnerability does not necessarily mean that someone will develop an anxiety disorder. It also may depend on the person's lifestyle, the types of life stressors they have encountered, and their early learning. Many people with social anxiety disorder report experiencing bullying or abuse during their childhood or adolescence. Others report having one or two particularly distressing social experiences that have stuck in their minds, whilst others report experiencing regular criticism early in life. Others report that their families did not socialise much during their childhood, so they did not have the opportunity to develop confidence in their ability to develop relationships with others.

For any given person, it may not be possible to have a complete explanation of exactly how and why they developed social anxiety disorder. Most of the time it probably takes a combination of biological, temperamental, and social factors. The good news is that regardless of what originally caused your social anxiety disorder, there are well-researched and effective ways to overcome your social anxiety.

What Keeps Social Anxiety Going?

To overcome your social anxiety it is helpful to understand what is keeping it going in the present. Social anxiety occurs when we perceive a 'social threat' in a particular situation. Our perception of social threat is how strongly we believe that a 'social catastrophe' will occur. This perception is divided into two parts: probability and cost. The probability refers to how likely our fears are to happen. If we believe our fears are highly likely to come true then our fear response (also known as 'fight or flight') is more likely to be triggered. The cost refers to how bad we believe it will be if our fears do come true. If you believe that it is very likely that you will appear nervous and make a mistake when delivering a presentation (high probability), and if this does happen then you will be criticised or humiliated by others (high cost), then you are likely to feel very anxious about the presentation.
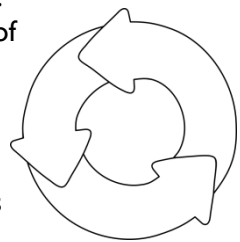
Once the perception of social threat is triggered (i.e., perceived social danger is high) you will experience a strong fear response. This usually results in physical symptoms such as:

- Trembling or shaking
- Blushing
- Pounding heart
- 'Going blank'
- Nausea

- Sweating
- Hyperventilation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Urge to escape

These symptoms are part of the fight or flight response, the body's protective mechanism. If we are under real threat (e.g., approached by a robber) our body must ready itself for fighting or fleeing from the threat.

As a result, we get a surge of adrenaline and our breathing rate increases (to get more oxygen to the body), we sweat (to cool the body), our muscles tense (to prepare for fighting or fleeing), our heart rate increases (to pump more blood around the body), our attention narrows and focuses on the threat (so that we aren't distracted from dealing with the threat), and so on. As you can see, all these changes are designed to help us deal with the threat.

But in most social situations we can't simply fight or run away at top speed, so we aren't able to use all the extra resources in our body (e.g., adrenaline, oxygen). As a consequence, we subjectively experience these bodily changes as intense anxiety.

So we feel socially anxious when we perceive a social threat. People with social anxiety disorder have a bias to their thinking whereby they *overestimate* social threat and therefore have their fight or flight response easily triggered in social situations. We will now describe six factors that can each play a role in maintaining the overestimation of social threat.

Negative Thoughts
Most people, when they are upset, have upsetting thoughts going through their minds. These thoughts can have powerful impacts on our emotions. These thoughts may be about the past, present, or future. Common social anxiety thoughts may include:

- I will say something stupid and others will laugh
- Other people are talking about me behind my back
- I am trembling, shaking, and looking as bright red as a beetroot
- I won't know what to say
- People think I am very odd

Negative thoughts about social situations are one of the reasons people feel socially anxious. Sometimes these negative thoughts are in the form of words, and sometimes they are in the form of images. Images may involve multiple senses. We may see a visual image of the social situation playing out. We may recall people's voices (auditory memories) or see snapshots (visual memories) from past social situations, or we might imagine these aspects of future social situations. They may be vague or fuzzy, or they might be as clear as if you were watching a movie.

Take a moment to write down some of the <u>negative thoughts and images</u> you have that make you feel anxious about social situations. What are some of the negative predictions you have about what others will think or how you will come across?

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Avoidance
In order to stop feeling anxious, most people with social anxiety try to avoid or escape from social situations to prevent their negative thoughts from coming true. Avoidance makes sense in the short term, because it may provide some relief from the anxiety. However, the relief is only temporary because the underlying perception of social threat is never directly tested, challenged, and modified. As a consequence, the social fear remains. In fact, avoidance usually results in increasing anxiety in more and more situations as people come to believe that they cannot cope with social situations. Avoidance also causes a practical problems and interference in people's lives.

Take a moment to write down any social situations you <u>avoid</u> because of your fear of being judged negatively by others.

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Safety Behaviours

Sometimes it is not possible to completely avoid social situations. In these cases, socially anxious people often use subtle avoidance behaviours called 'safety' behaviours to help them feel more comfortable. Safety behaviours are the things you do within social situations to try and prevent your fears from coming true. For example, a person might go to a work meeting but not say anything at the meeting. They haven't avoided the situation altogether, but at the same time they have avoided testing their fears (e.g., that if they say something they will be criticised). Common safety behaviours include:

- Using alcohol or drugs
- Not making eye contact
- Not contributing to discussions/meetings
- Wearing inconspicuous clothes
- Asking a lot of questions so you don't need to disclose personal information
- Making excuses to leave early
- Covering up your anxiety symptoms in some way (e.g., using makeup to cover blushing)
- Perfectionistic behaviours such as over-preparation for presentations/meetings
- Carrying anti-anxiety medications to take 'when or if needed'
- Only talking to specific 'safe' people

We might feel like these 'tricks of the trade' are helping to reduce our anxiety and prevent social catastrophes, but in fact they just stop us from learning that our fears are less likely to happen than we think (probability) and less catastrophic when they do happen (cost). If a social situation goes well it doesn't seem to make a difference to our social anxiety, because we attribute the success to our safety behaviour, rather than learning that the situation itself is safe and we can cope socially. Safety behaviours can actually make things worse because they can cause us to become more self-focused and appear less engaged in the social situation.

What are some of the <u>safety behaviours</u> you use in social situations?

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Self- and Environment-Focused Attention

People with social anxiety focus their attention in ways that increase their anxiety in social situations. In particular, socially anxious people focus most of their attention on themselves, including their physical symptoms of anxiety and their negative thoughts (self-focused attention). They may also look around their environment for any evidence that they are in fact being negatively evaluated (environment-focused attention, e.g., people laughing in another part of the room, anyone looking in their direction). When most of our attention is directed towards ourselves and/or looking for threats in our environment, very little attention is left over to focus on the 'task at hand' (task-focused attention). The effects of this are to increase self-consciousness and anxiety, and it interferes with social performance because you are not focusing on what you are trying to do (e.g., maintain a conversation).

When you are in a social situation and are feeling socially anxious, where is your <u>attention</u> focused?

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How You Think You Appear To Others

Close your eyes and see if you can create an image in your mind of how you think you appear to other people when you are feeling socially anxious. Most people with social anxiety think that they are performing very badly and that their anxiety is blatantly obvious to other people. For example, we may believe we are blushing bright red, shaking, trembling, looking away, sweating, or stumbling over our words. However, many people who feel anxious in social situations have inaccurate views about how they appear to others. It is possible that although you may feel anxious, others cannot see this. In fact, most people with social anxiety come across far better than they think they do. Inaccurate and overly negative beliefs about your social performance and how anxious you appear to others can therefore mislead you and increase your perception of social threat.

How do you think you <u>appear to others</u> when you are feeling socially anxious? Are there any physical symptoms of your anxiety that you believe are obvious to others?

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Core Beliefs

Many people with social anxiety disorder recall early life events that were associated with significant social anxiety. There may be one or two situations, or many early experiences, that you identify as substantially contributing to your social anxiety. These early experiences may be associated with important meanings about ourselves, others, and the world in general. We call these 'core beliefs'. For example, if I was bullied I may have formed beliefs such as "I am unlikeable" or "I am inferior". I might also have come to believe that "others are hostile or critical". As a consequence, when I think about entering a social situation now, I think my 'inferiority' is obvious and I expect to be criticised by others. Core beliefs are not necessarily conscious thoughts, but are more like 'unwritten' rules through which people interpret what is happening around them. They can act like 'filters' that guide our thoughts and expectations in the here-and-now.
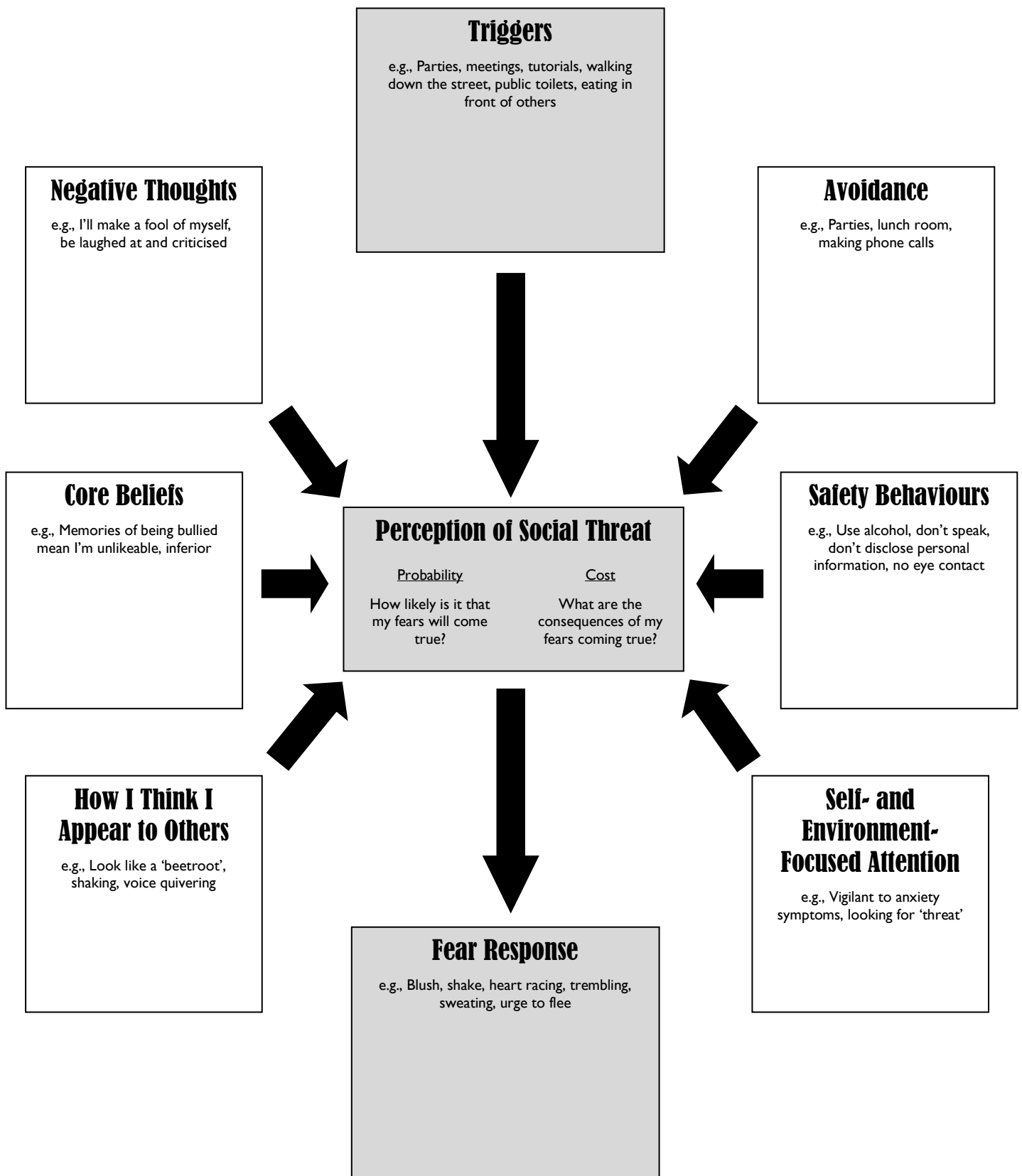
All six of these factors – negative thoughts, avoidance, safety behaviours, how you think you appear to others, self- and environment-focused attention, and core beliefs – work together to maintain your fear of negative evaluation and cause you to feel anxious and uncomfortable in social situations. On the following page we have summarised this information into a model which shows how all six factors contribute to social anxiety disorder. The shaded areas of the model explain the link between the triggers, perception of social danger (probability and cost), and the fear response. The unshaded parts are the six factors that contribute to the perception of social threat. We have listed some specific examples for each part of the model. On the page after that there is a worksheet for you to complete by filling in each part of the model with your own examples.
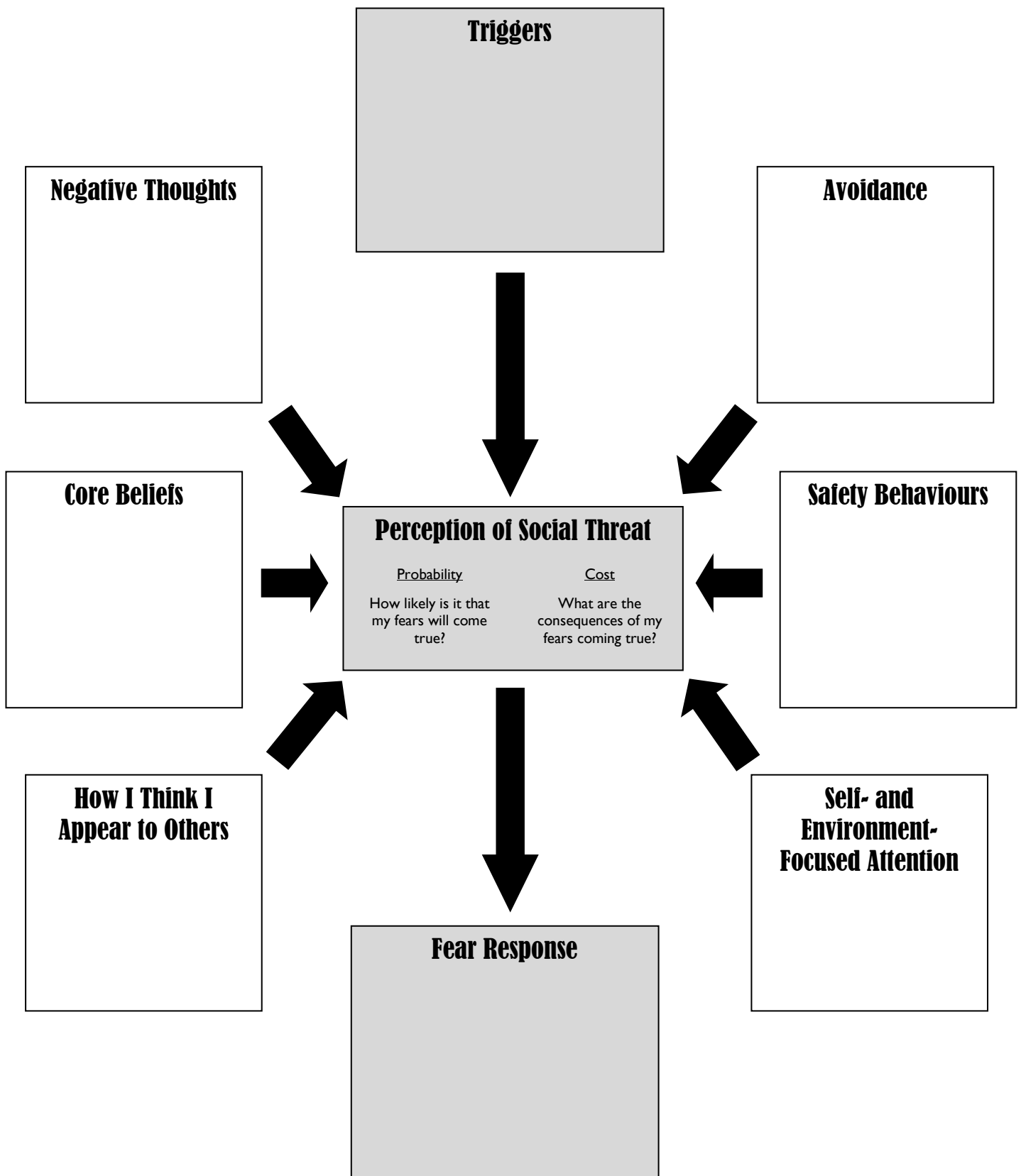
The good news is that the components of this model can also work for us, because making a change in any one of the parts will flow through to the others. The modules to follow will provide you with some practical ways to make changes to each of these maintaining factors of your social anxiety.

Model of Social Anxiety – Example

Triggers

e.g., Parties, meetings, tutorials, walking down the street, public toilets, eating in front of others

Negative Thoughts

e.g., I'll make a fool of myself, be laughed at and criticised

Avoidance

e.g., Parties, lunch room, making phone calls

Core Beliefs

e.g., Memories of being bullied mean I'm unlikeable, inferior

Perception of Social Threat

Probability

How likely is it that my fears will come true?

Cost

What are the consequences of my fears coming true?

Safety Behaviours

e.g., Use alcohol, don't speak, don't disclose personal information, no eye contact

How I Think I Appear to Others

e.g., Look like a 'beetroot', shaking, voice quivering

Self- and Environment- Focused Attention

e.g., Vigilant to anxiety symptoms, looking for 'threat'

Fear Response

e.g., Blush, shake, heart racing, trembling, sweating, urge to flee

My Model of Social Anxiety

Triggers

Negative Thoughts

Avoidance

Core Beliefs

Safety Behaviours

Perception of Social Threat

Probability

How likely is it that
my fears will come
true?

Cost

What are the
consequences of my
fears coming true?

How I Think I Appear to Others

Self- and Environment-Focused Attention

Fear Response

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Module Summary

- Social anxiety is anxiety that occurs in response to social situations. A certain amount of social anxiety is completely normal, with around 90% of people acknowledging that they feel shy at certain points in their lives.

- People with 'social anxiety disorder' or 'social phobia' fear being judged negatively by others and often avoid social situations, to the point that their social anxiety gets in the way of the life that they want to be living.

- Social anxiety occurs when we perceive a 'social threat' in a particular social situation. This is usually a fear of being judged negatively by others or not coming across well to others (e.g., coming across as awkward or uninteresting).

- Our perception of social threat is divided into two parts: probability and cost. The probability refers to how likely our fears are to happen. The cost refers to how bad we believe it will be if our fears do come true.

- People with social anxiety disorder feel more socially anxious than others because they tend to overestimate the social threat in some social situations. Overcoming social anxiety disorder is therefore a matter of reducing this tendency to overestimate social threat.

- Six factors maintain the overestimation of social threat. These are negative thoughts, avoidance, safety behaviours, self- and environment-focused attention, how you think you appear to others, and negative core beliefs.

- The modules to follow will provide you with some practical ways to make changes to each of these six maintaining factors of your social anxiety.

Coming Up...

In the next module we will look at how your thinking patterns contribute to social anxiety, and will introduce strategies to address unhelpful thinking patterns.

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 (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.

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