

Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

Module 10

Maintaining Your Gains and Dealing with Setbacks

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Introduction

Congratulations on making it to the end of this workbook! The most important thing for you to do now is to keep going! This means continuing to apply the strategies you have learned through reading these modules. If you continue to practise the skills you have learned, they will become more like habits that have been integrated into your lifestyle. In this final module, you will find a summary of all of the important strategies introduced to you in the previous modules. We will also discuss how to manage future setbacks which may occur with your social anxiety.

Summary of Skills

Throughout this set of modules, we have covered a range of new skills and strategies which are summarised below. Consider how helpful each of these strategies has been for you and commit to applying them regularly. This will allow you to maintain the gains you have made, and build on your gains over time.

Thought challenging

Our initial negative thoughts may 'just' be thoughts rather than facts. In Module 2, you practised 'tuning in' to your specific negative thoughts and images about social situations, learnt how to start looking for contrary evidence that does not fit your thoughts, and started to consider alternative, more realistic thoughts.

Behavioural experiments

Avoiding situations that trigger our anxiety stops us from directly testing our negative thoughts and therefore keeps our social anxiety going. Modules 3 and 4 introduced behavioural experiments to directly test your negative thoughts. Behavioural experiments involve:

- Being very specific about your predictions
- Planning how you could test the predictions
- Carefully considering what evidence you need to observe to check how accurate your predictions are
- Doing the experiment
- Reflecting on the results
- Making conclusions based on the results



Behavioural experiments can teach us that our negative thoughts are less likely to occur than we may expect, and that even when aspects of our negative thoughts do come true we can cope.

Dropping safety behaviours

Module 5 discussed the importance of dropping safety behaviours. We use safety behaviours to prevent our fears from coming true...or so we thought! Safety behaviours actually keep our anxiety going because they are just more subtle forms of avoidance. They also keep us self-focused, can create negative evaluation rather than prevent it, and ultimately stop us from directly testing our fears. If things go well, we conclude that the safety behaviour saved us...rather than learning that our fears were just less likely to happen than we thought.

Attention training and focusing

When our attention is focused on ourselves and/or looking for threat in the environment, we cannot be focused on the task at hand. Self- and environment-focused attention just distracts us from the task we are engaged in (e.g., conversation), which is then likely to affect our memory of the social situation in three ways. First, we are only likely to remember negative aspects of the situation (e.g., how anxious we were feeling) because that's what we were most focused on. Second, we are likely to miss positive aspects of the situation that would challenge our fears (e.g., positive feedback from others). Third, it is going to be much more difficult to keep up with the task at hand (e.g., topic of the conversation) because we are so distracted with ourselves. In Module 6, we learned how to be more aware of where our attention is (attention training) and how to shift our attention back onto the task at hand (attention focusing).

Video-feedback

It is common for people with social anxiety to overestimate how noticeable their anxiety is to others. For this reason, it can be helpful to conduct a behavioural experiment to test out how observable your anxiety actually is when you are anxious. As discussed in Module 7, an example of a good way to do this would be to record yourself giving a speech to see if your 'self-image' is accurate or not. You may learn that even when you are highly anxious your symptoms are not as obvious as you think, and that you don't need to be too concerned about other people noticing your anxiety.



Identifying and challenging my core beliefs

Core beliefs are often at the root of unhelpful thoughts that are particularly difficult to change. Modules 8 and 9 looked at core beliefs and how to change them. This involved use of the downward arrow technique to identify your core beliefs, challenging these core beliefs by looking for evidence against them, and strengthening new, more helpful core beliefs by developing action plans.

Next, we will develop a plan for recognising early warning signs of a setback in your social anxiety so that you can 'get back on board' with the strategies and continue moving forward towards your values and goals.

Dealing with Setbacks

As you continue to apply your skills, it is important to recognise that you can expect some ups and downs along the way. The road to recovery is rarely a smooth ride. It is normal to experience setbacks in your social anxiety from time to time, for example, if you experience a particularly difficult social situation or if your life circumstances change so that you are not getting as much exposure to social situations. The important thing is how you respond to these setbacks, not that they have occurred in the first place. Try not to focus too much on any setbacks that you experience. Instead, focus your attention on what you will do next to get back on track. If you respond to a setback by thinking in unhelpful ways like "I'm back to square one" you will probably start to fall back into old habits. If you try and learn something about the experience then you can use this information to build resilience over time.

It may be helpful to create a personalised Dealing with Setbacks Plan to help you to recognise the signs of a setback and take action as soon as possible. This way you can prevent a small setback from turning into a large one.

On the next page is a Dealing with Setbacks Plan worksheet for you to identify:

- **My Triggers.** These are the types of situations that could potentially trigger a setback in your social anxiety in the future.
- **My Warning Signs.** Clues you can keep watch for that indicate you might be starting to become more socially anxious again.
- **Action Plan.** What do you need to focus on and remind yourself when a social anxiety setback occurs? What do you need to do when a social anxiety setback occurs? Which strategies from your Summary of Skills will be important for you to put in place?

Remember that avoiding social situations plays a large role in maintaining social anxiety. Therefore it is important to remember that the main reason for identifying potential triggers for your social anxiety is not so that you can avoid your triggers. Rather, by being aware of your early signs and potential triggers, you will be in a better position to "spot" a setback in your social anxiety and then take early action to prevent it from becoming worse.



My Dealing with Setbacks Plan

Setbacks are normal – it is how I respond to setbacks that is most important

My Triggers (When are setbacks in my social anxiety more likely to occur? In what types of circumstances do I tend to have a setback?)

My Warning Signs (How do I know when I have had a setback in my social anxiety? Are there any emotional, thinking, behavioural or physical signals? E.g., avoidance, reliance on safety behaviours, more concerns about others judging me)

ACTION PLAN:

What do I need to focus on and remind myself when a social anxiety setback occurs?

What do I need to do when a social anxiety setback occurs? E.g., review Summary of Skills, review modules, recommence thought challenging and behavioural experiments

Maintaining My Gains

Congratulations again on making it to the end of this information package! The most important thing now is to continue using the strategies we have covered in these modules, and which are all summarised in the Summary of Skills. It may be helpful to revise the modules from time to time, especially if you are going through a difficult period. It may also be helpful to take this opportunity to consider whether there are any strategies in the Summary of Skills you think you would benefit from using more often. Are there any specific situations you still need to confront to overcome remaining anxieties? Is it time to start confronting these situations in your next set of behavioural experiments, to continue to build on the gains you have made?

There are some important things to remember about maintaining your gains:

Expect Slip-Ups

Slip-ups in progress can happen at any time and are to be expected. Use your new skills to start moving forward again when this situation occurs. It might be useful to remind yourself that most people have 'down days' or days where life's hassles are harder to deal with – it's part of being human!

You can also use setbacks as a way of learning something new about yourself to help avoid similar problems in the future. Ask yourself, what made this particular situation difficult for me? What could I do to manage it differently next time? What skills could I use to help prepare myself for similar situations in the future? Regularly consult the Summary of Skills and your Dealing with Setbacks Plan.

Social Support

It is wise to find someone with whom you can sit down and have a good talk. This doesn't mean a therapy session where you pour your heart out but rather just a chance to talk through what's going on in your life, what your goals are, and generally just to ventilate with someone you trust. Social support has been found to be very important in preventing relapse. Often problems seem bigger than they really are when a person tries to deal with them on their own. Talking through difficulties can help to put them into perspective.



Remember – progress is a bumpy road, but if you continue making small steps you will get there.

Module Summary

- To maintain and build on the gains you have made, continue to apply the strategies you have learned through reading these modules:
 - Thought challenging
 - Behavioural experiments
 - Behavioural experiment hierarchies
 - Dropping safety behaviours
 - Attention training and focusing
 - Developing a more accurate self-image of how you appear to others when anxious
 - Challenging negative core beliefs
 - Acting consistently with new, more positive core beliefs
- Expect setbacks, but rather than focussing on them, use your Dealing with Setbacks Plan to recognise them early and get back on track.

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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