

Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

Module 7

How I Think I Appear to Others

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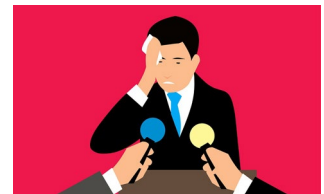
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Introduction

Our modules so far have focused on challenging and experimenting with predictions about how others will react to you in social situations. Hopefully, by regularly conducting behavioural experiments, you are beginning to update your initial negative thoughts about the likelihood (and cost!) of your social fears coming true. We are now going to look at thoughts about how you appear to others when you are feeling anxious, as it is common for people with social anxiety to think their anxiety symptoms are very obvious to others.

Thinking About How I Appear to Others

Let's imagine you're about to give a presentation in front of a group of your peers and you're feeling anxious. You notice that your palms and forehead feel sweaty, your cheeks are warm, and your hands are beginning to shake. You imagine stumbling over your words, and that everyone is going to notice these anxiety symptoms and think you're weird. So you decide to stay home and avoid the presentation altogether...



This is one example of negative imagery related to how you appear to others. It is common for people with social anxiety to hold negative thoughts and images about how they come across to others. These thoughts and images are typically guided by people's physical feelings of anxiety rather than objective feedback about how they actually appear (e.g., "because I feel anxious I must also look anxious"). On the one hand this makes sense - if you're noticing physical signs of anxiety then surely others will notice too?! Interestingly however, research shows that people with social anxiety commonly overestimate the observability of their anxiety and underestimate their social performance relative to others.

What thoughts or images come to mind about how you appear to others when you feel anxious? What personal physical signs of anxiety do you think are obvious to others (e.g., blushing, sweating, stuttering, shaking, mind blanks, "umms or ahhs")? How do you imagine you are performing? Write your answers in the space provided below.

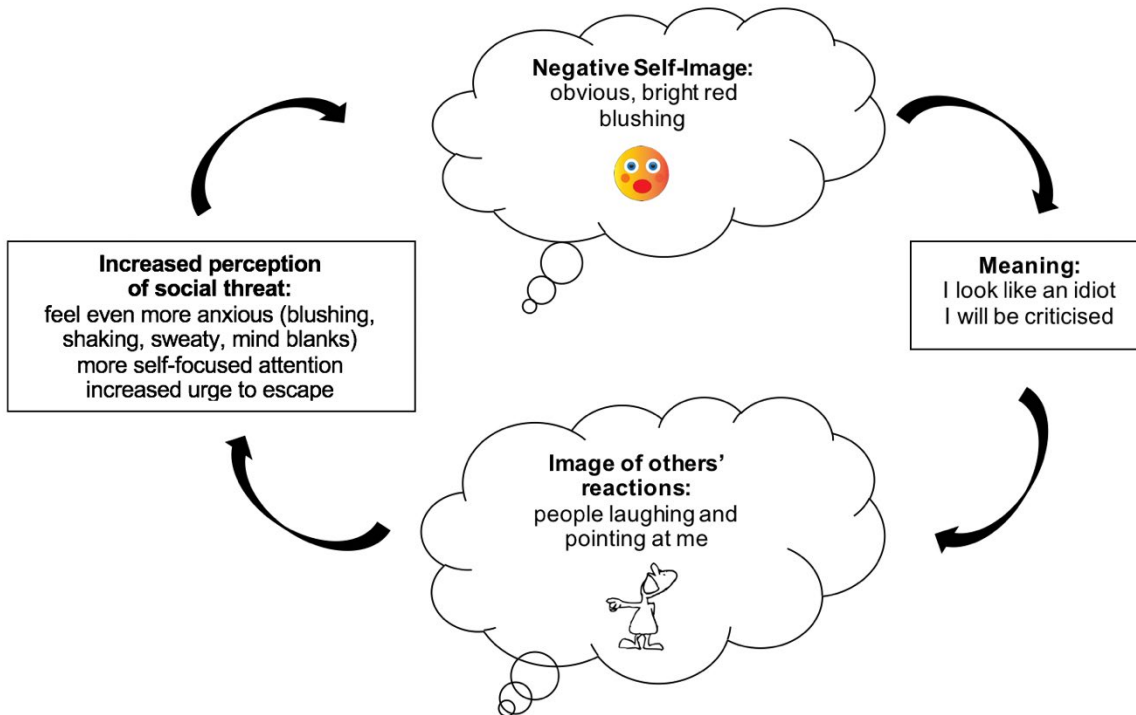
Holding negative thoughts about how you appear to others can maintain your social anxiety by:

1. Increasing your perception of social threat: If you believe that your anxiety symptoms are highly obvious to others and will be associated with very negative consequences (e.g., will lead to negative judgment from others), then it makes sense that you would see social situations as more threatening.
2. Promoting self-focused attention: If you're worried about anxiety symptoms being obvious to others, then your attention is more likely to be self-focused in an effort to detect any early warning signs of anxiety. As outlined in module 6, self-focused attention can distract you away from the social task at hand, interfere with your social performance, and increase your awareness of even small changes in your anxiety (and therefore heighten your expectation that it is obvious to others).
3. Increasing your urge to escape and avoid: You'll remember from previous modules that avoidance prevents you from testing the accuracy of your negative predictions. If you avoid



social situations because you think you will appear anxious, you will never get to find out how you actually come across to others, or how much it actually matters if people do notice symptoms of your anxiety.

The figure below represents the relationship between negative thoughts/images about how you appear and social anxiety.



Testing Out How I Appear to Others

Since research shows people with social anxiety tend to perform better than they imagine in social situations, we want to encourage you to be curious about the accuracy of your own negative thoughts about how you come across when anxious. It is possible that your anxiety is not as obvious to other people as it is to you.

Consider what it would be like to find out that in fact, many of the anxiety symptoms you imagined were obvious are actually very mild (or unnoticeable) from other people's perspective. What impact would that have on your expectations of negative judgement? What would this free you up to do differently when socialising or performing? Write your answers in the space provided below.

You can find out how you appear to others when you feel anxious by conducting a behavioural experiment. It is important that the information you collect from your experiment is unambiguous, objective, constructive and believable to you. We believe that experiments involving video feedback are the best way to achieve these aims. Obtaining video feedback is the best way to find out once

and for all, in a way that is convincing to you, how you actually come across when you're feeling anxious.

Video feedback experiments involve recording yourself when you are feeling anxious. They aim to directly compare your initial negative thoughts and images to how you actually appear on video. It is essential that you are feeling anxious when recorded so that you have an opportunity to observe how obvious these symptoms really are. You may benefit from asking a trusted partner, friend or family member for support in videotaping you (either subtly or in an observable way – the choice is yours!).



You may need to get creative in the way you set up your behavioural experiment. Most importantly, the experiment should be designed to test your specific fears regarding the observability of your anxiety. Ideas may include:

- Recording yourself completing a speech in front of the mirror
- Completing a 2-minute recorded impromptu speech in front of a select group
- Recording a 1:1 interaction with a trusted peer / friend / acquaintance / stranger
- Recording a speech or social interaction with your mental health practitioner
- Recording a group interaction
- Making use of the recording function in virtual resources (e.g., Zoom, Skype, FaceTime)



If you're finding the recording aspect too challenging, you can always ask a trusted friend or family member for feedback, although this feedback may be less believable to you.

You may wish to alter the type of task, audience, number of people, length of time recorded, or where the task is completed. Most importantly, the experiment should be set up to be at least 5/10 anxiety provoking. If you're not feeling anxious then you are unlikely to learn any helpful information regarding how you appear when you're in an anxious state.

Testing the Cost of How I Appear to Others

If you are concerned about receiving negative feedback from others in response to showing signs of anxiety, then you may benefit from designing experiments aimed at testing the cost of these symptoms. Ideas include recording other's reactions to you when you are:

- Shaking – by holding a full glass of water and intentionally shaking to the point you spill some of it
- Sweating – by intentionally splashing your face/armpits with water beforehand
- Blushing – by intentionally applying excess pink/red makeup to your cheeks beforehand

These experiments can be very challenging, but they can also be very powerful in updating the way you think you come across to others in social situations. Moving forward with a more accurate view of yourself can lead to more genuine choices about what you would like to do in life, without unfair and inaccurate perceptions dictating these choices for you.

We have provided an example Behavioural Experiment Record aimed at obtaining video feedback on the next page. Remember, the more specific you can be in describing your negative predictions and evidence to observe, the more informative the behavioural experiment will be.



Behavioural experiment example

Negative Thoughts Describe your prediction. Specifically, what do you think will happen? What negative images do you have about the situation?	Anxiety /10 How anxious do you feel?	Experiment Specifically, what could you do to test these thoughts?	Evidence to Observe Specifically, what do you need to look for to confirm or disconfirm your thoughts?	Results What happened? What clear evidence did you collect? Stick to unambiguous facts.	Conclusion What conclusion follows from your results? How can you keep this new information in mind? How can you find more opportunities to test your predictions?
<p><i>My anxiety is really obvious to other people. I go bright red, stutter, shake and can't get my words out.</i></p>	<p><i>9/10</i></p>	<p><i>Record myself presenting a 2-minute impromptu speech in front of my immediate family (mum, dad, brother and sister)</i></p>	<p><i>Blushing will be 9/10 observable</i></p> <p><i>Stuttering will be 10/10 observable</i></p> <p><i>My hands will shake and this will be 9/10 observable</i></p> <p><i>I will say "umm" and "ahh" at least 20 times</i></p> <p><i>I will have mind blanks (at least 5 that extend for approx. 10 seconds)</i></p>	<p><i>My cheeks were a little flushed, but I had to look really closely to notice – 2/10 observable</i></p> <p><i>I did not stutter – 0/10 observable</i></p> <p><i>My hands were a bit fidgety but I did not notice them shake – 0/10 observable</i></p> <p><i>I said "umm" and "ahh" but only 5 times</i></p> <p><i>My mind went blank once but only lasted a couple of seconds before I was able to think of something to say</i></p>	<p><i>Maybe my anxiety symptoms aren't as obvious as I initially thought</i></p> <p><i>The things I could see could be due to the fact that I didn't prepare for the speech rather than being obviously anxious</i></p> <p><i>I asked Mum to look over the video and she mostly agreed with my ratings, although she said she couldn't see the blushing at all</i></p> <p><i>This info helps me to feel more confident when socialising with others</i></p> <p><i>I will write myself a note in my phone and come back to it when I'm worried about my anxiety being obvious to others</i></p>

Some points to remember when reviewing your video ...

- Most people initially dislike seeing themselves and hearing their voices on video. An initial “yuck” factor is therefore expected when you first watch your video back. We recommend watching your video a minimum of four times which will help you to watch your video as objectively as possible.
- Pay close attention to how you look in the video rather than how you felt during the experiment (or how you are feeling while watching yourself on video). It is important that you focus on whether the video matches up with your original predictions.
- Try to be as objective as possible when watching your video back. Watch your video as if you were watching a friend or someone you care about. Look at the whole picture, rather than just honing in on one particular aspect that you dislike. Ask yourself, “If I wasn’t specifically looking for signs of anxiety, would this symptom stand out to me as an objective indicator that this person is anxious?”
- There may be aspects of your performance that you want to improve or do differently after watching the video. That’s ok. Remember the goal of this experiment is to test the observability of your anxiety – not evaluate your social performance! Stay focused on whether your initial predictions match up to what you see on the video.
- You may also wish to ask a partner / friend / family member to review your video to ensure you are being as objective as possible in your review.



Behavioural experiment record

Negative Thoughts Describe your prediction. Specifically, what do you think will happen? What negative images do you have about the situation?	Anxiety /10 How anxious do you feel?	Experiment Specifically, what could you do to test these thoughts?	Evidence to Observe Specifically, what do you need to look for to confirm or disconfirm your thoughts?	Results What happened? What clear evidence did you collect? Stick to unambiguous facts.	Conclusion What conclusion follows from your results? How can you keep this new information in mind? How can you find more opportunities to test your predictions?

Module Summary

- It is common for people with social anxiety to hold negative thoughts and images about how they come across to others. These images are typically guided by people's feelings of anxiety rather than objective feedback about how they actually appear.
- Holding negative thoughts or images about how you appear to others can maintain social anxiety by increasing your perception of social threat, increasing self-focused attention, and increasing your urge to escape/avoid.
- You can challenge negative thoughts about how you appear to others by conducting behavioural experiments with video feedback. It is important to be creative with your behavioural experiments to ensure you believe the evidence you are collecting.

Coming Up...

In the next module we will discuss how negative 'core beliefs' can keep your social anxiety going. We will show how to start identifying unhelpful core beliefs that relate to your social anxiety. We will introduce strategies to help start to change unhelpful core beliefs.



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.

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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.

“STEPPING OUT OF SOCIAL ANXIETY”

This module forms part of:

Bank, S., Burgess, M., Sng, A., Summers, M., Campbell, B., & McEvoy, P. (2020). *Stepping Out of Social Anxiety*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 978 0 9757995 1 2

Created: October, 2020