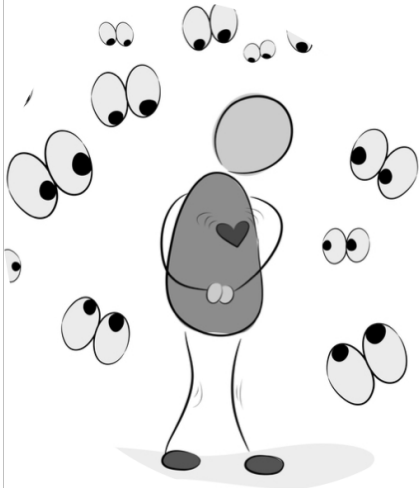


The CBT of Social Anxiety

The CBT of Social Anxiety – pick and mix resources pack:

If social occasions and interactions are mostly a *stressor* for you, it is likely you have Social Anxiety.



So, why does my brain malfunction for social interactions?

- Because I am 'just shy'? (nope)
- Because I am 'just too emotional'? (nope)
- Because of my trippy nervous system? (yep)

BODY	THINK	FEEL	BEHAVE
Threat response on high	I don't know how to talk to people!	Afraid Upset Embarrassed	Avoid / micro manage social interaction

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When we view social situations as a stressor or a negative event, (as opposed to a pleasure or a positive event), we physically pump up with stress hormones in response to them. Low, moderate, or high – depending on what we perceive is the 'threat level' and the 'danger'.

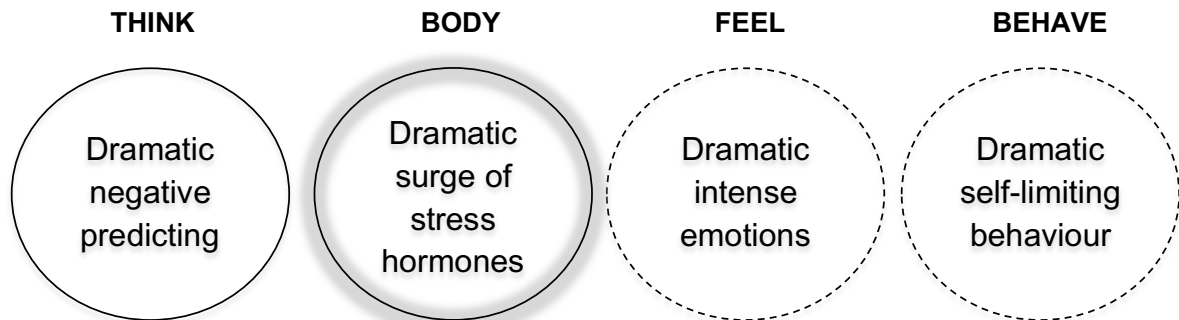
That makes sense, doesn't it? Your brain is not going to produce relaxation hormones in response to a stressful situation, is it? No – it activates your threat response, to pump you up with adrenaline and oxygen and cortisol, to help you deal with *danger*. But that is not at all helpful when the perceived threats are social and psychological, not physical - when we would prefer to cool down for them, rather than pump up (which causes over-breathing, blushing, overheating, trembling and scatter-brain). It's just like having Public Speaking Anxiety, but for general everyday life – it is when you have developed a situational anxiety – and your brain and body has become wired to regard certain social interactions as threats, largely because of the automatic stress surges and discomfort that doesn't feel good and that may be visible to the group.

"Today I escaped anxiety. Or no, I discarded it, because it was within me, in my own perceptions - not outside." Marcus Aurelius

Cognitive science tells us that our *attributional style* (how we explain the situation to ourself), plus our *threat response*, are the main cause of our feelings and behaviours. The event itself is not the real problem – it is how your brain and body is processing the event that is the problem to be solved.

CBT teaches you to become your own therapist with awareness and self-regulation of how you think and feel and behave – to literally edit how you think and feel and behave. It's a science, believe it.

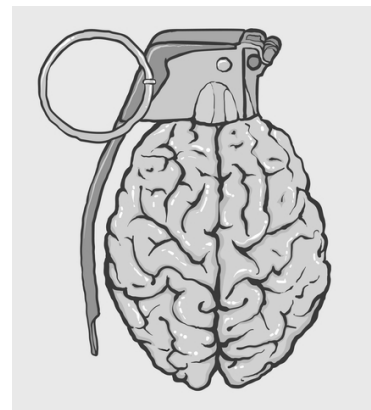
Check this 4 Strands of Experience model out – does it make sense to you? :



Early psychology focused on emotions, and in trying to make sense of the world through how you are feeling emotionally – rather than working on understanding and managing the main driver of anxiety: that *your mind is your brain which is attached to your nervous system*. Anxiety literally is a trippy nervous system, which pairs with exaggerated thoughts and beliefs, causing intense negative emotions, and self-limiting behaviour. CBT gives you skills to thought-stop and reconsider and regulate your perception – which will help regulate your dramatic body, which will help change how you feel, and let you live a bigger life, bit by bit, step by step.

So - if you've been trying to make sense of the world through how you are feeling emotionally, you've been looking in the wrong place: An emotion doesn't come out of the blue and cause your problems – feelings are not facts. Consider the following:

- Your heart beating faster is not an emotion
- Blushing is not an emotion.
- Not thinking straight is not an emotion
- Overheating and sweating is not an emotion
- Trembling is not an emotion
- Voice shaking is not an emotion

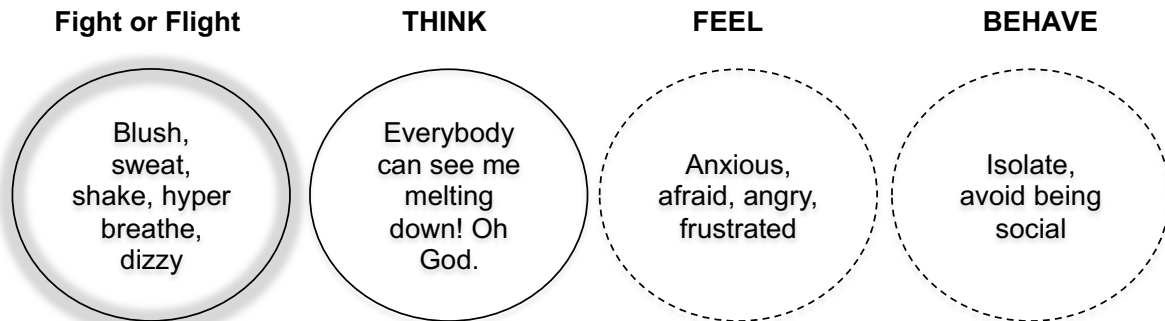


'It's your nervous system, stupid!'

(You know I'm not literally calling you stupid? We don't know what we don't know - always be learning.)

Other apes, sorry, 'people', cannot see an emotion - your practical worry is that they will witness your physical discomfort, and judge you negatively. Also - humans are wired to avoid the discomfort of pumping up. It doesn't feel good. We're just trying to protect ourselves and our status and our safety by micro-managing our lives to avoid it. That's not totally irrational – but, since everything in life is social, it's a pretty bad model to stick to when stress has become a disorder. So – use this handout to skill up

and rewire. Catch and examine your bad thinking habits that pump you up unhelpfully – and create new healthy thinking habits that regulate your body in proportion to events. Breathe it down and *be rational*. Check this 4 Strands of Experience model for somebody who is in auto high *fight or flight* socially::



The Merriam-Webster Medical Definition of social anxiety disorder

- *an anxiety disorder that is characterized by persistent and exaggerated fear of social situations (such as meeting strangers, dating, or public speaking) in which embarrassment or a negative judgment by others may occur and that causes significant distress, often resulting in an avoidance of such situations and impairment of normal social or occupational activities*
- “The essential feature of *social anxiety disorder* is marked, or intense, fear or anxiety of social situations in which the individual may be scrutinized by others”.— *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition*
- “About 5.3 million Americans ... suffer from *social anxiety disorder*, also called social phobia. It occurs in women twice as often as men. Symptoms include a persistent fear of being scrutinized and humiliated in public, excessive worrying, profuse sweating, trembling and stomach discomfort.” — Patricia Guthrie, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 29 Feb. 2000

So – we know that social anxiety is an intense exaggerated fear (emotion), with anxiety (physical symptoms / fight or flight) – the question is, what is causing the intense feelings? The thinking or the fight or flight? The chicken or the egg? In cognitive science solutions, we work on all of it: the thoughts, the body, the emotions and the behaviour. We skill you up to be your own therapist/scientist – to allow the ‘real you’ to navigate situations by being rational and informed about what’s really going on.

The physical high alert threat response is often called ‘Fight or Flight’ in psychology (for obvious reasons, the body pumps up in an instant to fight or flee). It was an evolutionary adaptation that helped humans to survive. And it would certainly have been a helpful automatic response back in caveman days, when multiple every-day threats were literally physical threats, when it would benefit us to be a state of high physical alert all the time – for a preying tiger, or the rival in the group that wants to take you out of the picture via a smack in the head with a stone, or an attack by a rival village, or just being strong enough to grab that last piece of chicken to survive.

Top tip: talk to your doctor about occasional-use **beta blocker medication** if you have debilitating physical anxiety that is stopping you progressing in your life/work. They are a simple blood pressure tablet that will turn down the threat response by blocking adrenaline surges – regulating your nervous system for a particular situational anxiety.

The instant threat response is helpful in the modern age for lots of situations too; from dealing with muggers, or a suspicious looking big spider in Australia (they've got the worst spiders, so you should be on high alert), or an intruder in your home... Or for a sudden physical pumping up to race and jump on that train you see is about to leave the station, or to scoop up your child who has wandered over to the fireplace, indeed to react lightning fast to anything that needs your physicality and focus. But it is not helpful when it is automatic in general social situations. The threat response IS the threat.

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What is my body doing?



- All okay, low resting heartbeat, homeostasis
- Pump up response - threat level low
- Pump up response - threat level medium
- Pump up response - threat level high

If I could turn down your threat response so that you could think straight, and so that there would be less fast breathing or shaking or blushing or racing heart in social situations, would that help you? If the answer is yes – then CBT is for you. CBT teaches you to create a cool rational thinking version of yourself – if you think differently, you feel differently and behave differently.

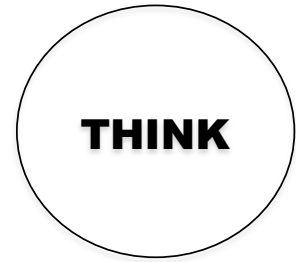
Does that make sense to you? Social anxiety, (regarding social interactions as a threat), is largely driven by dramatic physicality, which prompts dramatic ways of explaining the world to yourself, which causes dramatic emotions, and self-limiting micro-managing/avoidant behaviour. So – if you have been viewing everything as *emotional feelings*, you've been looking in the wrong place. You may be looking at life through distorted threat lenses because of your trippy nervous system messing with your data.

John Medina, molecular biologist and NYT best-selling Brain Rules author, says the 'mammalian' part of our brain is for *animal survival*, and that "most of its functions involve what some researchers call the 'four Fs': fighting, feeding, fleeing, and... reproductive behaviour." So you can see how we are driven to have a tribe to ensure all of that.

We want to fit in and stay in. Constantly assessing: "Am I safe or unsafe? Is this good or bad? Am I included? Am I respected? Am I attractive? Am I part of the group? Do I belong? Am I loved? Am I behaving properly? Are others behaving properly?" Beware your threat lens and threat response answering those questions overly negatively, becoming self-fulfilling prophecies, in a vicious circle.

You can learn to understand the amazing science of your body and it's threat response, and to change how you assess threats. Collecting new evidence through new experiences, to edit your memories, and your brain's automatic neural circuitry, to be more comfortable and to learn new 'good habits' of thinking. It's a science, believe it. Start 'learning and doing'.

Let's take a look at the negative predicting habits that activate fight or flight: Accepting these thoughts and beliefs, which are simplistic statements with no nuance or context, causes you physical and emotional and behavioural upset. Tick the ones you recognise.



- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I don't know how to talk to people | <input type="checkbox"/> I'm not normal. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I could go, but I wouldn't enjoy it. | <input type="checkbox"/> I look like crap. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> They won't want me there anyway. | <input type="checkbox"/> They'll all be happy and cool, and I'll be miserable and uncool. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> They're always judging me. | <input type="checkbox"/> I'll start to tremble and shake, it will be awful. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> It will be torture. | <input type="checkbox"/> I don't fit in. So they'll exclude me. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> They'll all see how nervous I am. | <input type="checkbox"/> I'm not fun. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My mind will go blank. | <input type="checkbox"/> I can't risk attention being on me, I'll panic, best to stay quiet. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My tongue will be tied. | <input type="checkbox"/> I should contribute |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My heart will be racing. | <input type="checkbox"/> I should be interesting. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'll blush bright red and they'll all see it. | <input type="checkbox"/> I should have charisma. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My voice will shake. | <input type="checkbox"/> I look like crap. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My throat will start to close, and I'll choke. | <input type="checkbox"/> They'll tease me for being a weirdo. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can't make eye contact, they'll think that's weird. | <input type="checkbox"/> I bet they're making faces behind my back |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'll have a massive panic attack in front of everybody. | <input type="checkbox"/> I'm not like other people. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'll feel sick in my stomach. | <input type="checkbox"/> They think I'm jealous of them. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I always sound stupid, and fake. | <input type="checkbox"/> They think they're so great but they're awful. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Everybody else will be relaxed, and I'll be a bag of nerves. | <input type="checkbox"/> They disrespect me. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'll just embarrass myself. | <input type="checkbox"/> It's not fair. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> If there are new people there I'll panic. | <input type="checkbox"/> It's humiliating. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parties are horrible. | <input type="checkbox"/> Life is just too hard for me. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> People are horrible. | <input type="checkbox"/> I'll never be happy. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> They'll talk over me again. | <input type="checkbox"/> I can't cope. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> People never even listen to me, so what's the point? | <input type="checkbox"/> It's hopeless. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> People don't like me. | <input type="checkbox"/> They think I'm an oddball. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I hate meeting new people. | <input type="checkbox"/> This is a very bad situation for me. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm boring. | <input type="checkbox"/> (Negative predicting) |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> (Negative mind reading) |

Can you see the patterns that are typical for social anxiety? Predicting machines are predictable!

This kind of negative predicting appears repeatedly – activating fight or flight, and resulting in intense fear and self-sabotaging. Can you see that they are distorted and exaggerated? Can you see that they are dramatic statements that have no nuance or context? Be careful what you say to yourself, your body is listening. Can you see how many of them are about the physicality of the threat response? The threat response is the threat!

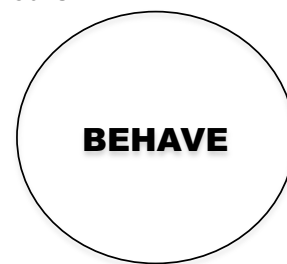
Somewhere along the way you collected and labelled social experiences as bad and dangerous threats (we call these fake threats ‘paper tigers’ or ‘invisible tigers’). How and why did this happen? For some people it’s just genetics, where you were born hypervigilant physically - others became dysregulated and *wired for threats* through chronic traumatic situations or environments and long-term exposure to stress hormones - others learned it from their authority figures (sometimes parents, but not always) – others have chemical or hormonal imbalances... however you came about it, you are *wired unhelpfully*. But you can do something about it. It begins with learning that trying to make sense of things through how we feel emotionally is not very useful. Emotional reasoning is irrational (‘I *feel* bad, so it *is* bad!’).

We can address the cause of inappropriate fight or flight by learning to challenge our distorted perception of events with new ways of thinking – since it only occurs when we perceive danger and an inability to cope, it can be regulated if we can rationally reframe our self-talk, and persuade ourselves that here is actually very little to fear, and that we can in fact cope. Rational evidence-based thinking skills help us to stop seeing hazards and dangers everywhere - invisible tigers become visible and are rendered toothless - thus physical responses will become manageable and occur less often and with less ferocity. ‘There is no tiger here, I’ve got this’. Changing our thinking and the way we look at situations, and gradually tolerating discomfort, and bit by bit exposing ourselves to interaction and realizing it’s doable and rewarding, will help to ‘rewire’ our brains and responses over time

Humans are quite irrational, we are simply not a perfect predicting-machine. The real you, the logical-thinking you, is the person reading this – whereas the ‘anxiety-you’ is a little caveman inside, thinking it’s helping you, but it’s gotten things very wrong. Learn how to be the boss of your own thinking, by overriding your caveman and activating the *real you* through learning rational thinking skills – building awareness and management of distorted automatic negative thoughts and beliefs. *Preciseness of language and evidence based statements* are what we want to learn how to do. We aim to create new self-talk – rejecting old automatic self-talk that is far too negative and dramatic and sure of itself on flimsy unreliable evidence and emotional reasoning.

Let's take a look at some examples of self-limiting social anxiety behaviours:

Can you see how these choices of action are ultimately self-sabotaging, causing you more upset and anxiety – trapping you in a vicious circle of bad habits.



- Avoiding social situations where you do not have certainty of how it will go
- Avoiding social interactions you find threatening
- Avoiding eye contact
- Avoiding parties
- Avoid being a focus of attention
- Not answering the phone, let it go to voicemail
- Overthink social media responses/interactions
- Constantly go over and over what you regard as bad social experiences
- Constantly comparing and rate yourself to others.
- Constantly daydreaming a different you in a different life.
- Avoiding the work canteen
- Not wanting to eat in front of people
- Avoid talking on the phone
- Avoid 'small talk'
- Thinking you need alcohol to cope
- Absenteeism
- Isolating yourself from friends and family
- Calling in sick to work often
- Pretending you're sick to avoid school or college
- Sit down the back at events – make yourself small
- Sleeping too much (or too little)
- Eating too much (or too little)
- Constantly watching out for, and usually misinterpreting, other people's reactions to you
- Perceiving criticism where none was intended
- Excessive self-focused attention
- Personalising everything
- Not listening properly – not present
- Preparing and rehearsing what you will say and how you will say it and when you will say it
- Focusing on all the little pauses, someone looking over your shoulder, little awkward moments
- Focusing only on perceived negatives and discounting the positives.

What have you learned? (key ideas about your own self-limiting behaviour:

The cost of accepting your self-talk is too high. Develop awareness and map it:

A CBT Self Esteem Guide – beliefs turn on the threat response which causes feelings and behavior...

How do I describe *myself* to myself? "I am..."

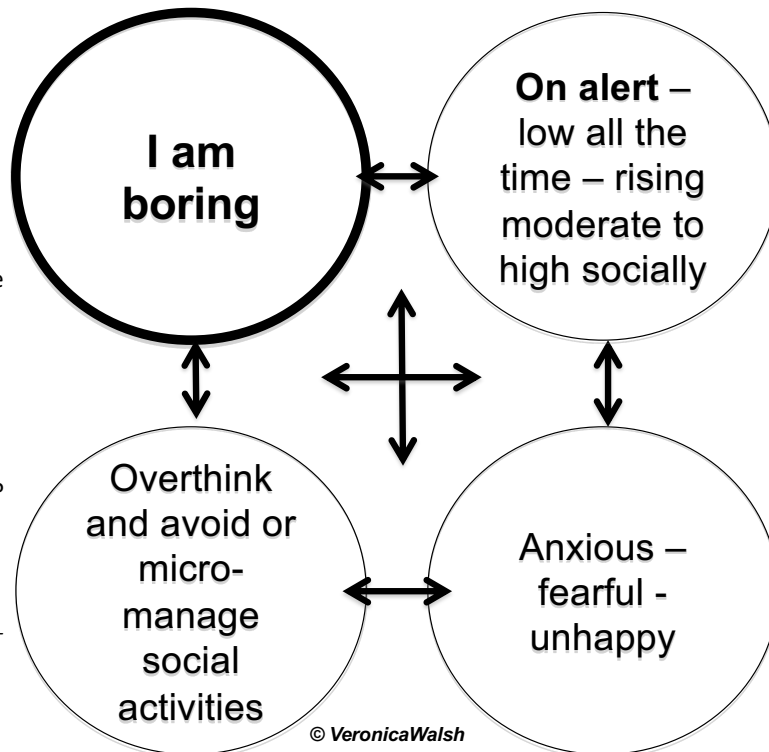
Is the statement 100% true and proportional?

How does believing this absolute statement make me feel and behave? Does it become a self fulfilling prophecy?

What would I advise my best friend to steer them out of this simplistic literal framing?

Key: So maybe we're not making everything up – but we may be very well be unhelpfully over-dramatic and inaccurate - being 'boring' is a thing we do sometimes, not a thing we are – it's a verb not a noun, and it's a social anxiety and something we can work on.

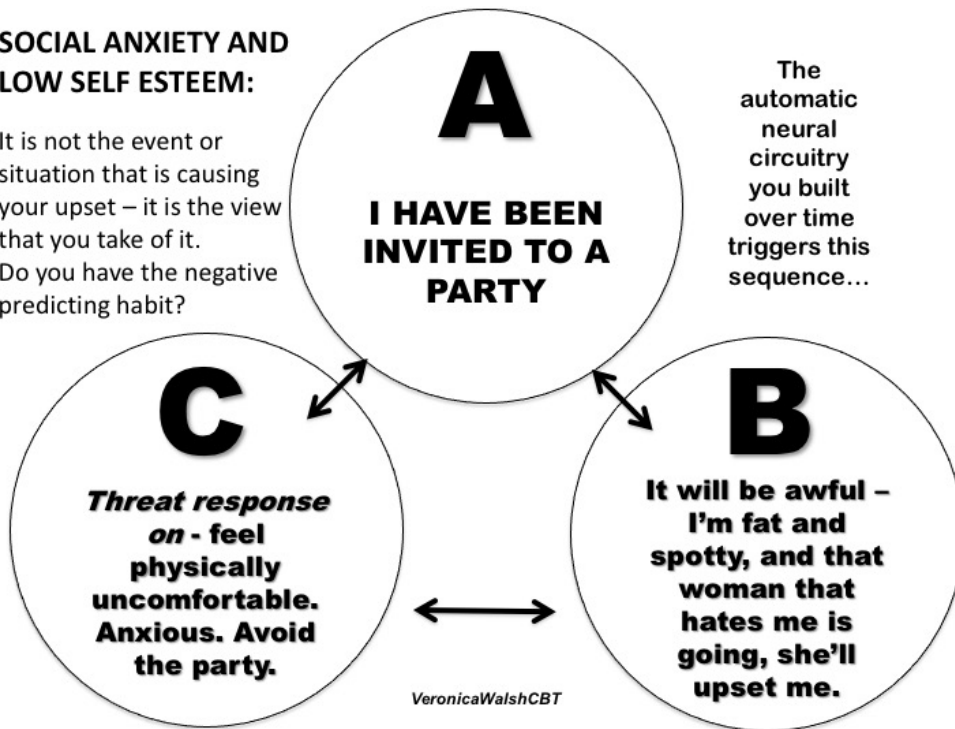
THOUGHT-STOP, EXAMINE, REFRAME



SOCIAL ANXIETY AND LOW SELF ESTEEM:

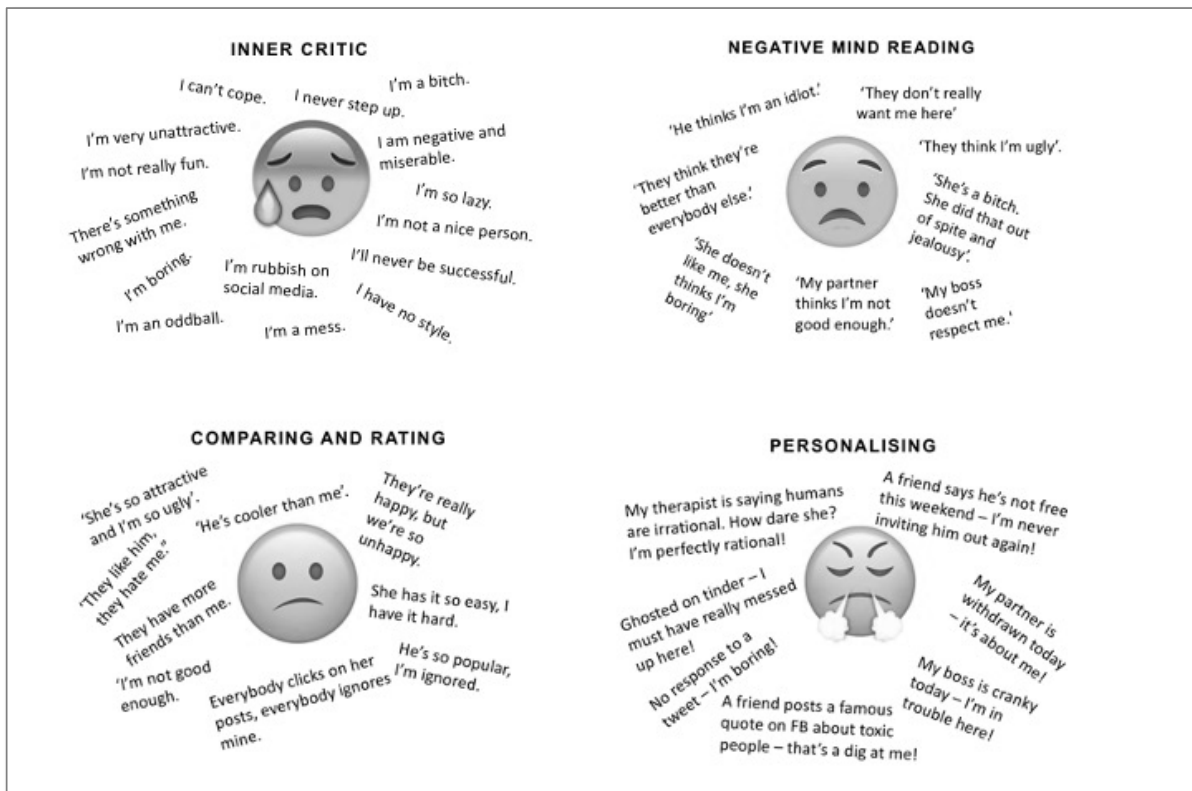
It is not the event or situation that is causing your upset – it is the view that you take of it. Do you have the negative predicting habit?

The automatic neural circuitry you built over time triggers this sequence...



The Journaling templates: best practice CBT requires journaling of our attributional style – refer to the ABC worksheets earlier in this handbook for examples of disputing bad thinking habits. And/or use the below model examples to guide you, CBT is efficient and proven to fast track you to being able to spot and *edit* irrational thinking in a flash. Check out the simplicity and effectiveness of how to map patterns – you can replicate this in a notebook, then design new rational self-talk – think different, feel different, behave different, and get better outcomes.

Watch out for these bad thinking habits:

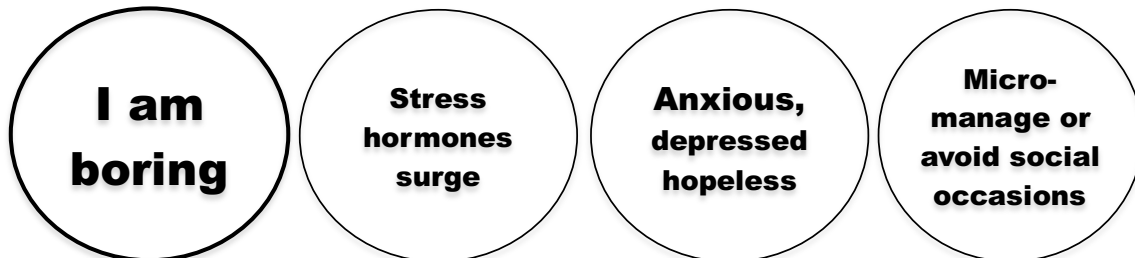


Tips to ask yourself of your thoughts and beliefs about a situation before reframing:

- Are these thoughts and beliefs exaggerated and overly dramatic?
- Are they healthy or unhealthy?
- Rational or irrational? Is my mental filter set to a negative lens?
- What is the exact evidence for this thought and belief?
- Is there any evidence against it?
- How has accepting this self-talk affected my life so far? Is it helpful or unhelpful?
- Am I only noticing my perceived negatives, and ignoring positives?
- What would I advise somebody I loved if they were thinking this way?
- Is there another way of looking at this?
- **What is a rational calm stripped down alternative statement?**

A social anxiety bad thinking habits example:

Let's take a look at a typical simplistic belief 'I am boring' – it has no context or nuance, no layers - it's overly absolute and dramatic and negative, and will make you feel bad and make yourself smaller and quieter socially, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.



- if you constantly **THINK** and absolutely believe the simplistic statement 'I am boring'
- you will constantly be activating your **THREAT RESPONSE** with stress hormones
- you will **FEEL** anxious and upset constantly
- and will **BEHAVE** in unhealthy self-sabotaging / self-limiting / self-defeating ways ...

A CBT therapist would work with you to help **identify and unpack your bad thinking habits**, (examples of social anxiety self-talk and beliefs. 'I'm useless at talking to people', 'nobody likes me', 'I won't be funny', 'they'll think I'm dull', 'they don't want to be stuck here with me', 'I'm an oddball', 'they're better than me'... and so on and so forth).

Then the therapist will work with you to **examine the evidence and question the absolute validity of this thinking**, and whether it is **activating your threat response** in an aggressive way, and whether it has been helpful or unhelpful in your life so far. "Is that a bit over the top? Where is the evidence?" they'll ask. "What are rational alternative ways of looking at this, can we dial it down?" For instance, if you say: 'nobody likes me', well, back it up with concrete examples and evidence. Example questions to ask yourself: Is **anybody** nice to you, ever? Well, yes. Do you have **any** family/friends that have liked you and demonstrated that? Well, yes. Have you ever been out socially with **anybody at all** where you were comfortable? Well, yes. – 'Okay – that's put the lie to that absolute negative automatic thought - that distorted unhealthy absolute statement that stops you being present and living your life with positive emotions'.

CBT teaches you that this kind of self-talk is exaggerated and causes distress and self-sabotaging behavior. You can change your bad thinking habits and automatic self-talk.

Be your own therapist, be your own best friend, build the 'rational cool' version of you to thought-stop and reframe your self-talk.

Summary: it is largely our brain and body's *interpretation* of events and situations, no matter how challenging they are, that leads to our emotional and behavioral upsets. CBT treats how we process thoughts as our headquarters, teaching us to catch and thought-stop and 'edit' our 'attributional style' (the way we explain the world to ourselves – examining whether it is positive or negative, rational or irrational, healthy or unhealthy, proportional or distorted).

Are you a reliable narrator? What are you thinking? Do you have a trippy nervous system? Does it drive 'dramatic thinking'? A more helpful reframe statement for social anxiety might be:

"I worry that I appear boring to some people in some situations when I'm anxious and go quiet. I would prefer it if I never got anxious, but I do, I have a stress disorder that causes me problems, but I'm working on it and doing my best – I am of the same value as anybody else. There's nothing wrong with being the smiley quiet person sometimes. I can learn to moderate my thinking, that will help in regulating my anxiety which will make me more comfortable. I will work on listening and focusing and contributing only if I want to. I'm ok, it's ok."

Consider the idea that 'being boring' is a behavior – it is something we do sometimes, not something we are, it's a verb not a noun. And we do it because of how we think and feel. We can change that.

Feelings are not facts: '*But what about my feelings?*' CBT doesn't aim to stop people from having emotions: emotions are a beautiful and normal part of life – and without the whole human experience, we wouldn't have art and theatre and literature and music, or indeed our social structures. But, if you are experiencing excessive debilitating emotions (moderate to high level upset in response to an event or to life generally), and if you have self-sabotaging behaviour, it can help you to examine objectively how and why this happens, and how to build understand and change it. Step by step.

The goal of *awareness and self-regulation* is to help people to be happier, to manage distorted dysfunctional responses to situations, and to live their best lives. People who have used CBT successfully develop healthier and more appropriate evaluations and responses even to negative situations – i.e. sadness or disappointment, rather than depression or hopelessness – or another example would be annoyance and irritation rather than aggression and rage, and so on). A negative response to a negative event is normal – we are not robots, and of course negative events do happen – but when stress is a disorder our negative response can be dramatic and unhealthy and out of proportion, causing ourselves and others unnecessary upset. CBT really is for everybody, every day. We should be taught this cognitive science in school as teenagers, it would save us from many of our needless irrational emotional roller coasters.

Manage your **bad thinking habits**. Think different. Feel different. Behave different. Be present.

Social Anxiety life-hacks:

Regulate your trippy nervous system in real-time by regulating the oxygen in and out with controlled breathing – Take a long 5 or 6 second breath in through your nose – hold for a few beats – then breathe out slowly through your mouth – repeat...

Do things that produce relaxation hormones – go for a walk on a beach with a dog, do yoga, learn mindfulness, have a candle-lit bath, listen to guided visualization podcasts, go for a facial or a massage. Read fiction. Try different things deliberately. Relaxation hormones negate the stress hormones by a multiple of 3.

Be social – extremely happy people are extremely social – but when stress becomes a disorder, we become less social – we lose the skills to view being social as a pleasure – but we can rebuild the skills by showing up – tolerate discomfort, be present, collect new evidence about what social experiences are for you.

Extreme fight or flight (panic attack symptoms) may also be helped with medication: If you recognise yourself here, and think you may have a moderate to high anxiety disorder, you might consider a visit to your GP to discuss trying **beta blockers**, a simple blood pressure tablet that blocks adrenaline surges, so that the threat response symptoms are lessened. Such treatment might be prescribed for occasional use, for situations that you might generally avoid but would rather face up to with help, (a speech, a date, an interview, a presentation etc.), or for daily use as part of an ongoing care-plan

Summary – remember that social anxiety is a very real physical condition. It's not made up. It's not a character flaw. It's not a question of intellectual ability. You are not broken – you are just hyper alert, and it has driven some perception defaults – you were just doing your best based on what you were thinking or feeling at the time, just trying to protect yourself, but you didn't have the right information. Practicing CBT can help you think and feel and behave differently. Skill up, rewire, be happier, step by step. Buy yourself a nice hardback journal. And / or develop the habit of 'brain dumping' notes into your smartphone.

Staying the way you are is the harder road, using cognitive science to skill up and change your life is the easier road, show up for yourself, it's fascinating and fun (really).

What have you learned? (key idea notes):

Super-quick CBT reframe hack for social anxiety:

WRITE THINGS DOWN – journaling and connecting how thoughts cause feelings and behaviors gives you clarity and helps you to catch your self-talk (not your therapist's assumptions) ... You will identify bad thinking habits, and challenge and dispute them by creating new cool moderate realistic self-talk instead... this is deep learning and awareness to build new associations in your brain, and to give you real 'tools' to stop yourself in your tracks whenever you find yourself automatically thinking these thoughts in future, and to 'thought stop' and replace with new healthy rational calm self-talk instead. Doing it over and over as a new philosophy for living, all day every day, until the new healthy thinking is more natural to you than the distorted simplistic thinking. Remember: writing things down gives us clarity and control.

CREATE NEW SELF TALK

Examples of new thinking / self-talk to dispute the social anxiety example of 'nobody really likes me, they think I'm boring' – it is not a 'positive thinking' mantra that you won't quite believe, it is cool rational proportional thinking, that accepts negatives, but undistorts drama with evidence:


No! It's not true that 'nobody likes me' and that 'I am boring' or 'I'm not nice'– when I make negative statements like that it's dramatic and irrational, and if I believe it 100% it makes me feel upset and hopeless. It's an irrational distorted belief. Throughout my life I have had, and do have, people in my life that like me. It's more true to say my stress is a disorder that I'm working on, and it sometimes makes me think and feel and behave in self-defeating and self-limiting ways that make it hard to be present and to connect and enjoy social activities. But millions of people all over the world have anxiety disorders at some point, it's real, it's physical, and it's totally manageable. It doesn't have to be like this forever. I'm working on ways to live the life I want and deserve. In the meantime, it's okay to be quiet socially. I am a worthwhile person; I am of value; people would be lucky to know me. It's understandable that occasionally a person might be uncomfortable around my discomfort, and react to me in a negative way. If that happens occasionally it's okay, I accept it. I would prefer if that person was kind and respectful, but 'it is what it is', just because someone does a bad thing doesn't make them bad. And if somebody thinks little of me, I don't have to agree with them! I am a good person who's just doing my best. I'm ok, it's ok.

THOUGHT STOP AND REFRAME. Catch your exaggerated irrational thinking. Challenge and dispute it – replacing it with rational compassionate healthy self-talk - over and over, until you change your defaults. Bake it in – live it...

Apply apply apply, edit, edit, edit - regulate, rewire, create a rational self-talk voice, and activate it when you need it.

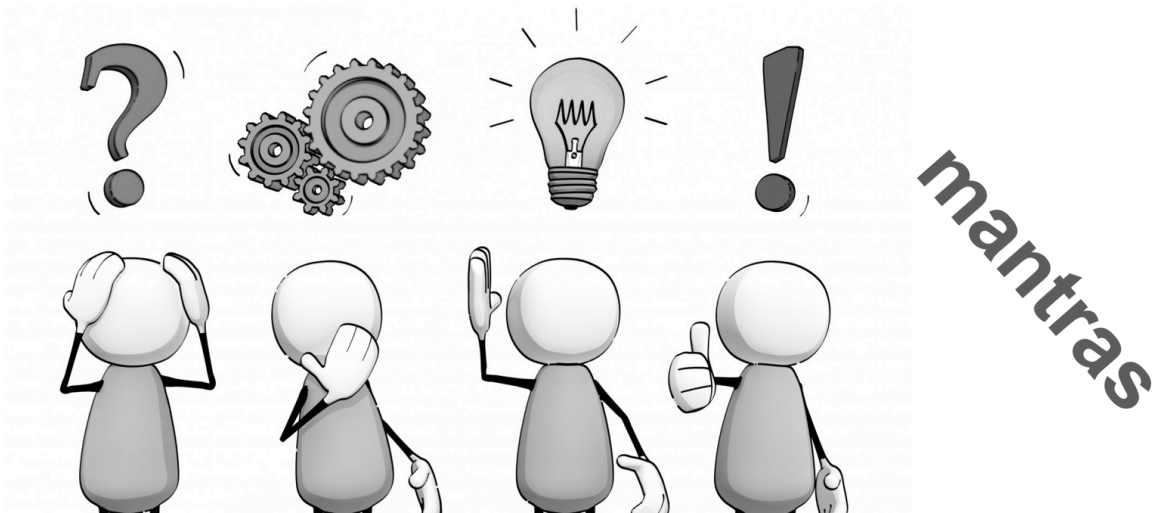
Use this ABC format template to catch and change patterns:

THE ABC OF CBT - MAP YOUR HABITS OF THINKING FEELING & BEHAVIOUR

A ACTIVATING EVENT OR SITUATION	B BELIEFS AND THOUGHTS
C CONSEQUENTIAL PHYSICAL FEELINGS (THREAT RESPONSE – NERVOUS SYSTEM)	CONSEQUENTIAL EMOTIONAL FEELINGS
CONSEQUENTIAL BEHAVIOUR	

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Visualisation and Mantra examples – for great self-management skills



Visualisation and designing short mantras to use again and again works, your brain loves imagery and associations.

Top tip - assign your *irrational-self-talk* an identity – notice when it's yapping and correct it.

Identity ideas:

- Imagine it as a toddler version of you.
- Or you in adolescence (hormones!).
- Or maybe picture a caveman-woman (cave-person?) or ape version of you.
- Maybe a silent-movie-star version of you with big eyes and big dramatic gestures.
- Maybe see yourself go into Ferrari or Maserati mode, too high, too fast.
- Or imagine you going into a Hulk-Smash-Things mode (anger!).

Talk back to the distorted self-talk - correct it, regulate it, dial it down - talk to it gently, use a soothing tone, persuade it the drama is a bit ridiculous, unpack the real facts, be rational. It is a dramatic and negative version of you, but it is not you. It is not evil or bad – it is trying to help you, but is a bit silly and simplistic, and it gets the data wrong. Ask it: “So, how is this kind of thinking working out for you buddy?”

Breathe it down to regulate your body. Take a long slow breath in through the nose, hold for a few beats, then a long slow breath out through the mouth, and repeat...

Make your rational pre-frontal cortex the boss of you, instead of your trippy nervous system and your automatic negative predicting – regulate!

Remember to remind it: ‘It’s just your trippy nervous system, there’s no tiger here, breathe it down, and look again...’.

Some of us are not ‘calm’, and so what. Some of us are always *on*. Some of us are not low-heartbeat people, we’re high adrenaline people. We’re trippy. We have ‘hearts that beat like a hummingbird’ - that’s how American comic Conan O’Brien delightfully describes himself - with *zero* apology, *and* he doesn’t call it anxiety. He jokes that his business partner is the opposite to him, and ‘has a heart that beats about 5 times a minute, so he’ll live to be 160, like a turtle’. I love that. Use it to remind yourself that: “There are worse things to be. My stress is a disorder, and It’s nobody’s business but mine. So what if I’m hyper-present and hyper-engaged? That can be a super-power as well as a nuisance”. This is the kind of new framing that allows you to be happier, to unconditionally accept yourself, to understand and manage yourself.

Check out these fast fun and efficient mantra examples to interrupt and edit anxiety self-talk – take what you like from here, and edit versions of them just for you, in your own style of language, to build your own CBT tool-box. Write them down on flashcards or in your phone notes.

- You’re pumped up for danger, but there is no tiger here, we’ve got this, breathe it down...
- Nope. Not today, you little messer. I know you’re trying to help, but you’re getting it wrong. That’s not true. It’s inaccurate. Thinking that way costs me too much.
- There you go, mind-reading again. These are my thoughts not theirs. I’m just guessing, and I’m not very good at it. I do not have mind reading skills. I go for negative guesses but actually I have no idea how they’re evaluating me. Or even if they’re bothered evaluating me to the extent that I’m imagining. It’s just as likely they’re caught up with their own stuff and are in their own moment. I could make ten guesses about what people are thinking, but they’re just guesses. And, even if somebody does think little of me, I don’t have to agree with them.
- If I, as a fallible human, have some distorted thinking and drama, so might others. People are not their behaviours, they can *behave* badly sometimes, but it doesn’t literally mean they *are* bad. Let it go. Be present.
- I don’t need to seek reassurance and value from others and how they treat me – I am of value and doing my best – and learning how to regulate and reinvent – I’m ok, it’s ok.
- Hey, that’s a little over-dramatic, don’t you think? When I listen to you, I get pumped up. Dial it down, be rational, reason with your thinking mind, not your ‘feeling’ mind. Feelings aren’t facts.

- Oops, here's my trippy nervous system revving up again. I'm ok, it's ok, Breathwork time! breath slowly in, hold, then slowly out. If I regulate the oxygen it will regulate the adrenaline and cortisol.
- I am not my behaviour. My behaviour is something I do sometimes. I can BE Quiet. I can BE uncomfortable. I can BE awkward. Somewhat sometimes. And so what, it's nobody's business but mine. I'm doing my best. I am of value. The anxiety is not literally me. Others don't really know me, and that's ok. They don't have the complete picture. I'm a work in progress. I can reinvent myself any time through *learning and doing*.
- Here she is – the messy bitch who lives for the drama. Look, I love you little one, and I'll call on you if the apocalypse or zombie plague comes, but right now you're not really helpful.
- Oh, here you go - 'comparing and rating' again, knock it off, what other people have or what they do is nothing to do with me, I do my best and have value and my own journey and purpose.
- Uh-oh, here's Hulk. Get lost big guy, you get me into trouble.
- Oy vey, here's Low Frustration Tolerance again. Look, that's ridiculous. It's not helpful to keep thinking 'I cannot, and will not, and should not have to tolerate this thing I find frustrating'. I can because it's just reality. Dial it down. Know what you can control and what you cannot control. Be cool.
- Try an 'abstract rational thinking' exercise - jump into the shoes of somebody who upset you. Objectively riff through a few scenarios where they feel righteous and justified in what they are doing. They have agency - they're allowed to make their own choices. You don't have to like it, you can be sad and disappointed, that's normal, you can be annoyed, that's normal – but it is irrational to demand that they not think and feel and behave the way that they do. And if you have rage you won't be able to communicate effectively - attempt to understand the *other humans*, show them the kindness and patience you would like for yourself...
- Oops, there my sizzling adrenaline goes again, for no reason at all. I'm accidentally in Maserati Mode – too fast, too high... *breathe it down
- Ah stop it you little busy-body. That's not rational. Stay out of it. *reframe
- I'm allowed to be sad and disappointed when people don't respond to me the way I'd prefer – but despair and depression and anxiety and anger is a bit over the top. I'm doing my best. I get another shot every day with the other humans!
- What if I work on being present and listening? And give myself a break from what I think are 'rules' for social performance? I'd PREFER it if I was cool and comfortable socially all the time but I

don't demand it, because that would be silly and unrealistic. My stress is a disorder, that's not a crime, it's a science thing, and I'm working on it.

- Buddha says 'with our thoughts, we make our world' – I have the power to remake my world, endlessly, as a philosophy for living.
- I can learn to be more present – to focus on what is rewarding and stimulating about any social situation. I am good enough - I don't have to perform – I can be the quiet smiley person if I feel like it. And I can still mindfully enjoy the conversation – the drinks – the food – the music, whatever is going on. I can listen, and if my brain sparks associations with something I might contribute to the conversation -if I feel physically safe and okay, I will contribute. If I'm shaky I probably won't, and that's okay. The experience is still mine either way.
- I've had a bad experience with this person(s) before - but that doesn't have to determine my destiny with them. And it doesn't mean I can't be part of this social group. I can activate my inner buddha and give without demanding to get, I can love without demanding to be loved, for me, for my lived experience, not necessarily for them. I can show respect to everybody simply because we're all humans doing our best in this moment, based on what we're thinking and feeling at time.
- Ok - trippy time - Cool down there little monkey. There is no tiger here. We're ok, we've got this.
*Breathe it down. Focus and listen. Move yourself into a different space.
- Just because I 'feel' bad doesn't make it bad. I have all the feels all the time because my stress is a disorder – I can name and tame my feelings. What is the appropriate emotional response to this situation?
- Feelings are not facts - just because I feel fear doesn't mean it is a bad dangerous situation. It's just my trippy nervous system messing with my data. It will regulate over time as I learn to breathe it down and be present.
- If somebody says, 'oh you're blushing' or 'you're very shy' or 'are you ok, you seem nervous' or 'you don't say much do you?', they are being insensitive and behaving poorly – that's about them not me, and they probably don't even know the effect of what they're saying. I can respond by saying 'oh, thanks for pointing that out buddy' and eyeroll. Or I can say 'yeah, I'm in stress-mode at the moment, I'm malfunctioning a bit, carry on and ignore it' and fake smile. Or I might be surprised in the moment and say nothing – and so what. * I will aim not to be mortified and scarper and go over and over it endlessly forevermore – that's not rational.
- Be mindful - notice five things: feel the weight of your body on your feet. Rub your hand. Touch your hair. Place a hand on your knee. You are here. Be present.