

LIFEHACK

Expand your toolbox of life skills and strengthen your mental wellbeing



Optional Module


Overcome social anxiety





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How to Use this Workbook

LifeHack is a self-help programme in which you learn various life skills for all sorts of situations you might encounter in life. This program is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and consists of reading material and interactive exercises. Four domains are covered: your emotional well-being, your studies, your social life and your self-esteem.

Each domain consists of one main module and two related optional modules. The best way to do the programme is to complete one domain per week by doing the main module and any of the optional modules that seem relevant to you. Therefore, the whole programme will take approximately 4 to 6 weeks.

You can find a list of resources in the community [here](#) when you need support. Counselling and Psychological services are available at HKU for current students. It is free-of-charge, professional and confidential. Don't hesitate to seek help if needed.

Enquiries and Feedback

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Main Module

Overcome social anxiety

Introduction

It's normal to, at times, worry about what others will think, or feel nervous about social situations. However, sometimes it can be felt so intensely that it can make us avoid certain situations and interfere with daily life. If you also struggle with this, you're in the right place.

So after this module, you will...

- Learn what social anxiety is and why we feel it
- Know the factors that keep it going
- Learn and practice some techniques to help you deal with social anxiety

SHY BATMAN



FIGHTING CRIME AND SOCIAL ANXIETY

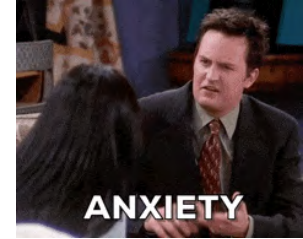
Comic by [Poorly Drawn Lines](#)

Before we get into it: describe your personal goal(s) with regards to social anxiety. What would you like to achieve after doing this module? (answer A)

Let's go!

What is social anxiety?

Social anxiety can be described as feeling worried, anxious or fearful with regards to social situations. Everybody feels like that sometimes, but for people with social anxiety these feelings are far more intense, long-lasting and/or interfere with daily life.



There are many forms of social anxiety and there are often unique characteristics from person to person. Here are some common examples of what people might fear, check the ones that you also worry about:

- Being in conversations one to one
- Public speaking
- Going to social gatherings
- Calling on the phone
- Dating
- Having all eyes on you
- People watching you do something, such as eating
- Otherwise, namely

Often, what underlies social anxiety is the concern that we will be negatively judged or criticised by others.



Here are some common thoughts people with social anxiety have, which ones do you also have?

- Spending a lot of time worrying about what others think
- Worrying about being laughed at
- Being afraid that you won't know what to say, or of saying the wrong thing
- Really wanting people to like you
- Not wanting to embarrass yourself
- Worrying about being judged negatively
- Being scared that others will or are talking about you behind your back
- Otherwise, namely

Usually these anxieties bring up some physical fear responses, such as the ones below. Check the ones you also experience when you feel anxious:

- Sweating
- Feeling really hot or cold
- Going red
- Feeling nauseous
- Dizziness
- Increased heart rate
- Shaking or trembling
- Feeling like you can't breathe properly
- Otherwise, namely

Why do we feel social anxiety?

There is not one clear answer as to why some people develop social anxiety. There can be a biological component such as a family history of anxiety. It can have to do with negative past experiences and memories, which 'get stuck' in our brains. It can simply be that being anxious is in our temperament. There are a million and one factors at play, but luckily you don't need to understand how you developed social anxiety to be able to overcome it.

There are three things you can do:

- Challenging negative thoughts
- Redirect your attention
- Face the fear

Let's go over each of these!



1. Begone, negative thoughts!

Thoughts have a big impact on how we feel and how we act. If you have positive thoughts like 'I'm going to have a great time at the party', you'll feel excited and optimistic about going. If you have negative thoughts like 'No one will want to talk to me' or 'People are going to judge me', it will make you feel sad or inadequate and make you not want to go.

People with social anxiety are often plagued by automatic negative thoughts. These can be about the past, present or future, and can also appear in the form of images (playing out a situation) or hearing people's voices, and they are often irrational.



Most of the time, we're not aware of our negative thoughts - they happen too fast for us to notice. And most negative thoughts are not completely true or very rational. To overcome social anxiety, you need to become aware of your negative thoughts and challenge them. Sounds complex? Not if you follow 6 simple steps!

(i) Trigger

In this step, you describe the situation that makes you feel anxious.

Describe a current social situation you feel anxious about (if there's none, describe something from the past):

David's example: David worries about speaking up during work groups.

(ii) Negative thoughts

Here you pinpoint the negative thoughts that go through your mind before, during or after the social situation. Use the examples below if you need a bit more inspiration.

What negative thoughts did you have about the social situation?

David's example:

He thought "If I speak, I will say something dumb and people will think I'm stupid."

Examples of negative thoughts:

- People are going to laugh at me
- I won't know what to say
- People won't like talking to me
- Nobody likes me
- People will think I look stupid
- Everyone is going to stare at me
- I won't have anyone to talk to
- I'll be alone all evening
- People will think I can't dance
- It's going to be horrible, I'm going to have a terrible time

NEXT LEVEL HACK

In the coming week, keep a piece of paper, a notepad or an app on your phone and every time you notice a negative thought in a situation where you felt socially anxious, write it down. The more you do this, the easier it will become to notice them.

(iii) Anxiety level

In this step, you rate your own anxiety.

How anxious do you feel in or about the social situation you described earlier?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all					Extremely					

(iv) Evidence against the negative thought

In this step, you look for things that show that the thought may not be 100% true. You basically 'fact check' the negative thought and come up with at least 3 arguments against the negative thought.

Here are some reflective questions that might help you evaluate the accuracy of your thought:

- Have I had experiences where my negative thoughts did not come true?
- Is the thought exaggerated?
- What assumptions is the thought based on?
- Does it include predictions about the future?
- Does the thought draw premature conclusions?
- What would I say to a close friend if they had this thought?

Now come up with at least 3 (bonus points if you do more!) arguments why the negative thought you wrote earlier might not be totally true:

David comes up with these arguments:

- I know I'm not dumb because I tend to get pretty high grades
- I have gotten positive feedback from classmates in the past
- I can't assume that I know what others think or will think
- Other people are more concerned with themselves and their own lives, than with me. I'm sure they don't spend their time thinking about me.
- Even if I do say something 'dumb' (which is not a useful label to use), it's not the end of the world and people will forget about it within hours.

(v) A more realistic thought

Step 5 is to come up with a more realistic thought using the arguments against the negative thought.

What would be a more realistic thought to replace your own negative thought from earlier?

David's example:

His original thought:	His new thought (more realistic):
"If I speak, I will say something dumb and people will think I'm stupid."	"It is possible (though unlikely) that I say something silly, but my classmates are really friendly and I doubt they will think I'm stupid - they're more focused on themselves than on me."

(vi) Rate anxiety again

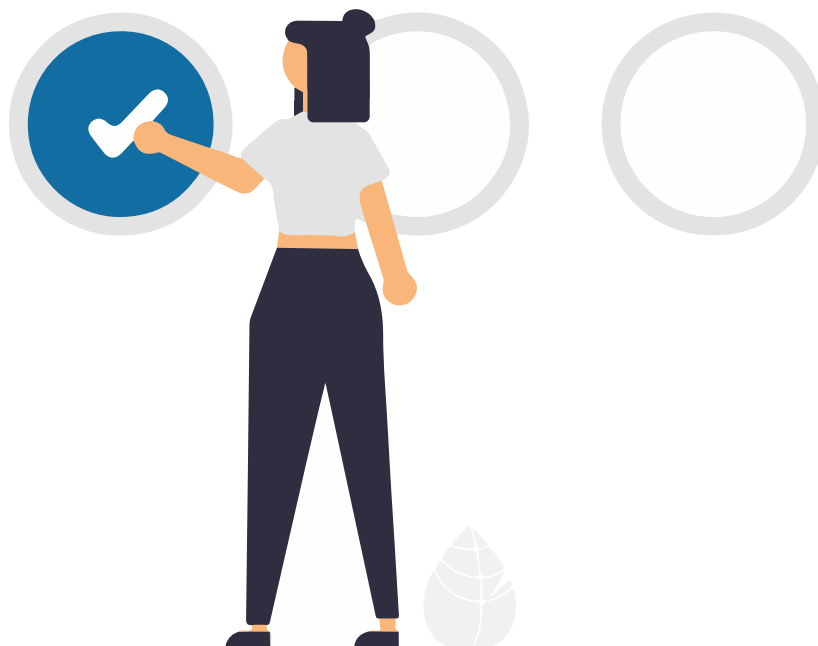
Last step! Rate your feelings of anxiety again after going through these steps. Most of the time, the anxiety will already have decreased, but if you don't notice a big change: don't worry! Repeat steps (iv) and (v) and see if that makes a difference.

Also keep in mind that this technique takes time to master and the more you use it, the more effective it becomes.

How anxious do you feel after these steps?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all					Extremely					

Nicely done! Repeat these steps next time you feel anxious, and notice the difference. Now let's move on to the next technique to overcome social anxiety.



2. Get out of your head

Another thing that keeps our anxiety alive is the way we direct our attention in the social situation. When we feel anxious, most of us are extremely focused on making sure that we don't do or say certain things, or look a certain way. Or we might feel physically uncomfortable, and then focus on those sensations.



And on top of that, we also tend to look for things in our environment that prove that our negative thoughts are true. This is called negative confirmation bias:


- If you worry about boring others, you'll take people checking their watch as proof of that.
- If you're scared that a person dislikes you, you'll interpret a neutral facial expression as one of disapproval.

As you can imagine, if you are so focused on all these factors there is very little room to relax and enjoy the experience. That is why, as cringy as it may sound, it is important to be in the moment and focus on the 'task' at hand. Here's the 3 steps to shifting your attention.

(i) Define your 'task'

While there are infinite social situations, they are most often about interacting and conversation. In this context, the 'task' is about paying attention to the conversation by following the topic of the conversation, listening to what others are saying, finding the things you have in common, and linking to your own experiences.





Of course, there can be other 'tasks' as well depending on the situation. Maybe you want to be able to dance in front of others at the club, or perform well in a physical group activity (such as a sports game). Either way, the first step to shifting your attention is to define the task.

Let's practice! Describe a recent social situation you were in, which caused you anxiety:

What was the task at hand? What social action did you need to perform in that situation?

(ii) Become aware of your focus

Now before you can direct your attention to the task, you need to know where your attention currently is.



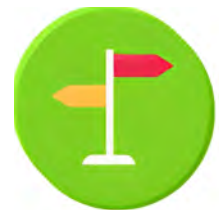
We already mentioned some categories that people with social anxiety tend to focus on:

- Your own actions and worrying you might do or say something that people will judge you on
- Your negative thoughts, these might repeat themselves over and over, or more and more different negative thoughts might pop up as time goes on
- Your physical sensations, like your heart pounding or your mouth being dry
- Interpreting signals negatively, such as assuming what other people are thinking

What were you focused on in the situation you just described? What thoughts, feelings, sensations or signs did you pay attention to?

(iii) Redirect your attention

Once you're aware of where your attention is, you can gently call it back to where you want it to be. Think of your attention as a puppy: it might wander off, but you can always call it back.



Here are some tips to be more present:

- Practice redirecting your attention. A few times a week during 'neutral' activities, stop to analyse where your focus is and then bring it to the task at hand. Perhaps you were cooking, studying or watching a show, and you'll notice your attention has wandered off. Then simply bring it back to the task at hand. This focus stuff is like any other skill: you get better at it with practice.
- In conversations (the social 'task' at hand), make a point to keep track of the topic at hand. If your attention wanders, ask yourself 'What are they talking about right now?' and get back to listening. Try to actively follow what is being said around you.
- Find a topic you're genuinely curious about or are interested in, because it's much easier to forget about your worries if you're engrossed in something you truly care about. So ask questions about things you're curious about. Or start up a topic about your own interests by asking about other people's experiences with it. "Has anyone seen <name of a new show>? I binged the whole thing last weekend."

Which of these tips and ideas could you put into practice?

Can you think of other ways to redirect your attention? Away from the worries and towards the 'task at hand'?

Awesome job! On to the last technique :)



3. Fear, meet my face

The last thing that keeps the fear alive, is our response to feeling social anxiety. Most people tend to

- either avoid certain social situations altogether,
- or if the situation cannot be avoided, practice safety behaviours.


Both of these are ways to reduce the anxiety related to a social event, but neither is particularly helpful in the long run. Short term they might alleviate your worries, but long term they will likely make your anxiety last and grow. The only way to make fear disappear is by facing it.

Watch this video that goes into the different aspects of avoidance and safety behaviours. [\(The video transcript is available on p.22\)](#)



An example

David is very anxious to talk to people in groups. He is afraid that if he does, people will think he is stupid and won't want to listen to them. In his studies, there are lots of work groups. For some classes attendance is not mandatory and David will skip the work groups (avoidance).



If they are mandatory, he actively chooses to stay quiet as to prevent drawing attention to himself (safety behaviour).

Do you ever avoid social situations because of social anxiety? Describe your experiences with avoidance.

What are your own safety behaviours? Think of as many as possible, across different social situations that make you feel worried or anxious.

More examples of safety behaviours:

- Using alcohol or drugs to reduce anxiety feelings or awareness
- Avoiding making eye contact so people won't try and talk to you
- Taking roles in group project where there is little to no interaction with others
- Over-preparing projects, assignments or presentations to avoid negative judgement
- Going on your phone to avoid having to interact
- Agreeing with others for fear of displeasing

Overcoming avoidance or safety behaviours

A technique that can be used to get rid of these two unhealthy coping mechanisms is to create your own little experiments. The idea is to face a feared situation without using safety behaviours to prove to yourself that the feared outcome doesn't happen, or even if it does, that it's not as bad as you thought and you can handle it.

At first when you practice these experiments, you might feel a bit more anxious. You're literally facing your fears, after all! But don't let that stop you, cause once you persevere you will feel an immense drop in anxiety when it comes to that situation.

Create your own experiment in 4 steps:

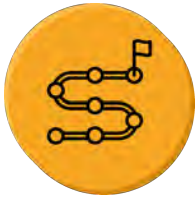


1. Identify your negative thoughts

The first step to creating your own experiment, is to identify the negative thoughts you'd like to work with.

David wants to test the belief that "People will think I'm stupid if I ask a question in a workgroup."

Write down a current thought related to social anxiety that you would like to use in the experiment:



2. Plan your experiment

Next, think of a way you could test how accurate your negative thought is. Come up with an action plan for a specific situation that you normally avoid (altogether, or by using safety behaviours).

David decides to ask one question in the next work group about the final assignment. It's something that has been unclear to him for a while but he never spoke up about. In preparation, he writes down the whole question for himself. He decides to ask the question at the beginning of the work group, right after the teacher asks the group how everyone has been.

What is your experimental action plan? Describe it as concretely as possible: what will you be doing exactly? Where would you have to be? With whom? For how long?



3. Define the evidence needed

Now define how you will know whether your thought is true or not. How will you gather evidence? What will you look at, who will you talk to?

David decides to ask some classmates whether they thought it was a stupid question during a smaller group assignment in the work group. If they say it wasn't a stupid question, he knows that his thought did not come true.

Write down how you can check whether your thought was true or not. Again: make it concrete: what kind of evidence will you need?



4. Evaluate the results

Once you have done your experiment, take a moment to write the results down and to think about what you got from the event. Do you think and feel the same as before? How valid was your thought? And what did you learn through this experience?

Example 1:

Henk writes down the following after his experiment:

“Not gonna lie, it was really hard. I almost chickened out but did it anyway by reminding myself that I want to get a good grade and really need an answer to my question. It was also quite scary to ask my fellow classmates if they thought my question was stupid, but I told myself that I won’t get rid of this stupid anxiety if I don’t face my fears. They actually responded really great and one person even said that they had been wondering the same thing and they were glad I asked. That kinda proves that these worries are all in my head. I feel kind of relieved. And a bit more confident. I’m going to continue asking questions and checking the response with classmates.



Example 2:

Cansu's experiment:

Cansu is afraid of eating in front of others because she fears that something will get caught in her teeth and people will think she is gross. When she has lunch or dinner with friends, Cansu will often go to the bathroom to check that her teeth are clean. She also avoids laughing out loud and will only smile a closed smile so people won't see her teeth. This constant worry ruins the social event, so she decides to do an experiment.

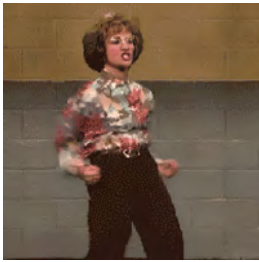
Her experiment: next week my friends are having dinner at their place and they invited me. This time, I will only go to the bathroom if I need to pee (and not to check my teeth). I will also laugh showing teeth at least 3 times. Before leaving I will ask them if they ever noticed any food on my teeth, and if yes, whether they found it gross.

The results: at first dinner was stressful because I was constantly thinking about my teeth. But as time went on, the anxiety lessened and I had a nice time talking to everyone. Afterwards, my friends said I didn't have food on my teeth, but also "Even if you did, so what? It can happen to anyone and it's just a bit of food."

Conclusion: Having food on your teeth can happen to anyone and it doesn't make you gross. People actually don't really care and will forget it ever happened.

Keep experimenting with the things you're socially anxious about, and you'll see that the fears lessen every time!

Hack wrap-up



Oh yeah, you made it all the way to the end!

Now let's take a look back at what you said at the beginning of this module.

This is what you wanted to achieve with regards to social anxiety: (refer to answer A on p.2)

How will you move forward with this goal, using the tips from this module?

This module in bullets:

- We all feel anxious at times about social situations, but for people with social anxiety it's more intense or long lasting and interferes with daily life
- At the core of this anxiety is usually a fear of being judged or criticised
- The first thing you can do to overcome social anxiety, is to become aware of your own negative thoughts, check the extent to which they are true (often not very) and come up with more realistic thoughts
- Second, be more conscious of where you direct your attention. Focus on the task at hand, rather than all the worries in your head or body
- Lastly, become aware of your own avoidance and safety behaviours and then break those habits. Do this by creating little experiments for yourself



Hey, psst! Does the optional module 'Express yourself & say 'no'' sound useful as well? Then head over there as soon as you complete this module, since you're **on a roll** now anyway ;)

What did you think of this module? Please let us know your views [here](#).

Supplementary Information

Video transcript of Avoidance and Safety Behaviours

Avoidance and safety behaviours are common ways to reduce anxiety when faced with a feared social situation. But in the long run, these methods aren't very effective. Let's explore why.

People with social anxiety dread all sorts of disastrous social outcomes, such as being disliked, or judged. The easiest way to make sure all these disasters we fear won't happen, is by avoiding the situation altogether.

We might come up with excuses why we can't attend that event, back out at the last minute, or avoid it in some other way. As a result of our avoidance, we get even less 'used to' the social events that we fear, and as a result our fears will only grow.

So what do we mean when we talk about safety behaviours? When we can't avoid a feared situation altogether, we might instead turn to safety behaviours to minimize the risk of the disasters we imagine. So basically, they are the things we do in the social situation to reduce the chances of the feared outcome coming true.

Different people have different safety behaviours, such as:

- Using alcohol or drugs to reduce anxiety feelings or awareness
- Avoiding making eye contact so people won't try and talk to you
- Taking roles in group project where there is little to no interaction with others
- Over-preparing projects, assignments or presentations to avoid negative judgement
- Going on your phone to avoid having to interact
- Agreeing with others for fear of displeasing

Safety behaviours are 'unhealthy' coping mechanisms. Even though they do allow us to be in a certain social situation, they don't let us prove to ourselves that we can handle it successfully. Rather, they teach us that we can only avoid the negative outcome by doing that safety behaviour. So in the end, our fear of the situation doesn't lessen as long as we rely on safety behaviours.