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Notes on Gillian Butler's *Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness*.

What people pay attention to determines what gets into their minds. When people are socially anxious their attention is more self-focused, they are hypervigilant for threats, and they notice and remember things that fit with their fears.

When people are anxious they tend to have a negative bias and to interpret things in terms of threats, as if the world were full of dangerous risks, and as if their resources were inadequate for dealing with those risks. Negative Automatic Thoughts predominate in their thinking.

People with SA often imagine themselves from an 'external' perspective - often an unflattering one. As images are such efficient ways of conveying meaning, the image has an immediate impact, even if it is only fleeting.

When overcoming the problem, it helps to learn how consciously to control the imagery, and to explore ways of taking a different perspective. This could involve, for example, constructing and searching for images of competent and effective interactions, and of situations seen the other way around, from the inside out, so as to pay better attention to other people and to the details of the social event in question.

When social anxiety starts to change, then meanings change also. As confidence grows, a setback or disappointment no longer has its original meaning, for example about being rejected, and about being acceptable to others. Instead of being stuck in seeing the refusal as a personal rejection, it becomes possible to step outside this framework, and to start thinking differently: trying out new meanings such as 'maybe they were busy'.

Working to avoid, or to keep safe, are states of mind that perpetuate the problem, as they contain the hidden message that doing otherwise would be dangerous or risky.

Vulnerability factors are long-standing characteristics that make someone susceptible to bouts of social anxiety, and they are both biological and psychological.

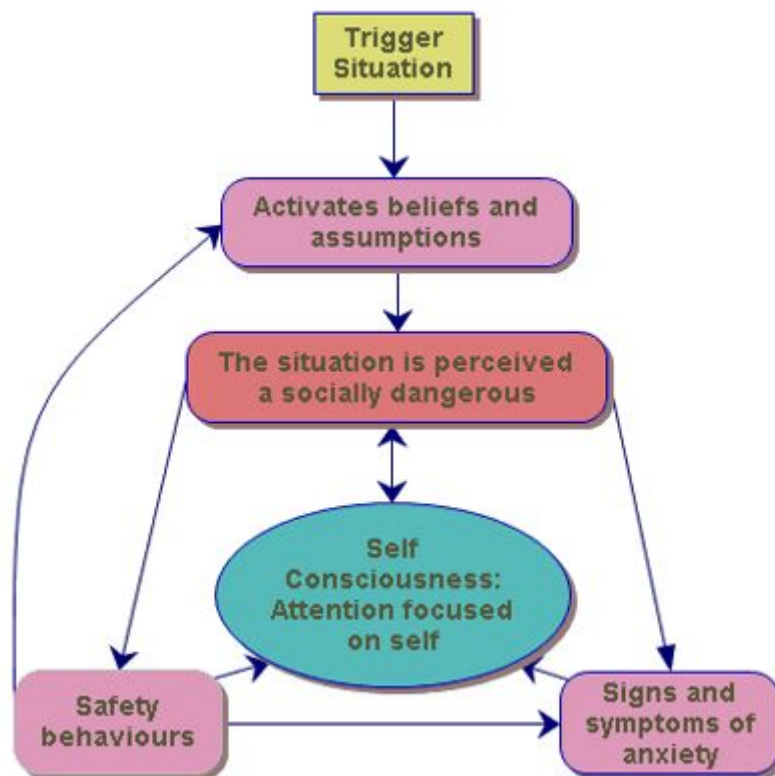
For people with social anxiety, the problem will occur when they encounter situations that provoke the fear of doing something that will be humiliating or embarrassing. Once they feel anxious then a vicious cycle comes into play, and perpetuates the problem. Reactions to anxiety, such as looking for a way out, worrying about what others might notice, feeling self-conscious or finding it difficult to speak fluently, feedback to make anxiety worse. So whatever caused the anxiety in the first place may be different from the reactions that keep it going. The cycle that perpetuates anxiety is one of the most important factors to be considered when it comes to overcoming anxiety.

It is not necessary to know everything about what caused the problem in order to work out how to alleviate it.

The perception of a social situation can make it feel threatening and socially dangerous, abounding with opportunities to fail - thoughts that provoke distress and anxiety.

When this happens, socially awkward people focus in on themselves. They become increasingly self-aware. As they shift their attention inwards, onto signs of social anxiety and social ineptitude of which they are painfully aware, and which they think that other people notice, this makes them increasingly conscious of themselves and of the way they think they appear to others. In technical terms, this is described as processing themselves as social objects, almost as if they were able to see themselves from the outside.

Clark and Wells Model



The more people focus on their internal sensations and perceived shortcomings, the more self-conscious they become; so that there is a two-way arrow in the diagram above.

Focusing inwards makes people more aware of internal signs and sensations of social anxiety, and being aware of these experiences makes the situations seem more socially threatening.

Feeling at risk makes you want to stay safe, but trying to stay safe makes you keep feeling the situation is risky. One thing feeds into another to keep the problem going.

Using safety behaviours means that the same situations will continue to trigger the same responses.

Safety behaviours also focus one's attention inwards, and make people increasingly self-aware and self-conscious. This makes the situation seem even more threatening.

One's assumptions are thus confirmed by these inward-looking, cyclical processes.

Being self-aware makes the situation worse because it provides the wrong type of information.

Breaking into cyclical patterns of behaviour that may have persisted for a long time is an excellent way of building confidence.

Overcoming social anxiety involves learning how to break the vicious cycles that otherwise keep the problem going. There are **four main methods**:

1. **Changing thinking patterns.**
2. **Doing things differently:** by facing difficulties without safety behaviours.
3. **Reducing self-consciousness:** i.e. learning how to focus on others and other things, rather than on oneself.
4. **Building up confidence.**

Questionnaire in *Overcoming*:

How does SA affect you?

Stops me making new friends and developing existing friendships. Stops me getting involved in interesting societies. Stops me enjoying social occasions. Makes me second-guess my ability to function in a professional environment. Stops me enjoying spontaneous conversations with strangers and acquaintances.

What are the signs and symptoms that bother you?

Struggling to maintain conversation. Reluctance to initiate conversation & discomfort throughout. Replaying actions mentally. Safety behaviours like sticking to safe topics and safe people. Avoiding certain social events. Drinking necessarily or excessively at / before social events. Sweating and pounding heart. Feelings of inferiority and frustration. Inhibited speech.

Aims.

Be able to enjoy social events where I know no, or few, people (without relying on alcohol).
Have the confidence to get involved with societies and groups without knowing anyone beforehand.

Enjoy spontaneous conversations.

It is helpful to keep a written record because (1) the first changes are small, and (2) small changes are easily forgotten.

The best strategy is to give yourself regular assignments and to work at them little and often.

Learn how to observe and rectify patterns of thought

1. Find out what you are thinking.

Thoughts may come and go quickly, seeming almost automatic or ‘unconscious’.

Record your social situations, feelings, and anxious thoughts in the table below.

Keep a record for a few days of situations in which you feel anxious or upset.

Once you have identified your habits, it will be easier to spot them in action.

2. Looking for alternative ways of thinking.

The aim is to learn to question your thoughts rather than to accept them as facts.

In looking for alternatives, think: - what are the facts? - what possible alternatives are there? - what might I be exaggerating or skewing? - what is the best way of seeing things? What is the best thing that could happen? - what can you do that would be helpful?

Avoid framing ideas as absolutes and imperatives: 'I must, I need to' etc. Instead try phrasing things as helpful suggestions. Similarly, avoid hyperbole in self-criticism.

‘Discounting thoughts’ (e.g. negative qualifiers, ‘yes, I was okay BUT ...’) can be re-examined and compared to helpful alternatives.

[illegible]

Doing Things Differently

It is important to act differently as well as to find different ways of thinking.

Changing your behaviour and doing things that you found difficult is important, but it is most effective if you stop and think about what you have done afterwards. A change in behaviour does not change your expectations and predictions about what will happen next time unless you work on these too.

The main method that will help you find out how to do things differently are mini-experiments.

Steps in a mini-experiment

1. Identify exactly what you currently do in any given type of social situation as a result of social anxiety, e.g. safety behaviours, avoidances.
2. Identify the connection between what you do and what you think: for example, identify your predictions, expectations, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, memories, etc.
3. Do something differently, in order to find out what happens.
4. Evaluate what happens. Think about it afterwards, with an open mind, and find out whether your thoughts were right.

Stopping safety behaviours

Situation	Prediction of consequences of eschewing Safety Behaviour	Experiment (what will you change?)	What happened as a result?	Conclusions of Experiment

Reducing self-consciousness

The most helpful strategy to learn in order to become less self-conscious is how to direct your attention onto other things and people, so that you break the pattern of inward focusing that made you self-aware.

The attitude that helps you do this is one of curiosity.

It is helpful to think of learning to divert your attention as a two-stage process: (1) deciding not to think about unpleasant experiences; (2) filling your mind with something else.

Try imagining that you were going to describe a person or conversation to someone else afterwards.

Challenging Assumptions

Identifying assumptions will tell you how to try to change your behaviour, as the new behaviour should remove the disadvantages of the old. Once you truly realise that protective behaviours of all kinds, including those that are closely linked to underlying beliefs and assumptions, do not really work, you will find that you can let them go and relax.

1. Identify an assumption.
2. Identify the behaviour that fits the assumption.
3. Do something differently.
4. Evaluate what happens, and re-evaluate the assumption.

TABLE 9.7. Treatment Goals in Cognitive Therapy for Social Phobia

- *Reduce anticipatory anxiety* by correcting social threat interpretation bias and preventing avoidance of anxiety-provoking social situations.
- *Counter excessive self-consciousness* during social exposure by re-directing information processing toward positive external social cues.
- *Eliminate safety strategies* employed to conceal and reduce anxiety.
- *Strengthen anxiety tolerance* and a more adaptive, coping perspective.
- *Reduce inhibition*, improve social skills, encourage a more realistic standard of performance, and develop a balanced self-evaluation of social performance.
- *Eliminate post-event rumination* and encourage more adaptive reappraisals of past social performance and its effects.
- *Modify core beliefs* about personal vulnerability in social interaction, the threat of negative evaluation by others, and the self as social object.

[At the beginning] It is important that individuals learn about the three phases of social anxiety and the role that overestimated appraisals of the likelihood and consequences of social threat play during anticipation, exposure, and postevent recall of social situations. In addition the deleterious effects of heightened self-focused attention, awareness of inhibitory behaviors, and failure to process external social information should be explained, as well as the maladaptive effects of safety or concealment behaviors. The cognitive therapist will also discuss how an overly negative interpretation and recall of one's social performance as well as assumptions about making a negative impression on others will increase feelings of anxiousness in social settings.

Clinician Guideline 9.17

Educating clients into the cognitive model of social phobia emphasizes that reduction in social anxiety is achieved by (1) correcting exaggerated judgments of social threat, (2) shifting attentional focus from internal anxiety cues to positive external social stimuli, (3) engaging in a realistic appraisal of one's social performance and tendency to be inhibited, (4) taking a more constructive perspective on anxiety tolerance, and (5) adopting more realistic assumptions of how the individual appears to others in social settings.

After educating the client into the cognitive model, the next couple of sessions focus on teaching cognitive restructuring to counter the biased threat interpretation when anticipating an anxiety-provoking social situation.

TABLE 9.8. Elements of Cognitive Restructuring for Social Anxiety

1. Identify a recent period of anticipatory anxiety.
2. Rate level of anxiety (0–100).
3. Use guided discovery to identify core social threat interpretation that may include:
 - Perceived intolerance of anxiety
 - Expectation of embarrassment
 - Negative evaluation (impression) by others.
4. Rate perceived likelihood and severity of anticipated social threat.
5. Challenge core social threat using:
 - Evidence of confirming and disconfirming information
 - Short- and long-term consequences (cost–benefit analysis)
 - Decatastrophizing
 - Identification of cognitive errors.
6. Develop a more realistic alternative anticipatory threat interpretation.
7. Rerate likelihood and severity of social threat and its alternative based on evidence.
8. Assign behavioral experiment (i.e., empirical hypothesis-testing task).

Once the core social threat interpretation has been specified, evidence gathering, cost–benefit analysis, and decatastrophizing can be used to challenge the client’s faulty anticipatory thinking. These interventions have been discussed thoroughly in Chapter 6. For evidence gathering, the therapist asks for any information that confirms the social threat thinking as well as opposing information that disconfirms or at least questions the veracity of the anxious anticipatory cognitions. The Testing Anxious Appraisals: Looking for Evidence form (Appendix 6.2) can be helpful. A cost–benefit intervention would explore the actual costs (negative consequences) and benefits (both immediate and long term) associated with exposure to the anticipated social event (use Cost–Benefit Form in Appendix 6.3). Finally, decatastrophizing can be employed in which the client is asked to imagine the feared negative outcome. After generating the worst-case scenario, the client can be asked (1) “Would it really be as terrible as you think?”, (2) “What is the most likely immediate and long-term impact on you?”, (3) “What could you do to minimize the negative impact of embarrassment?”, and (4) “How often do people embarrass themselves in front of others and yet somehow survive without life-changing negative effects?” In addition identifying errors in thinking (see discussion in Chapter 6) is an important part of challenging anxious thinking (use Common Errors and Biases in Anxiety handout and Identifying Anxious Thinking Errors Form, Appendix 5.6).

After challenging the faulty social threat thinking, the cognitive therapist works with the client on generating an alternative way of anticipating the forthcoming social situation. The alternative interpretation will probably acknowledge that the client may feel highly anxious and not perform as well as he likes, but the catastrophic, embarrassing outcome he anticipates is much less likely than expected. Instead “tolerable discomfort” is the most likely outcome.

In addition the therapist challenges the client’s biased interpretation that her inhibitory behavior will automatically be evaluated negatively by others. Instead the alternative interpretation is “people are tolerant of a fairly wide range of social behavior. I don’t have to make an award-winning performance to be accepted.” Once this alternative has been fully described the client is asked to rerate the probability that the initial catastrophic embarrassment will occur versus the alternative of “tolerable discomfort” and others’ acceptance of “somewhat inhibited social performance.”

Cognitive restructuring normally concludes with the assignment of a behavioral experiment. In most cases this involves some form of exposure to a variant of the anticipated anxious situation in order to collect evidence that disconfirms the exaggerated social threat appraisal.

Clinician Guideline 9.18

Cognitive restructuring in social phobia involves the correction of exaggerated interpretations of the probability and severity of social threat (i.e., negative evaluation by others) through evaluation of confirming and disconfirming evidence, consideration of realistic consequences, preparation for the worst outcome, and reevaluation in light of a more likely alternative interpretation of the social situation and one's inhibited social performance.

Prior to initiating within-session and between-session exposure to socially threatening situations, it is important that the cognitive therapist correct biased threat interpretations, excessive self-focused attention, and emotional reasoning by completing cognitive restructuring thought records on the moderate- and high-anxiety situations in the hierarchy.

Cognitive restructuring of actual social situations is introduced in the fifth and sixth sessions in order to correct biased threat interpretations, redirect attention to external stimuli, and deliberately refocus processing capacity on the positive cues in the social environment.

Exposure exercises also allow clients (1) to practice shifting attention away from internal states toward external social stimuli, (2) to learn better tolerance of moderate anxiety levels, (3) to interpret their social performance and inhibitions more positively, and (4) to gather critical disconfirming evidence of their biased social threat interpretations.

The prominence of postevent processing will vary across individuals with social phobia. For those who engage in considerable rumination about past social experiences, postevent processing must be targeted early in treatment. After obtaining a clear description of the client's postevent thought content, the therapist should inquire about the perceived costs and benefits of engaging in this repeated reappraisal of past social performances and their outcome. ... Whatever the case, it is important that the client realizes that in the end postevent rumination is a maladaptive cognitive strategy that contributes to the persistence of social anxiety because it ultimately reinforces the perception that social situations are threatening.

Clinician Guideline 9.22

Employ cognitive restructuring and behavioral assignments to correct biased recall of past social experiences that characterize the postevent ruminative processing in social phobia. Encourage individuals to take a field perspective when reevaluating their past social experiences.

MCT for Social Anxiety

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8fa6/487abb1c23117e47ed5cb7715c4d0e23061b.pdf>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1077722906001209>