Managing & Overcoming Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is not simply being shy or introverted. Social anxiety is a continuous fear of social situations that limits your relationships and experiences with others. Often, the fear revolves around being exposed to unfamiliar people or situations. Other times, the fear focuses on the potential for being judged or embarrassed in social situations. Here are tips for managing social anxiety:

1 Relax your body before entering social situations. Engage in deep breathing, alternating between tensing and relaxing your muscles, or listen to calming music before a social event.

2 Recognize negative thoughts that may cause social anxiety. These thoughts might include a fear of what others will think about our appearance, our place within a group, acceptance, or exaggerated consequences of social behavior. When having these thoughts, ask yourself these questions:

— Is my thought true or realistic? Consider: "Would I judge someone else as harshly as I am judging myself?"

— If this thought is true, is it helpful to dwell upon? For example, "I will be judged on my performance at this job interview, but it's not helpful to focus on this."

— If the thought is true, is it too "mean-spirited" to be accurate? Consider: "I may have spilled coffee on my shirt today, but that does not mean everyone will think I am unprofessional."

3 Practice! Practice! Practice! Psychological research shows that the more we "expose" ourselves to uncomfortable social situations, the more comfortable we will become. Consistently practice things such as starting conversations, going to social events, speaking up in meetings, and giving presentations. These are great ways to reduce your social anxiety over time and help you develop social skills.

4 Ask for feedback from friends, family, and co-workers about your strengths and growth areas in social situations. Often, people's social anxiety is related to negative assumptions about social interactions. However, these intuitions frequently are not accurate. You might be surprised at what the people around you think about you in social situations. Chances are you are being perceived much more positively than you think!

5 Engage in self-compassion. Remember, everyone makes social mistakes, not just you. Even if you do make a social error, it's important to treat yourself with kindness and forgiveness. Dwelling on past mistakes only makes social anxiety worse.

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