

What Keeps Social Anxiety Going?

People with social anxiety tend to hold an impression of themselves that is very negative. As a result they are very fearful that other people will view them negatively. They also tend to have strict beliefs, such as:

- High standards for how they think they 'should' perform in social situations.
- Strong beliefs about how they think other people will respond to them.
- Negative beliefs about themselves.

Having a negative self-image can prompt you to behave in unhelpful ways. Our beliefs can be so strong that they feel like facts, when actually they are more like opinions. If your self-impression is not entirely accurate it may put you under a lot of unnecessary pressure.

Your self-impression, self-image, and beliefs

Negative automatic thoughts and images

What keeps it going?

Social Anxiety

Self-consciousness & self-focused attention

Avoidance and safety behaviors

If you pay attention to how you think you are coming across to other people then you might focus your attention inwards - towards your own feelings, thoughts, and judgements about your performance. Some people say they do this so that they can 'catch' themselves making mistakes before other people notice.

Self-consciousness is the opposite of a performance enhancer (ask any sports-person). Worse, it gives you a biased impression of how you are really coming across to people.

Negative automatic thoughts that people with social anxiety have in social situations include:

- Predictions: "They will think I look anxious."
- Worries: "What if I say something and nobody replies?"
- Judgements: "I'm making such a mess of this."
- Doubts: "I'll never be able to do this."

Negative automatic thoughts and images aren't always accurate. People with social anxiety often fall into the trap of emotional reasoning: feeling something and thinking that it must be true just because it feels that way.

If you are socially anxious you might avoid situations that make you feel anxious (avoidance), or you might do things to control how you come across to other people (safety behaviors). You might also stay quiet in groups, or ask questions to keep attention away from you.

Avoidance and safety behaviors are well-intended, but they can lead to a lot of problems:

- They prevent you from learning the truth.
- They heighten your self-focus.
- They sometimes lead to the result that you were trying to prevent.
- They can make you appear unfriendly or uninterested.
- They can draw attention towards you.

