

Reducing Your Self-Consciousness in Social Situations

Objective: To learn to accept that everyone feels self-conscious some of the time and to practice ways to better manage self-consciousness in social situations.

You Should Know

People with social anxiety typically feel that everyone is evaluating their every word and their every movement. However, if you were to actually poll the people you fear are observing and judging you, the majority of them would likely say they're not. In fact, in many cases, they might say they didn't even notice you.

This doesn't mean that you are not a memorable person with many fine qualities and not worth noticing. It simply means that people with social anxiety tend to have an inner self-assessment mechanism that skews more toward self-criticism than self-kindness. And, believe it or not, even if other people *are* judging you, it doesn't mean they're right, and it shouldn't affect your self-image.

Experts say that people who are very self-conscious usually focus their attention inward, to the exclusion of noticing what's going on around them. You might be acutely aware of physical sensations or symptoms such as blushing or a racing heart. You might notice that you are fidgety or restless. You might experience emotions such as embarrassment or shame. And you might have a series of thoughts about somehow being inadequate or different. You project onto other people what you think they're thinking—and then the situation gets worse.

You might also feel unsafe or exposed and might have the urge to escape to the safety of being alone. That might provide temporary relief for the anxiety. But is it really helping you in your life? What if you were to develop skills to ride out those situations and retrain your brain to be able to be more present with other people, and even enjoy their company?

What to Do

In this worksheet, you will learn the skills to help you be less self-conscious in social situations, and replace your self-consciousness with *curiosity and self-compassion*.

Reducing self-consciousness involves learning to refocus your attention from inward to outward. So getting to know what's going on inside is an important first step. You will then learn to refocus your attention outward by observing others and recording your observations.

On the lines below, write down the details of a situation you recall when you felt highly self-conscious or embarrassed in a social situation. Be as honest as you can.

- What was the situation?
- When did it take place?
- Were you by yourself or with a friend or partner?
- What did you experience physically (anxiety symptoms)?

- What do you remember about how you felt?
- What do you remember about what your thoughts were during the experience? Be as specific as you can.
- What do you think the other person or people were thinking about you?

Now you are going to go out “in the field” to gather data. This exercise has two parts—focusing inward and focusing outward. Choose a public setting where the stakes are low, that is, you don’t know anyone and you aren’t risking being judged or scrutinized by someone you might see again. Examples include riding a bus or subway or train, going grocery shopping, going to a coffee shop or café, reading at the library, and so on.

For Part 1, you will focus for at least four or five minutes on yourself—what are your physical sensations? What are you feeling? What kinds of thoughts are you noticing? Are any memories or images coming up? If you start to notice that you’re focused on other people or on your surroundings, simply bring your mind back to the inward focus on you and your experience at this moment.

Now, pretend you are the sociologist recording this person's experience. Note all the details you can remember. What did you notice? Was focusing inward so intentionally pleasant or unpleasant? Did you notice any judgment or were you able to maintain your objective, curious stance? What *did* you notice about the other people in your surroundings while you were focusing on yourself?

For Part 2, switch gears. In a public setting (the same or a different one), focus your attention outward. Notice the people in this surrounding. Pick one or two people to observe (without being too obvious about it). What do you notice? How are they dressed? What do you imagine their mood is? Do they seem to have a lot of energy or not? Do they seem engaged in what they are doing or distracted? If the situation allows, you might say something innocuous to that person ("Nice day, don't you think?" "Looks like it's going to snow," "How about that game last night?"). See what that feels like and write down your observations below, focusing on what you noticed and what you felt.

2. By redirecting your attention outward, you are gathering new information about the world around you. Write down two or three surprising things that you noticed during this exercise about yourself and others. Make a commitment to look for those surprising things in other people or situations in the future.

3. Were you able to maintain your stance of curiosity and self-compassion? If yes, describe below what helped you? If not, what do you think got in the way?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
