

Identifying Your Worst Fears About Social Situations

Objective: To identify your thoughts about the worst things that could happen to you in social situations.

You Should Know

People with social anxiety are often unclear about what causes them to avoid social situations. Sometimes the habit of avoidance is so ingrained that it seems second nature to become anxious in advance of certain situations such as parties, dates, public speaking, or even being asked for your opinion. Before the situation occurs, you are plotting your escape route, imagining excuses for not showing up, or spinning a web of catastrophic thoughts about all the bad things that might happen.

This reaction is called anticipatory anxiety. Be assured that most people have some degree of nervousness in anticipation of certain social situations. But for those with social anxiety, the anticipation itself can become crippling and interfere with your getting through your day, or week, or life.

It is important to recognize that as scary as these thoughts are, they are just thoughts. Nothing bad is actually happening in the moment. For people with social anxiety, the worry and fear are so ingrained that the anxious thoughts come automatically, almost like a reflex. Sometimes physical responses kick in too. You might notice your adrenaline suddenly surging or your heart beating faster. The “what-if” thoughts start churning about all the things that could go wrong. Does this sound like you?

Studies show that through identifying your thoughts and fears in advance of social situations, you can slowly gain confidence and discover that your worst fears don’t actually come true.

What to Do

In this worksheet, you will clarify your worst fears about social situations. Before you do this exercise, be sure you are in a place where you feel safe and where you’re unlikely to be interrupted. The goal is to let your imagination run wild—knowing nothing bad is happening in the present moment. If you find yourself experiencing some anxiety, that’s normal and understandable. Just take some breaths and keep going. Think of it as a small “price to pay” for learning to master your fears so that you can have a happier, less stressful life.

Close your eyes and imagine yourself in the situations listed below. Really put yourself in the situation in your mind as much as you are able. Then write down your worst fears in words, phrases, or sentences. You could also choose to draw an image of the fear.

For example, in the first scenario, someone might write: “If my boss asks me my opinion, my worst fear is that I’ll start blushing and stammering, then I’ll feel like I can’t breathe and won’t be able to talk at all. I’ll be overcome with a sense of panic and have to leave the room to throw up in the bathroom, if I even make it that far. Then I’ll never be able to look anyone in the eye again and eventually they’ll know what a basket case I am and I’ll be fired.”

1. You are at a work meeting and your boss unexpectedly asks you to share your opinion about the subject under discussion.

2. You are invited to attend a surprise party for a friend, but you find out that most of the people there are strangers.

3. YOU are surprised by family and friends at a party for your birthday—suddenly you’re the center of attention.

4. You are asked to go out to eat with a friend as well as some people you don’t know.

5. In a class you are taking, everyone is asked to take turns reading aloud.

6. Your best friend sets you up on a blind date with someone who sounds like someone you might like.

7. You are on vacation and need to use a public restroom.

8. You have an appointment for your annual performance review at your job.

9. You play sports with a community team, which is about to compete for the championship.

10. You have to make an important client call and you know your co-workers can hear everything you say.

11. Identify a situation (or more) of your own that causes you anticipatory anxiety. Write down your worst fears.

What is a social situation that you currently avoid because it makes you so uncomfortable?

What is the worst thing you imagine would happen in this situation?

What is the best thing that could happen in this situation?

What is the most likely thing that could happen in this situation?

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?
