

Are You Anxious About Being the Center of Attention?

Objective

To help you manage your anxiety related to being the center of attention.

You Should Know

One of the primary worries for people with social anxiety is being the center of attention. The thought of presenting in front of your classmates can be paralyzing; but, other situations where you might be the center of attention, even “positive” ones, cause anxiety as well, such as winning an award, being praised at school, or being the “honoree” at a birthday party.

People with social anxiety worry that others are judging, criticizing, or otherwise scrutinizing their every move or utterance—as if they’re under a microscope at all times. This may cause both physical symptoms such as shaking, sweating, blushing, or a tremulous voice, as well as anxious, self-critical thoughts and efforts to avoid or escape such situations at all costs. The roots of this type of anxiety can stem from childhood—perhaps you have critical parents, or maybe you had a bad or humiliating experience when you were younger that has always stuck with you.

What would it be like to relax and enjoy these experiences? Hard to imagine? Well, it can be done.

You might already be working on practicing some strategies to overcome your fear of being the center of attention. One strategy is called “exposure therapy,” which means that you actually do (or “expose yourself” to) the people, places, and situations you fear in order to overcome your anxiety. It might sound scary at first, but there is a clear method you can follow that has been proven successful by experts.

The first step is to identify the aspects of being the center of attention that you fear and then rate them on a special scale, called the SUDS scale (Subjective Units of Distress).

What to Do

Here are some typical fears and symptoms that people with social anxiety experience when they find themselves as the center of attention:

- Shaking, trembling
- Increased blood pressure
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Rapid heartbeat
- Dizziness, fainting
- Nausea, gagging, vomiting
- Worry about being judged or criticized
- Worry about your appearance

- Worry about others criticizing how you stand, walk, present yourself publicly

Now, list below at least ten situations that cause you anxiety when you are the center of attention. Afterward, you will rate the items. There is no right answer—write down whatever comes to mind.

1. _____ SUDS Rating _____

2. _____ SUDS Rating _____

3. _____ SUDS Rating _____

4. _____ SUDS Rating _____

5. _____ SUDS Rating _____

6. _____ SUDS Rating _____

7. _____ SUDS Rating _____

8. _____ SUDS Rating _____

9. _____ SUDS Rating _____

10. _____ SUDS Rating _____

Now, review the rating scale below and think about each situation on your list. Then assign each situation the number that applies most closely. Your answer is purely subjective. It's also based on what you feel *today*, not yesterday or tomorrow or some distant time in the future. If you're working with a therapist, this scale can help you understand the severity of your anxiety related to being the center of attention, and also, ideally, show you that not every situation is off-the-charts terrifying or paralyzing.

SUDS Scale

- 0: Totally relaxed
- 1: Somewhat relaxed
- 2: Minimal anxiety/distress
- 3: Mild anxiety/distress, doesn't interfere with performance
- 4: Mild to moderate anxiety
- 5: Moderate anxiety/distress, can continue to perform
- 6: Moderate to quite anxious
- 7: Quite anxious/distressed, interfering with performance
- 8: Very anxious/distressed, can't concentrate
- 9: Extremely anxious/distressed, feeling desperate, unable to handle it\
- 10: Highest level of distress/fear/anxiety that you have ever felt, can't function

Reflections on This Exercise

What situation or symptom causes you the most distress about being the center of attention?

What situation or symptom causes you the least distress about being the center of attention?

On a scale from 1-10 (1 = not at all, 10 = highly motivated), how would you rank your motivation to work on one of the *lower-rated items* on your list (5 or under) in the coming weeks by using "exposure therapy" (practicing and role-playing) techniques? Explain.

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?
