

Dealing with Social Anxiety in School

Anxiety can at least partly be the result of an inherited family trait. It can also be triggered by stressful events (such as a school/town change, puberty, loss of a loved one, etc.), or by the need to keep some aspect of yourself or some event in your life secret.

Most anxiety is accompanied by unrealistic assessments of your situation, yourself, or the way others see you. For instance, thinking that anyone notices or cares that you have a few hairs out of place, or don't look your best, is likely unfounded. Most people are so absorbed in themselves and what they're doing that they don't notice anything about you – let alone be hypercritical of you.

When you are facing a potentially stressful situation that might cause your anxiety to rise, and when your inner self-talk turns to thoughts that others are judging you in some way, you need to stop that thought pattern and change the self-talk to recognize reality. "Thought stopping" is the first technique you can use. Yell at yourself (silently) "STOP" and simultaneously pinch yourself discretely. Tell those thoughts to get lost, and replace the anxious self-talk with more realistic talk. Remember that in 99% of all cases, no one is paying much attention to you, or judging you in any way. In the few situations that someone clearly is do so, you have three options: ignore them, accept the criticism as valid, or tell them (maybe not out loud all the time) to get lost and then tell yourself the truth.

Learn to accept sincere compliments. Believe that you are a person worthy of being accepted, validated, and loved. Rejecting compliments can be rather insulting to those making the compliments, so if for no other reason, accept them graciously rather than hurt their feelings. Acceptance can be as simple as a nod and a smile, or a simple thank you. Stay humble. People will truly love you for it.

In social situations that make you really anxious, such as having to talk in front of a class, there are several things you can do to cut the stress. The first is a bit of realistic self-talk ahead of time. Remember that your classmates have been in your situation and will be again, and most will be anxious about their own performance. It's good to remind yourself of that from time to time.

If that doesn't work and you find your anxiety increasing anyway, you can try the old trick of visualizing the audience as a bunch of eggplants, monkeys, or naked people. Make them seem ridiculous, not worthy of your worry, take a few deep breaths, and get on with it.

Here is another self-talk intervention you can use. When a stressful situation occurs, ask yourself "what's the worst (realistic) thing that could happen," and "will it matter in five years? (or five days, for that matter.)" Most of the time the answer will be reassuring. If not, the situation may actually need closer attention so as to avoid any serious problems. This is a great way to separate real from imagined threats.

You can make plenty of smaller mistakes in life – and even some big ones – and be just fine. Don't sweat the small stuff.

Exercise is an important, fun, and easy way to cut stress and improve your sense of wellbeing. Take a long, hard bike ride, walk, or run. Doing so releases endorphins into your brain, which make you feel great. Doing it daily, or at least every other day, might be enough even without all the other things we talked about. Exercise is powerful medicine.

These techniques have a good chance of getting your social anxiety under control. However, if they don't, I have other tricks in my bag. Just ask.

If there is ever anything else you want to talk about, related to stress or not, feel free to give me a shout. Everything we talk about is just between the two of us.