



Social Anxiety Before an Event: How to Prepare Without Avoiding

An explainer, prep card, and gentle exposure ladder · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- Social anxiety is a fear of being judged, embarrassed, or rejected. It is one of the most common anxiety experiences.
- Avoiding social situations brings relief now, but makes anxiety stronger over time.
- Shifting attention outward and facing situations gradually are proven ways to build confidence.

What keeps social anxiety going

Researchers have found that social anxiety tends to be maintained by a few predictable habits. Before an event, people often rehearse what could go wrong. During it, they turn their attention inward, monitoring how they look and sound. Afterward, they replay every awkward moment, sometimes called the "post-mortem."

Stage	Common pattern	Helpful alternative
Before	Imagining the worst, over-rehearsing	Setting one small, realistic goal
During	Self-monitoring: "Am I blushing? Do I sound stupid?"	Turning attention outward: listen, notice, get curious
During	Safety behaviours: avoiding eye contact, staying silent, holding a phone	Gradually dropping one safety behaviour
After	Replaying and judging every moment	Noting what went okay and moving on

Safety behaviours: the hidden trap

Safety behaviours are things people do to avoid feeling exposed, such as rehearsing sentences, avoiding eye contact, or drinking to feel relaxed. They feel protective, but they stop you from learning that you can cope. They can also make you seem distant, which may lead to the very reactions you fear.

What the research says

The Clark and Wells model of social anxiety highlights self-focused attention and safety behaviours as key factors that maintain anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995).

A large network meta-analysis found that individual CBT was among the most effective treatments for social anxiety disorder (Mayo-Wilson et al., 2014).

Tool: My Event Prep Card and Exposure Ladder

Before the event

My one small goal (e.g., ask two people a question):

The worst I'm predicting:

What I'd tell a friend with the same worry:

One safety behaviour I'll try dropping:

After the event

What actually happened:

Did my prediction come true? Partly? Not at all?

One thing that went okay:

My exposure ladder

List social situations from least to most anxiety-provoking (0–10). Start at the bottom and work up, staying in each until anxiety eases.

Step	Situation	Anxiety (0–10)
8		
7		
6		
5		
4		
3		
2		
1		

Strategies to try

- **Get curious about others.** Ask open questions and listen to the answers. It takes the spotlight off you.
- **Expect some anxiety.** The goal is not zero anxiety. It is doing what matters even with anxiety present.
- **Arrive a little early.** Settling in before a room fills can feel easier than walking into a crowd.
- **Skip the post-mortem.** If you catch yourself replaying, write one sentence about what went okay and move on.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Go on a "fact-finding mission."** Give your attention a job: learn three facts about each person you talk to. It shifts focus away from self-monitoring.
- **Try a tiny social mishap.** On purpose, do something mildly awkward, like asking a stranger for the time while wearing a watch. Discovering that nothing terrible happens weakens the fear of embarrassment.
- **Watch yourself on video.** Record yourself practising a conversation, then watch it. Most people look far less anxious than they feel.
- **Run a survey.** Ask a few trusted people, "What do you think when you see someone blush or stumble over words?" Their answers often differ from what you fear.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What am I most afraid people will think of me?

Where might this fear have come from?

What have I missed out on because of social anxiety?

What would I do if I trusted I could handle a little awkwardness?

When to reach out for support

If social anxiety is limiting your work, school, friendships, or relationships, CBT is highly effective. Therapy can help you practise in a supportive, gradual way.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Clark, D. M., & Wells, A. (1995). A cognitive model of social phobia. In R. G. Heimberg et al. (Eds.), *Social phobia: Diagnosis, assessment, and treatment* (pp. 69–93). Guilford Press.

Mayo-Wilson, E., et al. (2014). Psychological and pharmacological interventions for social anxiety disorder in adults: A systematic review and network meta-analysis. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 1(5), 368–376.

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