



FROM SOCIAL ANXIETY TO CONNECTION

*Practical Strategies for a
Calmer, More Connected Life*

DR BRENDAN MEAGHER

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● DISCLAIMER ●

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● HOW TO USE THIS BOOK ●

This book is designed to help you understand and work through social anxiety – not in theory but in practice. You can read it from start to finish or dip into the chapters that feel most relevant to you right now. Either way, take it slowly. Change doesn't happen by rushing through; it happens by noticing, reflecting and applying small steps over time.

Each chapter follows a simple rhythm:

- **Understanding:** you'll learn what's happening in your mind and body when anxiety takes hold.
- **Reflection:** through brief exercises and questions, you'll explore how these ideas relate to your own life.
- **Action:** you'll find practical steps to try, helping you gently face fears, shift habits and build confidence.

You'll also meet a range of real-life examples throughout the book. These are composites drawn from many years of clinical experience, and they illustrate how social anxiety plays out in real life. They're not case studies to analyse but people to relate to – reminders that you're not alone in this.

If you're currently seeing a psychologist or counsellor, this book can complement your therapy. If you're working through your hurdles on your own, move at a pace that feels right for you. Some chapters may feel emotionally challenging, and that's okay. It's often a sign that you're touching on something important.

As you read, stay curious. Take what helps, leave what doesn't and come back to sections as you progress. Over time, these small insights and experiments add up, helping you move from self-criticism toward connection and a kinder relationship with yourself.

● CHAPTER 1 ●

What Social Anxiety Is and What It's Not

Maybe you've thought, *I'm just a bit awkward* or *everyone feels nervous sometimes*. And that's true – most people do. However, social anxiety is something more. It's not just shyness or a case of the butterflies. It's a pattern that keeps showing up – feelings of fear, worry and self-doubt that make social situations stressful and exhausting. It often happens when you think you're being watched, judged or put on the spot, and it can leave you wanting to avoid those situations altogether.

Social anxiety is not about your personality. It differs from an introverted nature. You can be outgoing and still socially anxious. It's possible to relish companionship yet despise group speaking. You can be confident in some situations and feel really challenged in others. It's about fear – specifically, the fear of being judged negatively, embarrassed, rejected or exposed. That fear activates your body's alarm system and drives you to avoid situations you perceive as risky, even if you genuinely want to be part of them. You might feel it when you have to make a phone call, walk into a room where you don't know anyone, give a presentation or even eat in front of others. It's not always logical, but it's always real.

Social anxiety can show up in many ways:

- I am not good with technology.
- Worrying days ahead of an event.
- Replaying conversations and criticising yourself afterwards.

- Avoiding eye contact or relying on humour to cover up discomfort.
- Skipping social events, phone calls or any setting where you might be ‘on show’.
- Assuming people are judging you, even when there’s no clear evidence.

The result? You feel stuck and disconnected, as if life is happening around you rather than with you. You want that sense of connection, but fear keeps getting in the way.

The DSM-5 Criteria for Social Anxiety Disorder

Before we dive into strategies for change, it will help to understand how social anxiety is defined in the mental health field. Psychologists and psychiatrists around the world use the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5 for short) as a guide. Think of it as a shared language for describing mental health conditions so that professionals can be clear about what they’re talking about, research can be compared, and treatment can be tailored. The DSM-5 isn’t a rule book for whether your feelings are valid. It’s simply a standard reference that outlines the signs and patterns commonly seen in people with different mental health concerns.

According to the DSM-5, social anxiety disorder (sometimes called social phobia) involves the following:

- You have a marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations where you might be judged by others – such as meeting new people, having a conversation, being observed or performing in front of others.
- You fear that you will act in a way – or show anxiety symptoms – that will be negatively evaluated. Examples include being embarrassed, humiliated, rejected or offending someone.
- Social situations almost always trigger fear or anxiety.

- You actively avoid social situations or endure them with intense fear or anxiety.
- Your fear or anxiety is out of proportion to the actual threat posed.
- Your symptoms have lasted for six months or more.
- Your anxiety causes significant distress or impairment in social, work or other important areas of life.
- Your symptoms are not better explained by another mental health condition, a medical problem, substance use or another anxiety disorder.

If you see yourself in many of these points, here's some good news: you're not alone. Social anxiety is one of the most common mental health challenges worldwide, and having symptoms doesn't mean you can't improve. In fact, as you'll see in the coming chapters, social anxiety is very treatable with the right approach. While the DSM-5 criteria describe social anxiety in clinical terms, real-life social anxiety often looks far more personal and varied – as shown by the following stories.

Client Story: Mia, 41 – Work Scenario

During Monday's staff meeting, Mia has an idea she knows will improve the project. But as the conversation circles closer to her turn, her throat tightens. She tells herself, Wait for the right moment. That moment never comes, and she doesn't share her idea. By the end of the meeting, she's frustrated with herself. She misses her opportunity to contribute.

Client Story: Daniel, 26 – Social Scenario

Daniel gets a text inviting him to a friend's birthday dinner. He types, 'Sure, sounds fun,' but he doesn't hit send. Instead, he imagines sitting in awkward silence, struggling to join a conversation and wishing he were at home. In the end, he says he's busy. He finds instant relief knowing he doesn't have to attend the party, but disappointment quickly follows.

Client Story: Emma, 34 – Hidden in Plain Sight

At work functions, Emma seems effortlessly confident. She laughs, tells stories and keeps conversations flowing. What no one sees is the mental script she has rehearsed for days beforehand and how she collapses in exhaustion afterwards. She replays each interaction in her head on the drive home and scans for mistakes, convinced that she talked too much or not enough. To everyone else, Emma is outgoing. To herself, every social moment feels like a performance she's terrified of getting wrong.

The Actual Cause of Social Anxiety? A Misfiring Alarm System

Social anxiety is one of the most common mental health conditions in the world. Around 1 in 10 people experience it at a level that significantly affects their life, and many more deal with milder forms that still cause distress. Having around 10% of our population affected by social anxiety might be surprising to learn because the condition often goes unseen. Individuals with social anxiety usually conceal it well, and that invisibility makes it feel isolating. Everyone else seems to cope just fine – laughing at parties, speaking with confidence and moving through life effortlessly. Meanwhile, the person with social anxiety is stuck inside their head.

Social anxiety often develops early in life and is usually shaped by a mix of biology, personality and life experiences. Maybe you were the quiet kid in class and were laughed at when you finally spoke up. Maybe a parent or teacher was harsh, unpredictable or overly critical. Maybe those around you told you that making mistakes meant failure. Whatever the source, your brain learnt to treat social situations as risky. It started expecting rejection, embarrassment and judgement – even when those things weren't happening. Social anxiety is your brain trying to protect you. It's not a weakness. It's your nervous system doing what it was designed to do – sound the

alarm in situations that feel threatening. The issue involves unwarranted alarm activation. You are experiencing false alarms, and it's exhausting.

CBT: Social Anxiety Is Treatable

If only you could sit in my consulting room for a day, you'd see just how many others feel the same way that you do. You're not alone. However, there's good news. Whether you've received a formal diagnosis of social anxiety disorder or simply relate to what you're reading, it's important to know that it can get better.

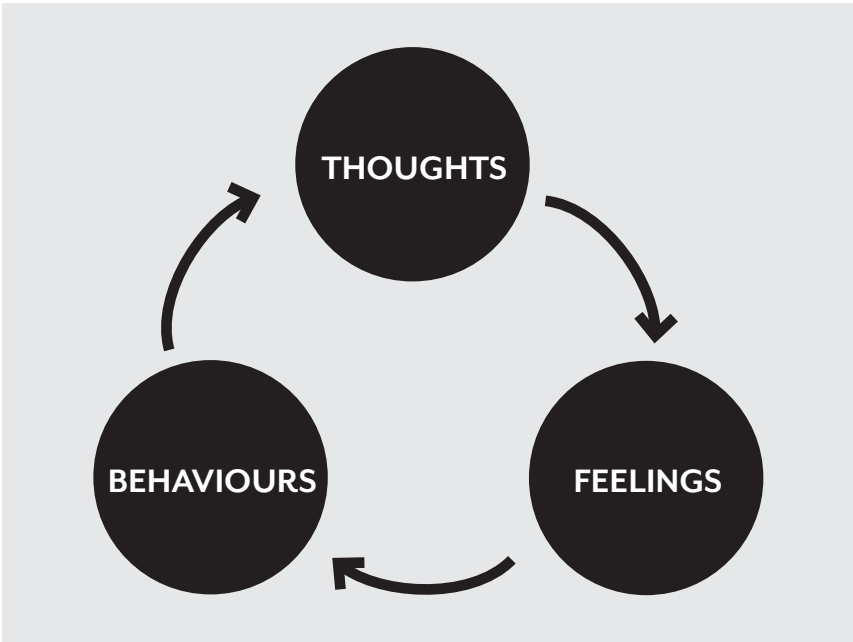
Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is the gold standard treatment for social anxiety, and it's the focus of this book. CBT is the most thoroughly researched and effective psychological treatment for social anxiety and is endorsed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the American Psychological Association. In the chapters ahead, you'll learn the evidence-based CBT skills that psychologists use to treat social anxiety.

CBT helps by:

- Challenging anxious thoughts.
- Encouraging you to gradually face situations you fear instead of avoiding them.
- Building confidence through real-life practices.

The biggest advantage of CBT is that it gives you skills for life. Once you learn the techniques, they're yours forever. CBT has been shown repeatedly to reduce symptoms and improve quality of life. The goal of CBT isn't to eliminate anxiety; it's to teach you how to manage it, respond differently and shrink its power.

CBT works on the idea that our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are connected. If you can identify and shift unhelpful thoughts – for instance, *they think I'm boring* – you can change how you feel and act. It's the unhelpful thought patterns that keep social anxiety going.



While the idea of our thoughts leading to our feelings is a very simple and logical one, distinguishing between our thoughts and our feelings can be tricky sometimes, particularly when we're feeling anxious. The way society uses the word *feel* doesn't help. For example, when someone says, 'I feel like my footy team is going to lose tomorrow', what they really mean is, 'I *think* my footy team is going to lose tomorrow'. As we go through the subsequent chapters, we're going to work hard at differentiating between our thoughts and our feelings. Our thoughts are an amazingly powerful tool, and we have to train them to provide the feelings we desire.

A Note on Medication

While this book focuses on psychological approaches and especially CBT, it's worth mentioning that medication can also assist some people with social anxiety. Certain antidepressant medications – such as ZOLOFT, Lexapro and EFEXOR – can help ease the physical

and emotional intensity of social anxiety. They don't *cure* anxiety, but they can make it easier to engage in psychological treatment while you're building new skills.

In Australia, psychologists don't prescribe medication; that's handled by your GP or a psychiatrist. If your anxiety feels overwhelming or your progress in psychological treatment is slow, discussing medication options with your doctor may be worthwhile. Research shows that CBT is usually the most effective first-line treatment because it addresses the underlying thinking and behaviour patterns that maintain anxiety. For some, a combination of CBT and medication works best. Medication can take the edge off symptoms, while psychological treatment creates lasting change.

Try This: A Gentle Check-In

To tune into your experiences, consider these questions:

- Do you avoid situations because you worry about how you'll be perceived?
- Do you over-analyse conversations afterwards?
- Do you hide your anxiety through humour, silence or distractions?
- Do you feel different or 'behind' socially compared to others?
- Do you want connection but think you can't achieve it?

If you've said yes to several of these, you're in the right place. This book will help you.

Conclusion

Now that you have a clearer picture of what social anxiety is and isn't, it's time to explore why your brain reacts as if social situations

are dangerous. You don't have to let social anxiety decide how you live. This book will guide you in understanding it, challenging it and creating a life that feels bigger and freer. With each small yet intentional step, new doors can open. By the time you reach the last page, you'll have practical tools, strategies and insights to help you connect with others – and with yourself – in ways you may not have thought possible.

About the Reflective Exercises

At the end of each chapter, you'll find a reflective exercise designed to help you pause, look inward and apply what you've just read to your own life. These prompts encourage you to explore your experiences of social anxiety more deeply – including what you think, feel and do – so that you can notice patterns and connections. To get the most out of this book and each of the reflective exercises, I encourage you to write your reflections in a notebook as you go. This practice can bring clarity. Some reflective exercises can be done quickly, but for others, you should ideally spend about a week focusing on one chapter before moving on to the next. Giving yourself time to notice how the ideas play out in real life will help the learning sink in. Remember, these exercises aren't about finding the 'right' answer. They're about understanding yourself better and developing strategies to manage social anxiety better.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 1: You're Not Alone

Purpose: to help you recognise that social anxiety is a shared human experience and to begin noticing your personal patterns without judgment.

This week, focus on gently observing your social anxiety – when it shows up, what it feels like and how you respond – so that you can start to understand it more clearly.

- ⊙ Situation: write about a recent experience when you felt socially anxious. What was happening around you?
- ⊙ Thoughts: what was on your mind? Write three or four of the thoughts you remember having in that moment.
- ⊙ Feelings: how did your body react? Note any physical feelings, such as a racing heart, sweaty palms, shaky hands or a tense stomach.
- ⊙ Behaviours: what did you do next? Describe how you responded. Did you stay quiet, leave the situation, push through or do something else?
- ⊙ Patterns: how does that recent memory connect to the way you usually experience social anxiety? Write two or three sentences about any similarities, including certain triggers, thoughts and physical sensations.

Key Points of Chapter 1: What Social Anxiety Is and What It's Not

- ⊙ Social anxiety goes beyond ordinary shyness. It's a persistent fear of judgement that can limit connection and participation in everyday life.
- ⊙ It can affect anyone, regardless of confidence or extroversion, and it often hides beneath a polished exterior.
- ⊙ According to the DSM-5, social anxiety disorder involves enduring fear, avoidance and distress in social or performance situations.
- ⊙ Real-life examples show how social anxiety can seem invisible yet can powerfully shape our thoughts, feelings and behaviours.
- ⊙ CBT is the most effective treatment for anxiety, as it teaches lifelong skills to manage anxious thoughts and face feared situations.
- ⊙ You're far from alone. Social anxiety is common, understandable and highly treatable with the right understanding and approach.

● CHAPTER 2 ●

Why Your Brain Feels Under Threat

If you've ever felt your heart race during a presentation, gone blank in a group discussion or avoided a phone call because of nerves, you've experienced what happens when the brain mistakes a social threat for physical danger. This reaction is driven by the amygdala, your brain's built-in alarm system. Long ago, the amygdala kept our ancestors safe by helping them instantly spot danger, such as a snake in the grass or a crocodile in the river. The problem is that the amygdala hasn't updated its software. Today, it still sounds the same alarm when the 'threat' is something as harmless as speaking up in a meeting or introducing yourself to new people. Once triggered, it sends signals through your body to prepare you to fight or flee the situation. This leaves you feeling on edge, even when you're perfectly safe.

That's why you might notice your body reacting. Such reactions may include:

- Your heart racing or pounding in your chest.
- Blushing or breaking into a sweat.
- Shaky hands, a trembling voice or wobbly knees.
- Tenseness in your shoulders, neck or jaw.
- A churning or upset stomach.
- A dry mouth or difficulty catching your breath.
- A feeling of being physically drained or wiped out afterwards.

These are protective responses. Your brain is doing what it's

supposed to do when it perceives a threat. It just doesn't realise it's misjudging the threat.

The Social Threat Response: Distorted Self-Image and Internal Monitoring

Humans are wired to be social. It's part of our survival instinct. For our ancestors, belonging to a tribe wasn't just nice; it was essential. Being accepted meant protection, food and safety in numbers. Rejection or exclusion could leave someone isolated, vulnerable to predators and cut off from vital resources. Connection literally meant life or death. That ancient coding still lives within us today. So, when someone looks at you a little too long or doesn't respond to your joke, your brain can interpret it as a threat. You then scan for signs of disapproval and become hyperaware of yourself – how you look, sound and act. This self-focus doesn't help. It actually amplifies the anxiety. You can't be present in the moment because your brain is stuck monitoring and defending.

Likewise, people with social anxiety often carry a distorted mental image of themselves in social settings. You might think you're visibly blushing, sweating or stammering – even when others haven't noticed anything of the sort. This imagined version of yourself becomes the standard against which you judge everything. When attention turns inward, anxiety increases. You're no longer listening to others; you're just analysing yourself. This self-monitoring makes social interactions harder, which reinforces the belief that you're not good at them. And so, the cycle continues.

The Anxiety Sequence: How It Builds

Social anxiety operates in a loop comprised of the following phases:

1. Anticipation: you worry before the event.
2. Perceived threat: you have thoughts such as *they'll think I'm boring* or *I'll embarrass myself*.

3. Physical symptoms: you have a racing heart, a tight chest, sweaty hands or nausea.
4. Self-focus and rumination: you focus on how anxious or awkward you feel.
5. Avoidance or endurance: you either skip it or suffer through it.
6. Post-event self-criticism: you replay every moment and feel embarrassed.
7. Increased fear next time: avoidance and unhelpful thinking strengthen the anxiety.

This cycle is self-reinforcing, and we need to change it.

The Role of Past Experiences and Memory

Many people with social anxiety can trace its roots back to adolescence or childhood – moments when they felt humiliated, mocked, excluded or criticised. Those early emotional experiences linger in the brain and shape how they see future situations. Their brains generalise: If it happened once, it could happen again.

You might consciously know that no one is judging you now, but your brain and body react as if the past is still happening. This isn't irrational; it's conditioning. Nevertheless, the good news is that the brain can learn new associations. By gradually facing your fears in safe ways, you can create new emotional experiences that challenge the old memories.

Client Story: Sam, 34 – Capable, Caring and Self-Critical

Sam is the teacher every student remembers – patient, engaging and genuinely invested in his students' success. But when staff meeting day rolls around, a knot tightens in his stomach. He arrives early, prepared and organised, with his notes neatly arranged. As the meeting starts, ideas swirl in his mind, but the words never leave his lips. He nods, smiles and takes it all in while silently debating whether to speak. By the time he finds the courage, the moment has passed. Later, alone, the replay begins.

Why didn't I say that? Did I sound stupid when I spoke? I bet they thought I was so embarrassing. *The self-criticism is relentless, leaving him mentally drained long after the meeting ends. To the outside world, Sam is calm, professional and confident. Inside, a quiet battle rages.*

Safety Behaviours: Short-Term Relief, Long-Term Trap

To cope, many people develop what psychologists call safety behaviours: avoiding eye contact, scripting conversations in advance, sitting near exits and constantly checking their phone. These habits reduce immediate anxiety, but they have a cost. They prevent a person from learning that social situations can be safe, manageable and even enjoyable.

When working with a psychologist, people learn to identify and gently reduce their safety behaviours. Over time, this builds real confidence – not the kind that comes from avoiding discomfort but the kind that comes from managing discomfort well.

Looking Forward

Understanding what social anxiety is and how your brain contributes to it is the starting point for improvement. You don't have to silence your fear completely. You need to learn that fear doesn't necessarily mean danger and that anxiety doesn't have to mean avoidance. Social anxiety is a learned pattern your brain has adopted to keep you safe. It's a habit, and habits can be changed. Understanding what's really driving your fear gives you the power to respond differently. This awareness is the first step towards breaking the cycle and building the confidence to engage with life on your own terms. Understanding your brain's alarm system is one thing, but another powerful influence is the voice inside your head. In the next chapter, we'll meet the inner critic and see how it shapes your social confidence.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 2: Why Your Brain Feels Under Threat

Purpose: to help you understand that your body's anxiety responses are protective and not proof that something's wrong and to begin to recognise your personal alarm signals.

This week, pay attention to moments when your brain sounds the alarm. Note what triggers it, how your body reacts and how you can gently remind yourself that the sensations are temporary and that you are safe.

- ⊙ Notice the signs: think of a recent occasion when you felt anxious around others. What did you notice first – the physical sensations, the thoughts or the emotions? Write down what stood out most in that moment.
- ⊙ Map the chain reaction: describe what happened step by step. Try to capture the sequence, such as *trigger* → *thought* → *feeling* → *physical reaction* → *behaviour*. Seeing the pattern clearly can help you recognise when the alarm is beginning to sound.
- ⊙ Name your body's signals: write about the physical sensations that often appear for you. These could be a racing heart, a tight chest, shaky hands or tense shoulders. How long do these sensations last? What happens once the situation passes?
- ⊙ Spot the false alarm: looking back, was the situation actually unsafe, or did your brain misread the threat? Write a few sentences about how your brain might have overreacted and what a calmer perspective could have been.
- ⊙ Reframe the response: imagine that same situation happening again. What can you tell yourself next time to remind your brain and body that you're safe? Write one short, reassuring sentence you can say to yourself in the moment.
- ⊙ Capture the insight: finish by writing one or two sentences about what you've learned from this reflection. How can this new understanding help you respond differently the next time your alarm system activates?

Key Points of Chapter 2: Why Your Brain Feels Under Threat

- ⊙ Social anxiety is not just nerves. It's your brain's protective system reacting as if social judgement is physical danger.
- ⊙ The amygdala – your brain's threat detector – triggers a fight-or-flight response, even in safe situations, such as during meetings or introductions.
- ⊙ Humans are wired for social acceptance, so perceived rejection can feel like a survival threat.
- ⊙ Self-focus and a distorted self-image make anxiety worse, reinforcing the belief that you're not good in social situations.
- ⊙ Safety behaviours – for example, avoiding eye contact or over-preparing – provide short-term relief but prevent long-term confidence.
- ⊙ Reframing anxiety as a false alarm can help you face discomfort and build resilience.

● CHAPTER 3 ●

The Inner Critic – Understanding Your Self-Talk

If you live with social anxiety, you probably know *the voice*. It's the one that pipes up after a conversation and says, *I sounded stupid*, or whispers during a meeting, *they all think I don't belong here*. This voice can be constant, and it can shape how you feel, act and view yourself. This voice is your inner critic, and in social anxiety, it's especially loud.

Your inner critic often develops through experiences and temperament. For some people, it's shaped by being teased, criticised, excluded or misunderstood. Maybe a teacher embarrassed you in front of others, your friends laughed when you stumbled or you grew up feeling you could never measure up. For others, the inner critic emerges more quietly, with no clear cause. It can arise from being self-aware, sensitive to others' opinions or driven to do well. Over time, to manage your inner critic, your brain learns to protect you by creating mental rules about how to behave or what to avoid to stay safe from rejection or failure. Here are some examples of those rules:

- Don't speak unless you're sure you won't mess it up: your brain thinks silence is safer than risking embarrassment.
- If you show nerves, people will think you're weak: anxiety tells you that your feelings are on display and that they'll be judged harshly.
- Stay quiet, stay safe: the fewer chances you take, the less you can get wrong.

- Always rehearse what you'll say, and then say less: over-preparing feels like control, but it can keep you from speaking naturally.
- Avoid drawing attention to yourself at all costs: even positive attention can feel threatening when you're anxious.
- If you make a mistake, everyone will remember it: anxiety magnifies slip-ups as if they'll be replayed forever.
- People are always noticing your flaws: you assume others are scanning for mistakes as closely as you are.
- It's better to avoid than to regret: skipping the situation provides relief, but it strengthens the fear next time.

You don't choose these mental rules consciously. They develop over a long period through repeated experiences. Once they're in place, they guide your thoughts automatically, even years after the original situation has passed. But here's the good news: what's been learned can be unlearned. We can create much kinder, more helpful rules.

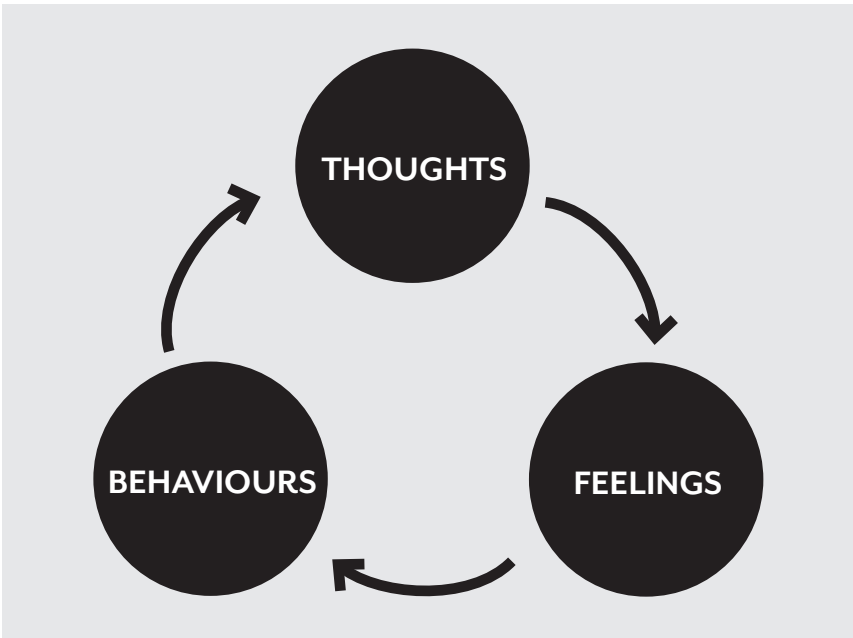
The Cognitive Model: How Thoughts Shape Anxiety

Psychiatrist Aaron Beck, the creator of CBT, introduced a simple but powerful idea mentioned in Chapter 1: our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are linked. What you think influences how you feel. How you feel influences what you do. What you do shapes how you think.

Here's how that plays out in social anxiety:

1. Behaviour: you walk into a social gathering.
2. Thought: you think everyone's going to notice how awkward you are.
3. Feelings: you feel anxious, your heart races and your mouth goes dry.

4. Behaviours: you keep your head down and avoid eye contact, and because you don't connect with anyone, you leave quickly.
5. Thought: you think you're a failure.



This becomes a self-fulfilling cycle – but what if we could catch that first thought and question it? Maybe we could move to a fairer or more helpful thought. Maybe that thought would be less likely to provoke a feeling of anxiety in our bodies. Maybe we could start talking to people more easily and naturally, identifying links and connections we have with other people.

Common Thoughts in Social Anxiety

People with social anxiety often have similar inner narratives. Here are some examples:

- *I'm going to say something stupid*: fearing that words will come out wrong and confirm your worst worries.
- *They can tell I'm anxious*: believing that every sign of nerves is obvious to everyone.
- *If I blush or stammer, they'll judge me*: focusing on physical symptoms as proof you're being evaluated.
- *I always mess things up*: drawing a sweeping conclusion based on a few awkward moments.
- *Everyone's watching me*: feeling like you're under a spotlight, even in casual situations.
- *I never know what to say*: expecting your mind to go blank before you've even tried.
- *They probably won't like me*: assuming negative opinions without clear evidence.
- *I'm not as interesting, funny or smart as other people*: comparing yourself harshly and coming up short.

These thoughts are often automatic. They just appear. They're part of a well-worn mental script. However, automatic doesn't necessarily mean accurate, and it certainly doesn't mean helpful. Still, these thoughts are often repetitive and predictable, so we can plan and prepare alternative, fairer/more helpful thoughts to counter the unhelpful thoughts.

Common Thinking Traps That Feed Social Anxiety

Some of the most common thinking patterns of people with social anxiety fall into the following categories:

- **Mind reading**: believing you know what others are thinking – usually something negative (e.g. *they think I'm boring* or *she noticed my hands shaking*).
- **Catastrophising**: expecting the worst possible outcome (e.g. *if I mess up, they'll never invite me again* or *one awkward moment will ruin everything*).

- Personalisation: assuming that other people's behaviour is always about you (e.g. *he looked away – it must be because I sounded stupid*).
- Fortune telling: predicting the future as if it's certain, often in a negative way (e.g. *I just know I'll say something dumb*).
- All-or-nothing thinking: seeing situations as either perfect or a disaster, with no in-between (e.g. *if I don't speak confidently, it's a total failure*).
- Overgeneralisation: taking one bad experience and applying it to all future situations (e.g. *I messed up last time, so I'll always mess up*).
- Emotional reasoning: believing that because you feel anxious, something must be wrong (e.g. *I feel nervous, so they must be judging me*).
- Labelling: defining yourself harshly based on one behaviour or mistake (e.g. *I'm hopeless* or *I'm socially awkward*).

The goal isn't to force yourself to think positively. That often backfires. Instead, it's about learning to recognise, question and rebalance your thoughts to create a habit of thinking more fairly or helpfully.

Remember that the harsh inner critic thrives on black-and-white thinking: you're confident or you're a failure. But life isn't black and white. You can feel anxious and still be articulate. You can blush and hold a conversation. You can stumble and remain respected. Reframing your inner dialogue doesn't mean ignoring your discomfort. It means treating yourself the way you'd treat a good friend – with context, kindness and encouragement.

I want to re-emphasise a very important point: we aren't trying to think positively. Often, trying to think positively goes too far. Sure, you can brainstorm a positive thought, but you don't really believe the thought. You roll your eyes at it and go back to your unhelpful, anxiety-provoking thought. What we're aiming for is a thought you believe in – not necessarily a positive thought (although it might be) but a fairer or more helpful thought.

Client Story: Ben, 31 – The Relentless Commentator

Ben’s mind ran a constant commentary: you sounded weird, or they think you’re boring. He assumed the critic was the truth-teller in his head. Using a thought record, Ben began challenging those automatic statements. When he wrote them down, they looked exaggerated and cruel. Gradually, he learned to replace I’m hopeless with I was nervous, but I tried. His anxiety didn’t vanish overnight, but his self-talk softened. Conversations started feeling human again, rather than feeling like high-stakes performances. Many people like Ben have benefited from using the thought record.

Two-Step Thought Record

Anxiety-Provoking Thought	Fairer/More Helpful Thought
<i>I’ll sound like an idiot when I speak.</i>	<i>I’ll be nervous, but I can still do it.</i>

**The Liking Gap:
You’re More Liked Than You Think**

Here’s an interesting insight from social psychology that’s worth remembering when you doubt yourself. Most people underestimate how much others actually like them. Researchers call this the ‘liking gap’, a consistent finding showing that after a conversation, we assume the other person didn’t enjoy it as much as we did. The term was first described by Erica Boothby and colleagues at Cornell

University. Their research revealed a striking pattern: across countless everyday interactions, people regularly misjudged how well they had been received. For anyone living with social anxiety, this is a powerful finding. It shows that those post-conversation doubts – such as wondering if you said something wrong, replaying every awkward moment or assuming others judged you – aren't reflections of reality. They're simply habits of an anxious mind.

So, the next time you catch yourself over-analysing an interaction, remind yourself that the other person probably liked you more than you think they did. That small shift in perspective helps loosen one of social anxiety's most persistent thinking errors, which is the belief that others are judging you harshly. In truth, most people are far kinder, more open and more forgiving than your anxiety would have you believe.

Thus, when you meet someone new, you can try to discover something you share in common, no matter how small. Maybe you support the same footy team, drive the same brand of car, have kids in the same age group or love the same TV series. This shared link instantly creates rapport and gives you a natural conversation starter. It also helps you develop a more constructive way of thinking about the other person so you can focus on the connection rather than searching for a topic to talk about. People feel more at ease and more open when they sense you have something in common.

Something to Keep in Mind

Most people just want to deal with *nice*. They want to interact with kind, respectful, genuine people. Often, nice is more than enough. However, those with social anxiety often aim for much more than nice. They push for perfect, impressive or extraordinary. That extra pressure can hold you back. Remember that you don't need to dazzle. Being nice, present and authentic is more than enough.

Once you recognise the patterns of your inner critic, you'll see how it pushes you towards avoidance. Avoidance may feel protective, but it quietly reinforces anxiety's hold. Each time you sidestep a feared situation, you teach your brain the wrong lesson – that you couldn't handle it. The way forward is to interrupt this loop, proving to yourself that discomfort is survivable.

Try This: The Thought Record

One of the most effective CBT tools is the thought record. It's a structured way to step back from your inner critic and view a situation more fairly and helpfully. Here's how it works:

1. Situation: what triggered the anxiety (e.g. you had to speak during a meeting)?
2. Thought: what ran through your mind (e.g. *I'll sound like an idiot when I speak*)?
3. Emotion: what did you feel (e.g. nervous or embarrassed)?
4. Evidence for: is there anything that supports that thought?
5. Evidence against: what challenges it, and what else might be true?
6. Balanced thought: what's a fairer or more helpful thought?

Instead of jumping to the harsh conclusion that you sounded like an idiot, you'll learn to work through the situation. *I felt nervous, but I still spoke, and it seemed to go well.* Even a small shift in your thoughts can be powerful. Over time, these rebalanced thoughts create new emotional outcomes and less anxiety.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 3: The Inner Critic – Understanding Your Self-Talk

Purpose: to help you identify your most common unhelpful thinking patterns and to begin practising how to challenge and reshape them using the two-step thought record.

This week, focus on catching your thinking traps. Use the two-step thought record each day to question your anxious thoughts and gently replace them with more balanced and realistic alternatives.

- ⊙ Identify your traps: what are two or three thinking traps that are most relevant to you?
- ⊙ Practise with the thought record: for the next two weeks, use the two-step thought record on page 23. Aim to write at least five to seven thoughts per day. The thought record is an invaluable tool for changing your thinking patterns. Remember, habits can change – but only with consistent effort.
- ⊙ Two tips for completing the thought record:
 - If you're finding it hard to spot your anxious thoughts, keep a brief daily journal to describe situations when you felt anxious – including where you were, what you were doing and what was happening around you. This can make it easier to recognise the thoughts you had before, during and after those moments.
 - If you've written some anxious thoughts but can't think of a fairer or more helpful alternative, take a break and revisit them later that day or the next day, when you feel calmer. You might also ask yourself, *What would I say to a friend if they were having this thought?* It can also be easier for someone else to see things more clearly than we can in the moment, so consider asking a trusted friend to help.

- ⊙ The next step is about practice – catch and question your thoughts and gradually shift your self-talk into something more balanced, more truthful and much more helpful. You don't need to be perfect; nobody is. You just need to pause and ask, *Is this thought helpful? Is it kind? Is it true?* That slight pause is where change begins.

Key Points of Chapter 3: The Inner Critic – Understanding Your Self-Talk

- ⊙ The inner critic is shaped by past experiences, and it develops mental rules aimed at self-protection. However, these rules often reinforce anxiety.
- ⊙ Automatic thoughts appear quickly and feel believable, but they're not always accurate or helpful.
- ⊙ In social anxiety, common thoughts include being afraid of sounding stupid, being judged for physical symptoms or being unlikable.
- ⊙ Self-focus and harsh self-talk create a self-fulfilling loop of anxiety, avoidance and low confidence.
- ⊙ The thought record is a practical CBT tool for identifying, questioning and reframing anxious thoughts into fairer or more helpful alternatives.
- ⊙ The goal isn't to think positively. It's to think more truthfully and compassionately in ways you can genuinely believe.

Further Reading

For those interested in learning more about the liking gap, consider reading the following:

Boothby EJ, Cooney G, Sandstrom GM, Clark MS. The Liking Gap in Conversations: Do People Like Us More Than We Think? *Psychol Sci.* 2018 Nov;29(11):1742-1756. doi: 10.1177/0956797618783714. Epub 2018 Sep 5. PMID: 30183512.

● CHAPTER 4 ●

Avoidance and Exposure – The Trap That Keeps You Anxious (and the Way Out)

When social anxiety flares up, everything in your body tells you to get out of the situation. And when you do – when you cancel plans, decline an invitation, leave early or keep your head down – you feel better ... temporarily. But that sense of relief is a trap. This chapter explores why avoidance is the fuel that keeps social anxiety alive and how facing even small fears can break the cycle. It's not about pushing yourself into overwhelming situations. It's about understanding what avoidance costs you and reclaiming your life, one step at a time.

Indeed, avoidance can feel like a solution. It's incredibly compelling because it works – in the short term. When you dodge a scary social situation, your anxiety drops. Your brain says, *I'm safe*, and it rewards you with the feeling of relief. Let's say you're invited to a party. You imagine having awkward conversations, standing alone and saying the wrong thing. You feel your heart race. You picture it going badly. So, you politely say, 'I've got too much on'. You feel immediate relief, but here's what your brain learns: that would have been a disaster; good thing I didn't go. The next time, the fear is even stronger, and you decline even faster than last time. Little by little, your world shrinks, and you end up missing opportunities to connect with others.

The Avoidance Cycle

Avoidance follows a predictable loop. Once you recognise this pattern, you can start to change it.

1. Trigger: you're invited to a social situation.
2. Anxiety rises: your mind floods with what-ifs.
3. Catastrophic thinking: you imagine embarrassment, failure or judgement.
4. Avoidance: you decline the invitation.
5. Short-term relief: the anxiety drops, and you feel better.
6. Long-term reinforcement: your brain falsely concludes that the event was dangerous.

Each time this cycle repeats, your anxiety gets stronger, and your confidence gets weaker. It's not that you can't develop confidence. It's that you haven't had the chance to build it because avoidance keeps stealing those chances away.

The research is clear. Avoidance is one of the primary mechanisms that keeps social anxiety going. Avoidance gives anxiety its staying power and stops you from learning that the worst-case scenarios rarely happen. It prevents you from discovering that people are usually kinder than you fear they will be. Most importantly, it robs you of the chance to realise that you can handle discomfort and do the thing anyway.

Avoidance Comes in Many Forms

Avoidance isn't always obvious. It's not just skipping events – it's the subtle ways you keep yourself 'safe'. These behaviours are what your anxiety thinks are survival strategies, but the cost is high: a smaller life, fewer connections and less confidence. Over time, these costs add up.

Obvious avoidance may include the following:

- Making an excuse to stay home.
- Letting messages or invites go unanswered.

- Finding a reason not to go at the last minute.
- Saying you're too busy or too tired to catch up.

Some examples of subtle avoidance are:

- Sitting at the back and staying quiet in meetings or classes.
- Avoiding eye contact or focusing on your phone instead of people.
- Rehearsing what you'll say and then staying silent anyway.
- Just interacting with one 'safe' person.
- Choosing online interactions over face-to-face ones.
- Using alcohol or humour to cover nerves.

Every time you avoid, your world shrinks. The café you used to love feels too risky. The gym becomes intimidating. Parties? Way too much pressure! Eventually, you miss out on friendships, relationships, opportunities and even small day-to-day joys. Avoidance doesn't just keep you anxious. It keeps you lonely. It keeps you stuck. But here's the hope: every time you face something you'd normally avoid – no matter how small – you open your world back up. You build your momentum.

The Solution: Approach in Small Steps

You don't need to leap into terrifying situations. In fact, that would probably backfire. The goal isn't to overwhelm your system. It's to retrain your brain to see that social situations aren't as dangerous as you think. That's where graded exposure comes in: intentionally facing what you fear in repeated, manageable steps until it becomes less scary.

When you've been avoiding something for a long time, even thinking about approaching it can trigger fear. That's okay. It's normal. The goal isn't to be fearless; it's to take action anyway, from a place of self-compassion and courage. Look for opportunities to interact with people. For instance, you could spend 30 minutes trying to find the item you want at Bunnings on your own, or you

could ask a staff member. This is just one example of how you can create a new habit of seeing opportunities instead of threats.

Every time you break the avoidance cycle, even in the smallest way, you're teaching your brain something important. New rules are being created, such as these ones below:

- *I can do this, even when I feel anxious.*
- *My feelings don't control my actions.*
- *I don't need to be calm to cope.*
- *I can be awkward and still be okay.*
- *People aren't judging me as much as I think.*
- *Discomfort is temporary. It will pass if I let it.*
- *I can handle embarrassment.*
- *The worst-case scenario is usually unlikely and survivable.*
- *It's okay to be imperfect and still belong.*
- *Courage means showing up, even when I'm scared.*

These messages, repeated through experience, are what rewires the fear system.

How Exposure Works

Social anxiety often teaches you to play it safe. Avoid the interaction. Wait until you feel confident. Rehearse every word. However, when you avoid social situations, your brain never gets the chance to discover that they're not actually dangerous. In reality, when you face the situation and nothing terrible happens – or when the worst happens and you survive – your brain adjusts its threat system. This is called habituation.

This chapter invites you to try facing your fears, gently and repeatedly, so that your brain learns that you can handle them. Exposure is one of the most effective ways to reduce social anxiety. It's not about pushing yourself or toughing it out but about gradual, purposeful practice. It involves approaching what you fear until your anxiety softens and your confidence grows.

Exposure is:

- Taking small, repeated steps towards what you fear
- Learning to act with anxiety rather than waiting for it to disappear
- Teaching your brain over time that discomfort is survivable.

Exposure isn't:

- Flooding yourself with high-anxiety situations
- Forcing yourself to be fearless
- Enduring a performance test to prove your worth.

Five Shifts That Strengthen Exposure

To get the most out of your exposure practice, keep these five evidence-based mindset shifts in mind:

1. Act before you feel ready.

A common trap is waiting to feel confident before acting. Confidence isn't a prerequisite, though. It results from repeated action. The more you engage with feared situations, the more your brain learns that those situations are survivable. Flip the script: instead of saying, 'I can't speak because I'm anxious', say, 'I'll speak up *with* anxiety'. This builds experiential tolerance – the ability to do difficult things despite discomfort.

2. Anxiety is uncomfortable, not dangerous.

Many people interpret physical symptoms of anxiety – such as blushing and a shaky voice – as signs that something's wrong. However, these sensations are normal. They're your body's alarm system misfiring, not a crisis. Tell yourself, *This is anxiety. It's unpleasant, but I can handle it.* Exposure helps you ride these waves without panic.

3. Focus outward, not inward.

Social anxiety turns your attention inward to how you look, sound or feel. This self-monitoring makes it harder to connect. Instead, focus on others. Be curious. What's the person saying? What colour are their eyes? What colour is their top? What matters to them? What do you have in common with them? Try to notice details, ask questions and gently redirect your focus back to them. You'll feel less stuck in your head and more connected to others.

4. Drop the need to be perfect.

Social anxiety often whispers, *Don't mess this up*. But perfectionism is a trap. People connect through authenticity, not flawless performance. Allow yourself to say that you don't know something or to admit that you're nervous. These minor acts of honesty foster genuine connection and reduce pressure. Embrace awkwardness. It's a sign you're showing up.

5. Measure success by action, not outcome.

Instead of judging an interaction by how it went, judge it by what you did. Did you take the risk? Stay in the conversation? Speak up despite nerves? That's a success. Keep a checklist or a journal if it helps. Each act of courage, no matter how small, chips away at avoidance and grows your confidence.

Here are some tips for success:

- Expect discomfort: it's a sign your brain is learning.
- Don't aim for perfect: focus on progress, not performance.
- Keep notes: track what you feared versus what actually happened.
- Repeat exposures: confidence grows from repetition, not reassurance. Practice, practice, practice.

Your Exposure Hierarchy

Before continuing further, take some time to create your own social anxiety exposure hierarchy. Include at least two items at each level from 10/10 down to 1/10, like in the table below.

Exposure Hierarchy – Social Anxiety

- | | |
|--|---|
| 10/10 – Extremely anxiety-provoking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Giving a speech or presentation to a large audience ● Confronting someone with a disagreement |
| 9/10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Attending a large social event where you know few people ● Meeting your partner’s family or friends for the first time |
| 8/10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speaking up in a work meeting or class to share an opinion or idea ● Introducing yourself to a group when joining a new team or club |
| 7/10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Making small talk with a stranger at a café or networking event ● Joining a social activity, such as a trivia night, where you don’t know anyone |
| 6/10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Asking a question in a public setting ● Talking to a shop assistant or salesperson when you feel awkward doing so |
| 5/10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Making a phone call instead of emailing or texting ● Recording yourself on video and sharing it publicly |
| 4/10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introducing yourself by name when speaking to someone new ● Giving a brief compliment to someone you don’t know well (e.g. ‘I like your jacket’) |

3/10

- Staying in a conversation for an extra few minutes instead of exiting early
- Sharing a small personal detail with a colleague or friend

2/10

- Saying hello to a shop assistant
- Leaving your phone in your pocket instead of using it as a shield in public

1/10 – Barely

anxiety-provoking

- Making brief eye contact with a passer-by
- Smiling at someone while walking past

Next, try doing these steps:

1. Choose one activity that you usually avoid that's a 2/10 or 3/10 – for example, sharing a small personal detail with a colleague or friend.
2. Rate your anxiety before on a scale from 0 to 10.
3. Do the activity, even if your heart races or your voice shakes.
4. Reflect afterwards: what actually happened? Was it as bad as you expected?
5. Repeat regularly. Small steps, taken often, build confidence.

Remember, this isn't about forcing yourself. There's a big difference between healthy exposure and pushing yourself too hard. If you force yourself into something that's far beyond your current capacity, you might end up feeling more anxious, not less. If it seems too challenging, choose an activity that you rated lower for anxiety. That's why it's crucial to start small. Facing fears should feel challenging but doable – not traumatic. If you rate your anxiety an 8 out of 10, try something closer to a 4. Think of this as training, not testing. You're building a new habit, not proving yourself.

Try This: Supermarket Exposure Practice

The supermarket is a great place to build confidence in small, low-pressure ways. If you usually go straight to the self-service checkout because it feels safer, choose a staffed checkout instead. As you wait, focus on staying present. Notice what's happening around you – the sounds and the items moving down the conveyor. When you greet the person at the checkout, make brief eye contact and say hello. Maybe you could ask them a question about their day.

Afterwards, take a moment to notice your thoughts:

- What did your mind say before and during the interaction?
- Were any of those thoughts harsh or self-critical?
- How did the reality compare with what you expected?

You're not trying to stop the thoughts or judge them. You just want to see them clearly and gently challenge the story that everyone's judging you.

Client Story: Nathan, 40 – The Declined Invitation

Nathan always had an excuse ready: busy week, early start or feeling too drained. Each 'maybe next time' brought a wave of relief, followed later by a familiar frustration. He wanted to feel connected and be part of things, but each avoidance quietly reinforced the fear that social situations were unsafe. When we talked about what he wanted most, he said, 'I just want to feel normal around people again'.

Together, Nathan and I built an exposure hierarchy of small, realistic steps towards connection. His first step wasn't a big night out or a group lunch. It was simply having coffee with one colleague rather than declining the invitation. The anxiety was still there, but so was a sense of pride afterwards. Later, he reflected, 'I thought I had to wait

until I felt confident to do things like that. Turns out, the confidence came after doing it'. Nathan benefited immensely from the hard work he did with his exposure hierarchy.

Client Story: Helen, 30 – The Courage to Stay

Helen dreaded team training days – introductions, icebreakers, all of it. So, we created a small exposure plan for her. She'd speak once in each session, no matter how anxious she felt. At first, her voice shook, but no one reacted badly. Repeating the exposure showed her body a new truth: discomfort doesn't equal danger. After several weeks, she admitted, 'It's still awkward – but not terrifying'. Each time she stayed rather than escaping, her confidence quietly expanded.

Using the How We Feel App

One of the most powerful steps in managing social anxiety is learning to notice and name your emotions. The How We Feel app is a free, research-based tool developed by a team of scientists, designers and engineers in collaboration with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. It's available for both Apple and Android. It helps you check in with your emotions throughout the day, using a simple colour-coded Mood Meter to identify exactly how you feel and why. By tracking your emotions over time, you can spot patterns, such as when anxiety peaks or which situations lift your mood. The app also offers videos with practical strategies to help you understand your emotions better.

I encourage you to set notifications to check in four times a day (e.g. 8 am, 12:30 pm, 5:30 pm and 8 pm). Each check-in takes less than a minute, but the benefits build quickly. The more you practise identifying emotions, the more self-aware and in control you'll become. This small daily habit can create lasting change. Please don't proceed with reading the book until you've downloaded the

app and set your notifications. Aim to do a minimum of 100 check-ins in the coming weeks.

Conclusion

Avoidance is understandable. It's your brain's way of trying to keep you safe. But while it may offer short-term relief, it also keeps you stuck. If you've been living in avoidance, it doesn't mean you're broken or weak. It means you've been doing your best to manage fear with the tools you had. Now it's time to build new ones. By gently facing the situations you've been avoiding, you teach your brain a different lesson: discomfort is temporary, you can handle anxiety, and fear doesn't have to control your choices. Exposure isn't about becoming fearless. It's about choosing to approach situations, again and again. Each act of approach – each conversation you stay in or each moment you resist the urge to retreat – expands your world a little more. Confidence doesn't appear first; it grows from these experiences. Over time, you're not just reducing anxiety. You're rebuilding freedom, connection and trust in yourself. Avoidance may have kept you safe for a time, but approaches will help you live. The next chapter explores one of the most common ways avoidance hides in plain sight: the safety behaviours that can quietly hold you back even when it looks like you're coping.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 4: Avoidance and Exposure – The Trap That Keeps You Anxious (and the Way Out)

Purpose: to notice what triggers your anxiety, plan small steps towards approaching feared situations and reflect on what you learn along the way.

This week, choose one or two manageable challenges from your exposure hierarchy to practise each day. Focus on progress, not perfection. Each small step is proof that you can feel anxious and still move forward.

- ⊙ Step 1: Identify your triggers.

Think of situations that commonly spark anxiety or avoidance. Consider when you notice yourself withdrawing, staying quiet or over-preparing. Which people, places or times of day tend to heighten your anxiety?

List a few examples below (from mildly uncomfortable to highly challenging):

- ⊙ Step 2: Add the best examples from above to the exposure hierarchy you've already created to improve it further.

From your examples, choose at least one or two items in the 3/10 to 5/10 range to begin practising each day. Move on to higher-rated items when you become more comfortable.

⊙ Step 3: Take action.

When you face one of your chosen situations, notice your physical sensations and thoughts before, during and after. Remind yourself that you can feel anxious and still take that step.

⊙ Step 4: Reflect on the learning.

Afterwards, jot down brief notes about what happened and what you discovered, such as:

- What did you expect would happen?
- What actually happened?
- What did you learn about your ability to cope?

Aim to do at least one exposure hierarchy activity each day for the next two weeks. Remember, you need to build the habit of challenging your comfort zone.

Key Points of Chapter 4: Avoidance and Exposure – The Trap That Keeps You Anxious (and the Way Out)

- ⊙ Avoidance brings short-term relief but teaches your brain that social situations are dangerous, keeping anxiety alive.
- ⊙ Each act of avoidance shrinks your world, limiting opportunities for connection, growth and confidence.
- ⊙ Facing fears through small, repeated steps (i.e. graded exposure) retrains your brain to see that discomfort is survivable.
- ⊙ Progress comes not from being fearless but from acting with courage and self-compassion in the face of anxiety.
- ⊙ Confidence grows from experience, not from waiting to feel ready. Every small act of approach builds resilience.
- ⊙ By replacing avoidance with a gentle approach, you expand your life, rebuild trust in yourself and open the door to genuine connection.

● CHAPTER 5 ●

Safety Behaviours – The Hidden Habits That Backfire

If you've ever felt like you're just getting through social situations and not actually engaging in them, chances are that you're using safety behaviours. They're the little things we do to protect ourselves from judgement, embarrassment or rejection. They make us feel safer, more in control and less exposed. But here's the tricky part: while they seem helpful, they're often what keeps anxiety going. This chapter explores what safety behaviours are, why we rely on them and how letting go of them can open the door to real confidence and long-term change.

Safety behaviours are subtle coping strategies people with social anxiety use to cope with situations that feel risky. They're not always obvious, and they often look like socially acceptable habits. Some examples are:

- Extensively rehearsing what you'll say before speaking.
- Avoiding or minimising eye contact.
- Checking your phone to look busy or distracted.
- Speaking quietly, briefly or not at all.
- Smiling or nodding to mask discomfort.
- Using humour or self-deprecation to deflect attention.
- Positioning yourself near the exit or at the edge of a group.
- Holding a drink, bag, or other prop for comfort.
- Waiting for others to speak first to avoid starting conversations.
- Deliberately arriving late for events.

These behaviours usually reduce anxiety in the moment. You feel more in control – slightly more prepared and slightly less exposed. However, these behaviours come with a cost: they prevent you from learning that you don't need them.

The Long-Term Effect of Safety Behaviours

Safety behaviours make sense because they're protective. Nevertheless, they send a message to your brain: 'This situation really is dangerous, so I need to protect myself'. The brain stays on high alert, and anxiety sticks around. It's not your fault. This is how our brains are wired – to protect, predict and prevent danger. But when the strategies become the norm, they limit your growth.

Here's the big issue: safety behaviours block learning. Let's say you give a presentation, but you avoid eye contact, read directly from a script and keep your body tense. You get through it, and no one laughs or judges you. However, you don't feel confident because your brain attributes the 'success' to your safety behaviours. You think, *that only worked because I prepared thoroughly and read from my notes*. You don't get the chance to learn that you could have been okay without all that.

In fact, the next time you're in a similar situation, you'll likely feel just as or even more anxious. When people face feared situations and use safety behaviours, their anxiety doesn't significantly improve. This is probably why you don't believe that getting more experience in anxiety-provoking situations reduces your anxiety. It's because the behaviour keeps reinforcing the belief that the situation is threatening. As long as the 'shield' is in place, the brain doesn't update its fear response. That's why removing or reducing safety behaviours, slowly and strategically, is a powerful step towards a long-term reduction in social anxiety.

Noticing Is the First Step

Many people don't even realise they're using safety behaviours. They've become automatic. You might have been doing them for years, thinking they were just your way of getting through social events. The first step is simply to notice what's happening. Try asking yourself these questions:

- When you start feeling anxious around people, what do you usually do?
- What are you hoping they won't notice about you?
- Is there something you do that makes you feel a bit more in control, even for a moment?
- If you didn't do that, what do you think might happen?

You're not trying to change anything yet – just observing with curiosity. Think of it as gently shining a light on your habits. The more you notice, the more choices you'll have later about whether to keep them or try something different. This isn't about forcing yourself to be fearless. It's about discovering that you can tolerate discomfort and that your worst fears rarely come true. Each time you try, your brain learns the situation isn't as dangerous as it once believed, and your threat system stands down.

What This Looks Like in Real Life

Let's say you always rehearse conversations before making phone calls. You decide to make a straightforward call without extensively pre-planning your sentences (maybe take 30 seconds to compose your thoughts). You feel your anxiety spike, but you still make the call. It's awkward, but the other person doesn't notice anything odd. You hang up and realise that you didn't rehearse, and you didn't fall apart. That's a win – a small but real one. Do it again, and your confidence builds – not the fake confidence that comes from performing

perfectly but the genuine kind that comes from proving to yourself that you can handle being imperfect.

Letting go of safety behaviours is an act of retraining your brain. You're giving your nervous system new data. Each time you don't default to a protective behaviour and survive, it updates the message from *I'm only safe if I hide* to *I'm okay being seen*. You're building a sense of internal safety, not because you're faking it better but because you're learning to tolerate real, raw moments without retreating.

Client Story: Nick, 22 – The Human Shield

In his university tutorials, Nick kept his phone in his hand, pretending to text so that he'd look occupied. It worked – no one approached him – but it also kept him invisible. We labelled the habit a safety behaviour: a short-term comfort that blocked long-term growth. Nick practised leaving his phone face down and making brief eye contact instead. Initially, his anxiety spiked, but by the third week, he was chatting naturally. He realised he'd been hiding behind his phone from the connection he actually wanted.

Conclusion

You don't need to drop every safety behaviour all at once. In fact, you shouldn't. Those strategies have served you well, and they've helped you cope. But now, you're ready for more than just getting through. You're learning to show up – not perfectly but authentically. As you gently release the habits that keep you restricted, you create space for something bigger: growth, confidence and genuine connection. This is a gradual process, built one small choice at a time. You've already taken the first steps. Now, let's keep moving forward together.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 5: Safety Behaviours – The Hidden Habits That Backfire

Purpose: to notice the habits you use to feel safe in social situations and to gently test what happens when you let one go.

This week, choose one safety behaviour to experiment with. Start small, stay curious and notice what happens when you rely a little less on old habits and a little more on your own resilience.

⊙ Step 1: Notice.

Think about what you do when you feel anxious or self-conscious:

- What helps you feel safer or more in control?
- What are you hoping to avoid (e.g. judgment, embarrassment or awkwardness)?

Write three safety behaviours you've noticed. Some examples are checking your phone, avoiding eye contact and speaking very softly.

⊙ Step 2: Reflect.

For each behaviour, ask these questions:

- What does this protect me from?
- What does it cost me?

For instance, *checking my phone protects me from feeling awkward but costs me a genuine connection.*

⊙ Step 3: Experiment.

Choose one safety behaviour to test:

- Pick a small, safe situation (e.g. greeting someone).
- Try it without your usual safety behaviour.
- Afterwards, ask yourself, *What actually happened? Was it as bad as I expected? What did I learn?*

The key idea is that you don't need to drop every safety behaviour. Just start noticing and gently loosening one at a time. Each step teaches your brain that you can handle being seen and still be safe.

Key Points of Chapter 5: Safety Behaviours – The Hidden Habits That Backfire

- ⊙ Safety behaviours are protective habits that help you feel less exposed in social situations.
- ⊙ They create short-term comfort but keep long-term anxiety alive.
- ⊙ Your brain learns that you're only safe when you hide behind your safety behaviours.
- ⊙ Letting go of even one safety behaviour teaches your brain that you can handle being seen.
- ⊙ Real confidence grows not from perfect control but from tolerating imperfection.
- ⊙ Noticing and gently reducing safety behaviours builds genuine comfort and connection.

● CHAPTER 6 ●

The Two Circles of Influence – Focusing on What You Can Control

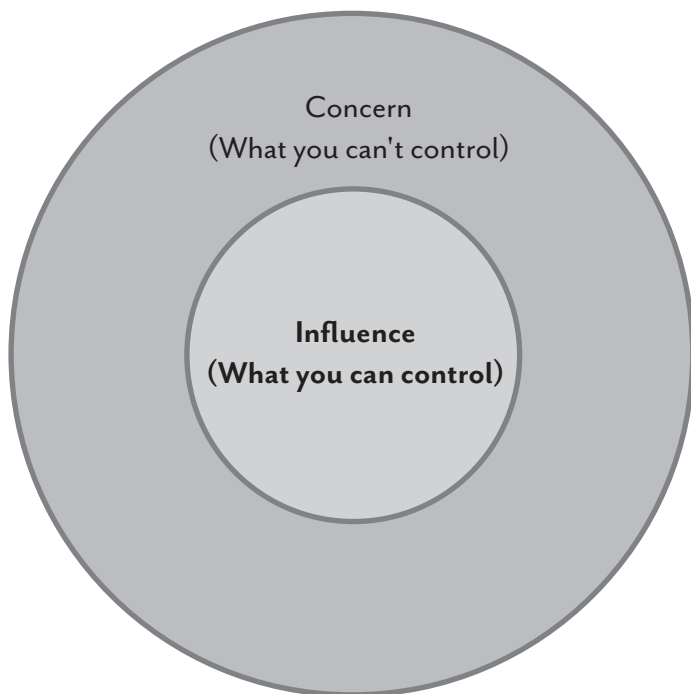
In the world of social anxiety, our minds often orbit two unspoken circles: one we can navigate and one where we feel adrift. This chapter adapts Stephen Covey’s wonderful idea of the Circle of Concern and the Circle of Influence for the social anxiety context. The inner circle is our zone of influence – the things we can shape, such as our thoughts, reactions, breathing and responses. This is where our personal power lives. Grounded in this circle, we can practise self-compassion, choose our words, regulate our emotions and lean into connection – even when anxiety whispers otherwise. Beyond it lies the outer circle, which contains everything we care about but can’t control. These are the social judgements, unpredictable reactions or imagined failures that fuel our inner chatter. We may circle endlessly here, replaying what-ifs, but no amount of rumination changes them.

The Trap of the Outer Circle

When we’re anxious, attention drifts outwards. We scan for cues, asking ourselves, *Did they smile? Did I say that wrong? Are they judging me?* This is our mind’s way of protecting us, but it keeps us stuck in hyper-vigilance. The more we try to control the uncontrollable, the more powerless we feel. This focus outwards reinforces avoidance. If we believe our worth depends on others’ approval, every conversation becomes a performance. We might avoid eye contact, check

our phones or rehearse what to say next. These are all small efforts to feel safer, yet these ‘safety moves’ quietly block genuine connection, leaving us lonely and frustrated.

The Two Circles: Influence & Concern



Reclaiming the Inner Circle

The challenge is to move towards the inner circle to reclaim agency. The inner circle is the realm of small but meaningful actions, including slowing our breath, noticing tension, softening self-talk or saying to ourselves, *I can handle this moment*. Think of it like steering a small boat in choppy water. The waves – which are the other person’s reaction or the uncertainty of how you’ll be received – can’t be controlled. However, the tiller in your hand – representing your breath, posture and self-kindness – can. Steering,

even imperfectly, keeps you on course. These inner actions build trust in yourself. They remind you that confidence isn't about predicting how others will respond. It's about believing you can meet whatever arises.

Practical Shifts You Can Try

Each of these small actions brings you back to your circle of influence:

1. Pause for a slow exhale before speaking: it signals safety to your nervous system.
2. Anchor to your senses: feel your feet on the ground or the weight of your hands. These simple grounding details bring you back to the present.
3. Use a kind phrase: try, 'I don't need to be perfect, just present' or 'it's okay to take my time'.
4. Acknowledge the outer circle without getting lost in it: notice the what-if thoughts without chasing them. Return gently to what you can do right now.
5. Recognise small wins: a moment of eye contact, a shared laugh or simply staying in the conversation a little longer – all of it counts.

Courage in Everyday Moments

Focusing on what we can influence doesn't remove anxiety; it transforms our relationship with it. Courage isn't the absence of fear but rather choosing to act despite fear. Each time you bring your attention back to your inner circle, you take ownership of your response. You step from reacting to responding, and that shift is where growth begins. In social spaces, courage often looks ordinary, such as a breath, a smile or a steady voice. Still, these minor acts close the gap between preparation and connection. With repetition, the distance between fear and participation narrows.

Client Story: Jackie, 29 – The Presentation Spiral

Jackie worked in marketing and dreaded team meetings. She'd spend hours worrying about what others might think of her ideas and hours more replaying every word afterwards. When she started therapy, we talked about Covey's circles. Jackie recorded her worries and concerns and placed them in the 'can control' circle or the 'can't control' circle as she evaluated each one. She realised she couldn't control her manager's reactions or her colleagues' expressions, but she could control her breathing, her preparation and her tone of voice. Before her next meeting, she took one slow breath before speaking, reminded herself that she could only influence how she showed up and shared her point. The world didn't stop spinning, no one laughed, and the meeting continued. For Jackie, that was the start of freedom. She learned to shift from the outer circle (others' opinions) to the inner circle (her own actions).

Conclusion

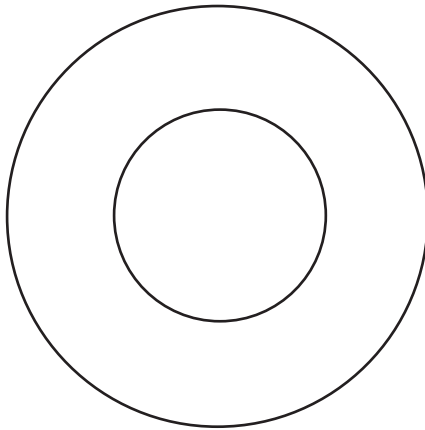
The two circles can help us learn where to focus our energy. The outer circle will always exist, filled with unknowns and what-ifs. But the inner circle – the space of awareness, breath and gentle courage – is where we can live. Each time you return there, you reclaim your sense of calm, agency and connection. And that's how change begins – one small, intentional moment at a time.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 6: The Two Circles of Influence – Focusing on What You Can Control

Purpose: to help you distinguish between what you can and can't control in social situations so that you can direct your energy towards what truly makes a difference.

This week, practise shifting your attention to your inner circle. When anxiety arises, gently remind yourself to focus on what you can influence and not what you can't.

- ⊙ Take a few moments to draw two circles – one inside the other.



- ⊙ In the inner circle, write the things you can influence in a social situation. Some examples are *my breathing, my posture, how kindly I speak to myself, whether I stay in the conversation, my thinking patterns and my ability to look for things in common.*
- ⊙ In the outer circle, list the things you often worry about but can't control. Examples include *what others think of me, how they respond, whether they like me and how awkward I seem.*

- ⊙ When you've finished, take a moment to look at your circles. Notice where most of your energy and attention go.
 - Do you spend more time focused on the inner or outer circle?
 - How does it feel when you shift your attention inward to what you can actually influence?
 - What changes when you let go of trying to control the outer circle?

Let this image remind you that peace often grows when you bring your focus back to the inner circle, which is where your influence truly lies.

Key Points of Chapter 6: The Two Circles of Influence – Focusing on What You Can Control

- ⊙ Social anxiety pulls our attention between two circles: the inner circle we can influence and the outer circle we can't.
- ⊙ The outer circle, filled with others' judgements and unpredictable reactions, drains our energy when we try to control it.
- ⊙ Genuine power lies within the inner circle – our thoughts, breath and small intentional actions.
- ⊙ Focusing on the inner circle helps us reclaim agency and ground ourselves in what we can do.
- ⊙ Courage grows from gentle, repeated focus on small, controllable actions – such as breathing, kind self-talk and staying present.
- ⊙ Shifting attention from the outer to the inner circle transforms fear into confidence and moves us towards authentic connection.

Further Reading

If you're interested in further exploring the ideas covered in this chapter, I highly recommend Stephen Covey's classic book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. His Circle of Concern and Circle of Influence model has helped millions of people refocus their energy on what they can control. It's a perfect companion to the work we've explored in this chapter.

● CHAPTER 7 ●

Mindfulness and Compassion – Being Kinder to Yourself

Living with social anxiety often means living with a harsh internal dialogue. You replay conversations, criticise every word and measure your worth by how supposedly normal or confident you think you appear. Over time, this constant judgement becomes exhausting and damaging. This chapter introduces two tools that offer a different path: mindfulness and self-compassion. These aren't fluffy concepts. They're powerful, evidence-based approaches that reduce anxiety, soften the inner critic and build long-term emotional resilience.

Social anxiety doesn't just come from what others might think. It often comes from what you think about yourself. After a social interaction, you might say to yourself, *I shouldn't have said that*, or *Why can't I just act normally?* This inner commentary might feel like it will help you do better next time, but it fuels shame, self-doubt and the belief that you're flawed. The antidote? Observing these thoughts without believing them and then responding with kindness instead of criticism.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness, popularised by Jon Kabat-Zinn, is about noticing your thoughts and feelings without judging them. It's not about stopping thoughts; it's about awareness. When you practise mindfulness, you create a small space between a thought and your

reaction. That space gives you choices. Instead of being swept away by anxiety, you can say, *Ah, that's my anxiety talking*. In that moment, you reclaim your power. Mindfulness doesn't erase discomfort; it helps you sit beside it, rather than drown in it.

In social situations, your mind can feel like a runaway train. Mindfulness helps you:

- Step back from spiralling thoughts.
- Notice what's actually happening.
- Return your focus to the conversation, the room or your breath.

Mindfulness also teaches you that thoughts are not facts. By practising mindfulness when you're calm and relaxed, you train your brain to use these same skills when anxiety rises. It's like strengthening a muscle. Regular practice builds the capacity to stay grounded and present even in moments of stress.

What Is Self-Compassion?

If mindfulness is about awareness, self-compassion is about attitude – how you treat yourself once you've noticed the discomfort. It means acknowledging that things are hard, recognising that imperfection is part of being human and responding to pain with warmth, not blame.

In social anxiety, self-compassion might sound like the following:

- *I felt really anxious just then, but I'm allowed to be human.*
- *That was uncomfortable, and I still showed up.*
- *It's okay that I'm not perfect. I'm learning.*

So, when facing a situation that makes you uncomfortable, you can try taking a compassionate pause:

1. Notice your anxious thought (e.g. *I sounded weird just then*).
2. Name it (e.g. *That's my self-judgement voice*).
3. Respond kindly (e.g. *This is hard right now, but I'm doing my best*).

At first, this may feel awkward, but that's okay. You're learning a new language, and it becomes easier with practice. Compassion quiets the inner critic and builds a more supportive voice – one that helps you recover faster and encourages you to try again. Self-compassion isn't letting yourself off the hook. It's giving yourself the strength to keep going. If kindness feels undeserved, start by imagining how you'd treat a loved one in your position. Then, offer yourself even a fraction of that care. That's enough to begin.

Try This: Mindfulness Practice

1. Find a quiet spot: sit in a comfortable place, such as on a chair or the floor.
2. Sit upright but relaxed: keep your back straight but not stiff and rest your hands in your lap.
3. Close your eyes (or lower your gaze): this helps you turn your attention inwards.
4. Take a few slow breaths: notice the air moving in and out. Don't force it – just breathe naturally.
5. Focus on your breathing: feel your chest or belly rise and fall. That's your 'anchor'.
6. Notice when your mind wanders: it *will* wander – that's normal. Just gently bring your attention back to your breath.
7. Keep going for a few minutes: start with two to five minutes. Over time, you can go longer if you like.
8. Finish gently: take one or two deep breaths, then open your eyes. Notice how you feel.

You're not trying to empty your mind. You're just practising noticing and returning – again and again. That's mindfulness.

Helpful Thoughts for Practising Self-Compassion

Here's a list of some self-compassionate mindsets to get you started:

- *It's okay to be learning. No one expects me to have it all figured out.*
- *I can take this one small step, and that's enough for today.*
- *I'm not my thoughts. Just because my mind says it doesn't make it true.*
- *Anxiety is uncomfortable, but it's not dangerous.*
- *I can feel anxious and still choose how I respond.*
- *I'm doing the best I can with the resources I have right now.*
- *Everyone feels awkward sometimes. This is part of being human.*
- *This moment will pass, just like other difficult moments.*
- *My worth isn't measured by other people's reactions.*
- *I can treat myself with the same patience I'd offer a friend.*
- *It's okay to rest. Rest isn't failure.*
- *Small steps count. They add up over time.*
- *Courage isn't the absence of fear. It's choosing to act while feeling afraid.*

Client Story: Tom, 37 – The Harsh Coach

Tom was successful in his job but exhausted. His inner voice spoke like an angry football coach, barking criticism after every conversation. We practised short compassionate pauses – noticing thoughts, naming them and adding one compassionate phrase, such as 'this is hard, and I'm trying my best'. At first, he said it through gritted teeth, but his tone gradually softened. He began catching his self-judgement mid-sentence, replacing you idiot with you're learning. After a few months, Tom said, 'It's strange. I'm only a little less anxious, yet I recover a lot

faster'. That's what mindfulness and compassion do: they don't erase anxiety, but they change the way we hold it and how we respond to it.

Conclusion

Social anxiety can make you feel like you must constantly monitor and perform, but mindfulness and self-compassion offer a gentler path – one grounded in presence and permission to be human. You won't always notice every thought or respond perfectly, and that's okay. Practising mindfulness when you're calm builds the ability to stay grounded when anxiety rises, and self-compassion quiets the harsh inner critic. Research shows that combining mindfulness with CBT improves anxiety outcomes by helping people become less reactive and more resilient. Together, mindfulness and compassion foster awareness and warmth. They encourage a kinder relationship with yourself and greater ease in connecting with others.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 7: Mindfulness and Compassion – Being Kinder to Yourself

Purpose: to practise combining mindfulness with self-compassion in real-life moments.

This week, when anxiety or self-criticism arises, pause, breathe and respond with gentleness. Notice how even small moments of self-kindness begin to shift your experience.

⊙ Step 1: Notice.

When you catch yourself in a moment of anxiety, self-judgement or self-criticism, pause and say (silently or out loud), ‘Ah, that’s my anxious/self-judgement voice’.

⊙ Step 2: Take a compassionate pause.

Place a hand on your chest, take a slow breath and choose a gentle response. Say a self-compassionate comment to yourself, such as *it’s difficult with anxiety, but I can do it*.

⊙ Step 3: Do a quick reflection for one to two minutes.

What was your anxious or self-critical thought? What helpful thought did you use? How did you feel afterwards (even if it’s only slightly different)?

⊙ Step 4: Conduct an end-of-week reflection. At the end of the week, write down:

- One thing you noticed about your thoughts.
- One way you were kinder to yourself.
- One thing you’d like to try next week.

Remember, this isn’t about erasing anxiety. It’s about meeting yourself differently when anxiety shows up, with awareness and warmth.

Key Points of Chapter 7: Mindfulness and Compassion – Being Kinder to Yourself

- ⊙ Mindfulness helps shift focus from self-monitoring to present awareness.
- ⊙ Mindfulness reduces anxiety by breaking the avoidance–rumination cycle.
- ⊙ Self-compassion counters harsh self-criticism.
- ⊙ Compassion-based practices encourage acceptance over perfection.
- ⊙ Small daily practices build long-term resilience.
- ⊙ Kindness towards oneself supports social confidence.

● CHAPTER 8 ●

Social Skills and Connection – Building Confidence Gradually

One of the most persistent and damaging myths about social anxiety is the belief that you're just not good with people. You might feel you're behind – as if everyone else was born knowing how to socialise while you overthink every word, gesture and pause. Indeed, social anxiety doesn't just make socialising uncomfortable. It can lead to avoiding it altogether. Less social contact means less practice, which fuels the belief that you're socially inadequate.

In reality, most people aren't natural conversationalists. Some people just get more practice than others. Social skills aren't an inborn gift for a lucky few; they're skills. Like any skill, they can be learned, practised and refined. This chapter is about building social confidence in realistic and manageable ways. You don't need to become an extrovert or master dazzling small talk. You only need simple tools, steady practice and the willingness to take small, consistent steps forward. Over time, these steps add up, and the gap between how you see yourself and how you want to be closes.

Social Skills Can Be Practised and Improved

The goal here isn't to become someone else; it's to build confidence in your own way of connecting. In this chapter, you'll focus on low-pressure behaviours that support connection without trying to 'perform'. These behaviours include:

- Using simple openers and brief follow-ups.
- Staying present in an interaction a little longer than feels comfortable.
- Responding to common anxious thoughts in the moment.
- Giving and receiving genuine compliments.

None of this requires you to be a social butterfly. You don't need to dive into high-pressure situations to catch up. All you need are presence, curiosity and kindness. Start with interactions that feel safest. Each small step builds familiarity and momentum.

Try This: Social Mini-Challenge

Each of the following is a small step towards comfort and confidence in connection. Think of these as reps for your social muscles.

1. Smile at someone you pass in the street.
2. Ask a colleague or classmate how their weekend was.
3. Make one kind comment in a group chat or meeting.

Working Through Common Fears

Social anxiety often sparks thoughts like these:

- *I won't know what to say.*
- *They'll think I'm weird.*
- *I'll say something wrong.*

These fears feel real but rarely tell the full story. Staying in the moment long enough shows you that most fears don't come true. When a fear shows up, silently say, *That's my anxious mind talking. Let's see what actually happens.* Stay in the interaction for one more question, comment or minute.

In fact, you don't have to be bubbly or the life of the party to be socially skilled. Many of the most meaningful connections come

from people who speak less but listen deeply, notice details and make others feel seen. Being good at socialising is about presence, not volume.

Giving and Receiving Compliments

Confidence comes after action, not before. Each small attempt, even the wobbly ones, builds strength. One thing that can cause anxiety is a compliment. You might be afraid of saying the wrong thing, but accept that you will – and so will everyone else! Socially confident individuals know connection isn't about perfect communication but about staying engaged. If you miss the mark but your intentions are good, people will be compassionate.

When it comes to giving compliments:

- Keep them genuine and simple
- Focus on specifics.

If you're on the receiving end of a compliment:

- Try a simple thank you
- If it feels awkward, name it: 'I never know what to say to compliments – thank you'.

Client Story: Sacha, 24 – The Quiet One at Work

Sacha avoided small talk at her new job because she viewed herself as no good at it. She feared awkward silences, so she often kept her earphones in (a safety behaviour). Initially, we decided that she'd try one mini-challenge a day – such as asking a colleague a question (e.g. 'How's your morning been?') or paying them a genuine compliment. Sacha said it felt robotic at first, but after about six attempts, she began to describe the joy of people starting conversations with her. She realised that she didn't need to be funny or impressive – just present. She learned that confidence doesn't come before connection; it grows through it.

Conclusion

Social confidence is built one minor act of courage at a time. The aim is progress, not perfection. Each deliberate moment of connection proves you belong in the conversation – not by being someone else but by being yourself. New skills grow with practice, but the path isn't always smooth. The next chapter will help you handle setbacks and build resilience so that progress sticks.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 8: Social Skills and Connection – Building Confidence Gradually

Purpose: to build confidence through small, realistic social actions that help you practise approaching, engaging and connecting with others.

This week, pick three simple social mini-challenges that you're most able to do. Treat them as gentle practice sessions.

- ⊙ Step 1: Choose your mini-challenges from the list below.
 - Make eye contact with and smile at someone you see regularly (e.g. a barista, neighbour or shop assistant).
 - Ask a colleague or classmate how their day is going.
 - Offer one genuine compliment.
 - Contribute one brief comment in a group chat or meeting.
 - Hold eye contact for an extra moment when greeting someone.
 - Ask a follow-up question during a conversation.
- ⊙ Step 2: Predict → do → reflect. For each challenge:
 - Predict: what do you think will happen? What's your biggest fear?
 - Do: complete the action, staying in the interaction a little longer than you might usually.
 - Reflect: what actually happened? How did you feel afterwards? Did your fear come true?
- ⊙ Step 3: Do an end-of-week reflection. Write down:
 - The easiest mini-challenge.
 - The most rewarding mini-challenge.
 - One thing you'd like to try next week.

Remember, each step – no matter how small – is proof that you can move towards connection rather than away from it.

Key Points of Chapter 8: Social Skills and Connection – Building Confidence Gradually

- ⊙ Social skills can be learned and improved over time.
- ⊙ Confidence grows with practice in real social settings.
- ⊙ Focus on listening and showing interest rather than perfect performance.
- ⊙ Non-verbal communication plays a key role in connection.
- ⊙ Small positive social interactions can have a cumulative effect.
- ⊙ Improved social skills reduce reliance on avoidance behaviours.

● CHAPTER 9 ●

Managing Setbacks – Building Resilience and Momentum

If you've ever asked yourself why you're still struggling after making progress, you're not alone. One of the most frustrating parts of working through social anxiety is the reality of setbacks. You might have had a great run – facing fears, engaging socially and managing your thoughts. Then suddenly, one awkward moment, a bad day or a knock to your confidence makes it feel like you've lost



all your progress. This chapter is about learning to expect, manage and grow through such setbacks – to see them not as failures but as natural and essential parts of the journey.

Unfortunately, progress with social anxiety isn't a straight upward climb. It's more like a messy scribble, with leaps forward, stalls and the occasional dip. Life gets in the way. Stress rises. Old triggers show up. You get tired, overwhelmed or disheartened. None of that means your progress is gone. It simply means you're human. Hence, resilience-building is a vital part of anxiety recovery. Setbacks aren't the opposite of progress; they *are* part of progress.

Normalising the Bumps in the Road

One of the most helpful mindset shifts is to stop treating tough days as proof you've failed. Instead, see them as feedback. A rough interaction? That's a chance to learn something. A week of withdrawal? That might be your body asking for rest or your mind revisiting old fears under extra stress. When you approach setbacks with curiosity instead of criticism, you build resilience. You move from self-blame to self-awareness.

Some common setback scenarios can be reframed like this:

- You stayed quiet at a gathering → You still went. Quieter days are okay. You don't always have lots to say, and that's fine.
- You had a big anxiety spike → That means you're facing something meaningful. The goal isn't zero anxiety; it's engagement.
- You avoided something you'd handled before → One off-day doesn't erase your progress. The path is still forward.

The more you reframe, the more you see setbacks as temporary dips, not permanent defeats.

Try This: The Self-Reflection Log

Use this log after a difficult social moment to regroup and grow:

- What triggered your anxiety? Maybe it was a surprise question or a larger group than you were expecting.
- What helped, even a little? For example, you stayed in the room, you took a breath or you spoke once.
- What can you try next time? How about a planned phrase or a reframe?

Writing down your answers to these questions helps process the event and lowers the emotional sting.

What Builds Resilience?

Resilience isn't about never falling. It's about getting back up as quickly as possible each time. Resilience grows through:

- Flexibility: adjusting when something isn't working.
- Self-compassion: meeting hard moments with care, not criticism.
- Perspective: remembering that one day – or even one week – doesn't define you.
- Practice: creating confidence through repeated action, as each exposure adds proof that you can cope.

Think of resilience as a muscle. You build it by using challenges as fuel, not by avoiding them.

However, you might sometimes find yourself asking, *I did the exposure, I challenged the thought, so why am I still anxious?* Remember that recovery isn't a checklist. The aim isn't perfect responses; it's continued engagement. The pursuit of perfection fuels fear, and by contrast, permission to wobble, rest and restart fuels freedom.

Preparing for Future Setbacks

Some days, avoidance will feel easier. You might feel like giving up. That's okay. Resilience sometimes looks like taking a smaller step, slowing your pace or doing something nurturing to recharge. You don't have to push every day. You just need to keep returning.

- Create a setback plan: list three ways to re-centre when you feel you've regressed (e.g. journal, call a friend or revisit your wins).
- Keep a wins list: note your successes after good days and revisit them when self-doubt rises.
- Coach yourself: be supportive, not scolding. (e.g. *That was tough. Let's learn from it and go again.*)

Client Story: Sam, 41 – The Rough Week

After several months of progress, Sam had a setback. He froze during a client presentation, felt humiliated and delayed his next session with me. When we reconnected, he said, 'I thought I'd failed. I should be over this by now'. We reframed this as 'Every recovery includes dips. They're part of the learning curve'. Sam wrote what had actually gone well (he stayed in the room and finished the presentation) and one thing to do differently next time (breathe before speaking). By the next session, he was calmer and more realistic. Progress, we agreed, isn't about never falling; it's about getting back up a little faster each time.

Conclusion

Setbacks don't mean you're failing. They mean you're stretching into fresh territory and doing something brave enough to challenge your comfort zone. They're not signs to quit; they're invitations to slow down, breathe, reflect and then step forward again. The path out of social anxiety isn't paved with perfect days. It's made of ordinary ones where you try, learn, rest and repeat. Every time you

get up, even slowly, you're further along than before. Sometimes, anxiety overlaps with other challenges, so keep going. Recognising when it's more than just social anxiety helps you get the right support. In the next chapter, we're going to explore what else could be going on.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 9: Managing Setbacks – Building Resilience and Momentum

Purpose: to help you build self-awareness and practical strategies to recover from setbacks with confidence, calm and self-compassion.

This week, notice how you respond to challenges and practise using your resilience plan to recover more quickly and kindly when things don't go as planned.

⊙ Step 1: Identify your triggers.

List three situations that negatively affect your confidence, such as tiredness, being busy or not being busy at all.

⊙ Step 2: Create your setback plan.

For each trigger, write down:

- One helpful thought you can remind yourself of.
- One small action you can take to re-engage.
- One calming tool you can use (e.g. mindfulness).

⊙ Step 3: Keep a wins list.

Each day, note at least one success, no matter how minor. This becomes your evidence bank when doubt creeps in.

⊙ Step 4: Practise self-coaching.

When a setback happens, compose a short self-coaching message as if you were encouraging a friend, such as, 'That was tough, but you showed up. Let's try again tomorrow'.

Key Points of Chapter 9: Managing Setbacks – Building Resilience and Momentum

- ⊙ In social anxiety, setbacks are a normal part of progress.
- ⊙ Resilience means returning to your approach after difficulties.
- ⊙ Reframe setbacks as learning opportunities.
- ⊙ Maintain realistic expectations. Progress is rarely a straight line.
- ⊙ Self-compassion helps prevent discouragement.
- ⊙ Persistence builds long-term change.

● CHAPTER 10 ●

When It's More Than Just Social Anxiety – Understanding the Bigger Picture

Social anxiety rarely exists in a vacuum. Beneath the surface, many people also wrestle with exhaustion, self-doubt or past experiences that quietly shape how safe they feel around others. You might notice not only the fear of being judged but also waves of low mood, constant worry or the relentless drive to get everything right. When these layers overlap, it can feel confusing or heavy. However, it also means there's more to understand and more ways to heal. This chapter helps you see the full picture of your mental health so that you can approach yourself with insight and compassion – not criticism.

The reality is that social anxiety rarely exists in isolation. Lots of people who struggle with social anxiety also experience other mental health concerns at some point. These may include:

- Depression: feeling low, hopeless or disconnected – not just socially but emotionally.
- Generalised anxiety: worrying excessively about many areas of life and not just social ones.
- Perfectionism: setting impossibly high standards and criticising yourself when you fall short.
- Trauma: experiencing things that shaped how safe you feel in the world or around others.

- Burnout or exhaustion: resulting from years of pushing yourself to ‘appear normal’.

These aren’t signs you’re broken. They’re signs your nervous system has been working overtime to protect you. They’re also common in people who are sensitive, thoughtful and self-aware – great characteristics when they’re managed well.

Understanding Overlap: The Transdiagnostic View

Research shows that many mental health difficulties share common patterns – a perspective known as the transdiagnostic approach, championed by psychologists such as Stefan Hofmann and Adrian Wells. Rather than seeing each diagnosis as separate, this model looks at shared features, including:

- Excessive worry
- Avoidance
- Negative self-beliefs
- Emotional dysregulation
- High self-criticism.

The transdiagnostic view explains why working on one issue – such as social anxiety – can also create improvements in other areas. For example, there is a lot of overlap in social anxiety disorder and generalised anxiety disorder treatment.

When to Seek Additional Support

If you’ve been working on your social anxiety but still feel stuck, exhausted or overwhelmed, it may be time to seek extra support. That’s not failure; it’s a strong, smart step forward.

Consider speaking to a GP or a psychologist if:

- You often feel flat, tearful or unable to enjoy things – even outside social situations.

- You're withdrawing from more and more areas of life.
- Your thoughts are becoming dark, hopeless or highly self-critical.
- You rely heavily on alcohol, food, sleep or distraction to cope.
- Past trauma continues to affect your relationships or sense of safety.

A professional can help identify whether other issues are present and guide you to the right treatment. Many people delay seeking help because they think they *should* be able to handle things alone, but mental health doesn't work like that. It's not a measure of strength; it's part of being human. You're allowed to ask for help. You're allowed to rest. You're allowed to want more than just coping. You deserve to feel connected, hopeful and alive. It can be life-changing to work with a coach on your mental health, which is really what a psychologist is.

Client Story: Aisha, 35 – The Invisible Weight

Aisha came to therapy for social anxiety, but underneath were layers of burnout and perfectionism. She worked 60-hour weeks, fearing that slowing down would disappoint others. We explored how exhaustion fuels anxiety and how being run-down makes even small interactions feel threatening. Through therapy, Aisha began to see her anxiety not as a flaw but as a signal. It was her body's way of saying that something needed care. After reducing her hours slightly, she started sleeping better, and her anxiety softened. Sometimes, healing begins not with exposure but with rest.

Integrating Support with Your Progress

If you've already been practising the tools in this book, adding psychology or medication isn't starting over. It's building on the foundation you've created. Think of it as adding scaffolding to a structure you've been carefully building.

Here are some first steps you can take:

- Book a GP appointment. Share how long you've been feeling this way and what you've already tried.
- Ask about a mental health treatment plan. (In Australia, for example, Medicare can subsidise therapy sessions.)
- Find a psychologist whose expertise matches your needs.
- Be open in sessions. You don't have to know where to start; just start where you are. Some people are nervous about seeing a psychologist for the first time because they find it hard to describe what's going on for them. That's totally understandable and is to be expected. If you had it all clearly worked out and you could describe it succinctly and eloquently, it's highly unlikely that you would need to see a psychologist!

Conclusion

If you're living with social anxiety alongside depression, trauma, perfectionism or other challenges, it doesn't mean you're broken. It means you've been carrying more than most people realise. You don't have to figure it all out alone. Seeking extra help isn't a sign of weakness; it's an investment in your future. By widening your support through therapy, medication or other tailored approaches, you give yourself the best chance to heal and grow. As you take those steps, remember that your mental wellbeing is also shaped by the way you care for your body and your daily routines. That's why in the next chapter, we'll explore six powerful lifestyle pillars that can strengthen your foundation for recovery and help anxiety take up less space in your life.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 10: When It's More Than Just Social Anxiety – Understanding the Bigger Picture

Purpose: to help you recognise how far you've come, notice areas that still need gentle attention and strengthen the habits that support your ongoing recovery.

This week, bring together everything you've learned so far. Reflect on your progress, care for the parts that still feel tender and take one small, kind step that keeps your growth moving forward.

- ⊙ Identify one area where you've noticed genuine progress, no matter how small.
- ⊙ Note one challenge that still feels heavy or recurring.
- ⊙ Write down one kind, realistic step you'll take to care for yourself in that area, such as seeking support, practising a skill or giving yourself permission to rest.
- ⊙ Share one insight or success with someone you trust. This is to remind yourself that change is happening, even if it's gradual.

Remember that recovery isn't about perfection. It's about awareness, self-compassion and continuing to move gently in the direction of connection.

Key Points of Chapter 10: When It's More Than Just Social Anxiety – Understanding the Bigger Picture

- ⊙ Social anxiety can co-occur with other mental health conditions.
- ⊙ Recognising overlapping symptoms can guide better treatment.
- ⊙ Seeking professional help is vital for complex presentations.
- ⊙ Treatment may need to address multiple conditions at once.
- ⊙ Accurate assessment improves intervention outcomes.
- ⊙ Early intervention can prevent the worsening of symptoms.

● CHAPTER 11 ●

Lifestyle Medicine – Building the Foundations of Wellbeing

Our bodies and minds are deeply connected. The same habits that protect physical health also support mental wellbeing, and the link goes both ways. When we eat nourishing foods, move our bodies, sleep well, manage stress, nurture relationships and avoid harmful substances, we give our brains the best possible environment to heal and thrive. These are known as the six pillars of lifestyle medicine. They're not about living perfectly but about building steady foundations that make emotional recovery easier and life more balanced.

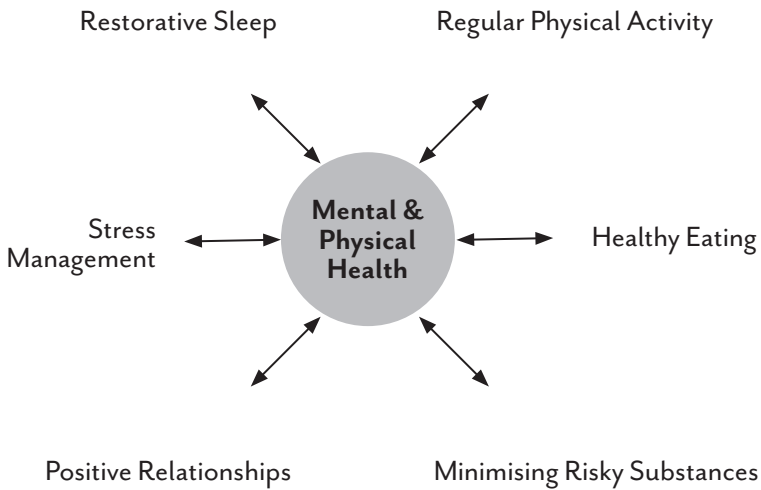
In detail, the six pillars are:

1. A whole-food and plant-predominant eating pattern: a diet of vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains, nuts and seeds
2. Physical activity: regular movement to support overall health
3. Restorative sleep: the prioritisation of quality, consistent sleep for recovery and wellbeing
4. Stress management: healthy coping strategies to reduce the effects of stress
5. Avoidance of risky substances: the reduction or elimination of tobacco, excessive alcohol and recreational drugs
6. Positive social connections: building healthy and supportive relationships.

When we build on these pillars, we support our mental health in powerful ways: nutritious food stabilises energy and mood,

movement boosts endorphins, quality sleep assists with emotion regulation, stress management helps us respond rather than react, positive relationships buffer us against challenges and avoiding harmful substances protects both our physical and mental health.

The Six Pillars of Lifestyle Medicine and Their Bidirectional Link with Mental Wellbeing



Setting Realistic Goals

Without a doubt, struggling with your mental health makes it harder to eat well, exercise and sleep well. Anxiety can disrupt sleep, stress can drive unhealthy coping and low mood can sap motivation. As those pillars weaken, mental health can decline further. That’s why the focus should be on small, realistic changes. Even tiny steps– such as taking a short walk, getting one more hour of sleep or reaching out to a friend – can break the cycle.

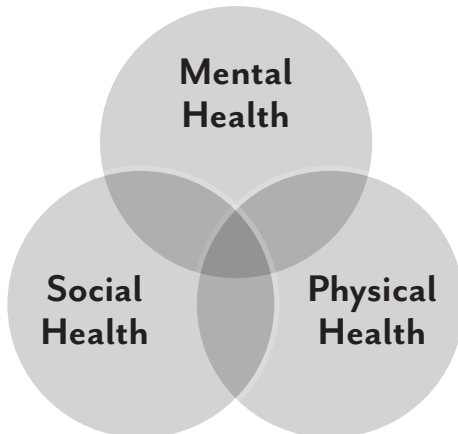
Importantly, perfection isn’t the goal. Perfect is the enemy of sustainable. Chasing perfection sets unrealistic expectations, making

it easier to give up after a slip. Actual progress comes from small and consistent actions – habits you can actually keep up. Whether it's eating well, moving more or sleeping better, aim for 'good enough most of the time'. Consistency beats perfection because it's what you can live with day after day, year after year, sustainably.

Mental Health, Physical Health and Social Health: A Holistic Approach

Often, when people start working with a psychologist, they think of their mental health as distinct from their physical and social health. The nature of obtaining a referral from a GP to a psychologist can also create the perception that the physical and the mental are distinct and that psychologists just focus on the mental aspects of a person's health. However, our mental health doesn't exist in a vacuum separate from our social and physical health.

Hence, I like to introduce this triangle diagram early in treatment to convey that working on your mental health successfully with a psychologist is very hard to do in isolation from working on your social and physical health. Sharing the triangle makes the three elements explicit and not something assumed as part of the interaction with the client.



The triangle can also foster hope. You might start with the question, *How much can I really influence my mental health?* When mental health is viewed as one distinct part on its own, *not much* is often the perception. However, viewing the three sides of the triangle as deeply intertwined factors is a powerful motivator. It can influence the view that small changes might positively affect the dynamic relationship between physical, social and mental health. For instance, small changes in social and physical health result in small improvements in mental health, which then lead to a mental health state that's more conducive to further small changes in social and physical health. What's often a cycle of damaging behaviours changes into a cycle of health-enhancing behaviours.

Taking care of your physical and social health doesn't mean that you need to run ultra marathons and be the life of the party at every social gathering. You just need a little change. Strong emotions – such as feeling disconnected, hopeless, miserable, resentful and overwhelmed – are the body's alarm system telling you that a little change is required.

Concerning physical health, you can reflect on the following:

- Can you get in slightly more steps and track them to have objective feedback on progress?
- Can you have slightly more nutritious meals?
- Can you have a little less alcohol?
- Can you be slightly more respectful of our sleep needs?

In terms of social health, you can ask yourself these questions:

- Can you go through the checkout at the supermarket rather than the self-serve to allow you to have an interaction with another human?
- Can you call a friend or have coffee with them?
- Can you go to a place like the library to be around other members of your community?
- Can you join a sports team or an interest group?

Small changes in your behaviour can create a ripple effect on your mental wellbeing, so that your mood, sense of belonging and sense of purpose increase, while your feelings of isolation, loneliness and stress decrease.

Client Story: Josh, 32 – Recharging the System

Josh was trying everything for his social anxiety, including journaling, exposure practice and podcasts. Yet, he was running on four hours of sleep a night and three coffees before lunchtime. We reframed the conversation: before tackling social fears, he needed to rebuild his baseline. Therefore, Josh set small goals, such as going to bed at a consistent time, taking short daily walks and swapping scrolling on his phone for calling a friend or family member. Within weeks, he noticed more emotional capacity. 'It's easier to challenge thoughts when I'm not so tired', he said. These things seem simple and obvious, but they often aren't when we've been living with them for a long time. Josh had lived for years in a state of tiredness.

Conclusion

Caring for your mental health isn't separate from caring for your body or relationships; they're parts of the same whole. When we make small, realistic improvements to the six pillars – healthy eating, regular physical activity, restorative sleep, stress management, positive relationships and minimising risky substances – we strengthen every side of the triangle of physical, social and mental health. Over time, these gentle shifts create powerful momentum towards balance, resilience and wellbeing. Progress, not perfection, is what truly sustains change.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 11: Lifestyle Medicine – Building the Foundations of Wellbeing

Purpose: to strengthen your overall wellbeing through small, consistent daily habits that support balance and resilience.

This week, choose one small, realistic action for each of the six lifestyle pillars. Commit to trying each action for seven days and notice how these changes affect your mood, energy and sense of calm.

- ⊙ Jot down one small, realistic action you can take to improve in each pillar. Commit to trying each action for the next seven days and note how it affects your mood, energy or anxiety.
- ⊙ Measure your progress. Tracking each pillar daily for a week helps you stay focused on your goals and notice patterns. At the end of each day, rate each pillar, and at the end of the week, calculate your average score for each pillar. This is how to track (see table on opposite page).

Each day, give each pillar a score from 0 to 10 based on how well you supported that area. At the end of the week, add up each pillar's daily scores and divide by 7 for the average. The aim isn't a perfect score; it's a good, sustainable score you can keep up week after week. Some days will naturally be harder. Work might limit socialising, bad weather might disrupt exercise or you might choose to enjoy a drink of alcohol. That's normal. Focus on progress over perfection. A consistent, realistic average over time will have more impact than a perfect week you can't maintain.

Key Points of Chapter 11: Lifestyle Medicine – Building the Foundations of Wellbeing

- ⊙ The six pillars of lifestyle medicine – nutrition, movement, sleep, stress management, social connection and avoiding risky substances – are deeply linked to mental wellbeing.
- ⊙ Small, consistent habits in these areas can significantly improve mood, resilience and emotional balance.
- ⊙ Mental health challenges can weaken these lifestyle pillars, creating a cycle that needs gentle and realistic change to reverse.
- ⊙ Striving for perfection often leads to burnout. Sustainable progress comes from being good enough most of the time.
- ⊙ Mental, physical and social health form a triangle, each influencing and reinforcing the others.
- ⊙ Small everyday actions in physical and social wellbeing can spark a positive ripple effect that strengthens mental health.

● CHAPTER 12 ●

Creating a Values-Based Life – The Compass Beyond Anxiety

You've come a long way. Through these chapters, you've explored the roots of social anxiety and learned how to face fears, challenge unhelpful thoughts and respond to yourself with compassion. Now it's time to shift your focus from managing anxiety to building a meaningful life. By aligning your actions with your values, you can create a life that feels fulfilling, even when anxiety is present.

Identifying Your Values

Values are the principles that guide your behaviour and give your life meaning. They're not goals to be ticked off but directions to move towards. Identifying your core values can help you make decisions that better reflect who you truly are.

Identifying your values begins with noticing what truly matters to you – not what others expect or what feels right on paper but what gives you a sense of purpose and vitality. Think about times in your life when you've felt most alive, proud or connected. What were you doing? Who were you with? What qualities were you expressing – kindness, curiosity, courage or honesty? These moments often point towards your deepest values. Writing words or themes that stand out can help. Then, narrow them to the few that feel most authentic and energising.

Values can take many forms, and no two people's lists will look the same. For example, one person might value *connection*,

expressed through spending time with loved ones, while another prioritises *growth*, shown through learning and self-improvement. Other common values include *creativity*, *compassion*, *adventure*, *fairness*, *family*, *health* and *integrity*. The goal isn't to find the 'right' values but to recognise the ones that resonate deeply with you and to shape your choices and actions to reflect your values in daily life.

A Helpful List of Common Values

Here's a list of 20 values that most people hold:

1. **Compassion:** caring for others and responding with kindness and understanding.
2. **Honesty:** being truthful with yourself and others.
3. **Kindness:** choosing to act with warmth and generosity.
4. **Courage:** doing what matters, even when it feels uncomfortable or uncertain.
5. **Growth:** seeking to learn, grow and become your best self.
6. **Connection:** building meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging.
7. **Creativity:** expressing yourself and finding new ways to think or create.
8. **Integrity:** acting in line with your principles, even when no one's watching.
9. **Fairness:** treating people with equality and justice.
10. **Adventure:** embracing new experiences and challenges with curiosity.
11. **Family:** valuing close relationships and shared love or support.
12. **Learning:** expanding knowledge, skills and understanding over time.
13. **Health:** caring for your body and mind to live well and feel strong.

14. Respect: valuing yourself and others, even when opinions differ.
15. Responsibility: owning your actions and following through on commitments.
16. Gratitude: appreciating the good things – big and small – in daily life.
17. Humility: staying open-minded and recognising your own limits.
18. Contribution: giving time, energy or kindness to make a positive impact.
19. Balance: maintaining harmony between work, rest and relationships.
20. Authenticity: living in alignment with who you truly are.

Client Story: Elena, 46 – Rediscovering Direction

Elena's social anxiety had eased, but she still felt stuck. 'If I'm not focused on fixing anxiety, what do I focus on?' she asked. We explored her values – curiosity, kindness and community – and how she could express them in daily life. She began volunteering at a local animal shelter and reconnecting with friends over coffee. The shift was subtle but profound. Her attention moved from avoiding anxiety to approaching meaning. 'I still get nervous', she admitted. 'But now it's about something I care about'. That's the heart of this final chapter: anxiety may whisper, but values can decide your direction.

Reflective Exercise for Chapter 12: Creating a Values-Based Life – The Compass Beyond Anxiety

Purpose: to help you align your daily actions with what truly matters to you, strengthening motivation, meaning and a sense of direction in your life.

This week, take time to connect your values with your actions. Focus on small, realistic steps that express what's most important to you in everyday life.

- ⊙ Choose your top five values. Use the list of values as a guide, but your values don't need to be from the list.
- ⊙ Write one small, realistic action you can take this week to live each value. For example, if you value connection, call a friend. If you value growth, learn something new.
- ⊙ Plan when you'll do each action. Small steps are easier to take when scheduled.
- ⊙ Reflect at week's end. Which actions felt most meaningful? What impeded you from taking action? What's one action you'd like to repeat next week?

Small, values-based actions build momentum. Each step reinforces who you want to be and how you want to live.

Key Points of Chapter 12: Creating a Values-Based Life – The Compass Beyond Anxiety

- ⊙ Living beyond anxiety means focusing on what gives life meaning and not just managing symptoms.
- ⊙ Values are guiding principles that help you live authentically and make purposeful choices.
- ⊙ Identifying your values begins with noticing what energises and fulfils you rather than what others expect.
- ⊙ Everyone's values look different. There's no right list – only what feels true to you.
- ⊙ Small, consistent actions that reflect your values create lasting change and self-confidence.
- ⊙ When your daily actions align with your values, life feels richer, steadier and more resilient – even when anxiety shows up.

● CONCLUSION ●

A Life That's Bigger Than Anxiety

If you've reached this point in the book, you've done something many people find incredibly hard: you've stayed. You've read through discomfort, reflected on fears, challenged long-held beliefs and explored new ways of responding to anxiety. That's not just progress; that's courage in action. This book was never about 'curing' anxiety or erasing it forever. Anxiety isn't something you get over. It's something you learn to manage – more gently, more wisely and with far more compassion.

Social anxiety may have shaped your life in quiet but powerful ways, affecting your confidence, relationships, career choices or sense of self-worth. Nevertheless, it doesn't have to shape your future in the same way. You now have the understanding and tools to respond differently. You've learned how anxiety works in the brain, why avoidance feels safe but keeps you stuck and how unhelpful thinking patterns can magnify fear. You've practised exposure, built self-compassion, navigated setbacks and explored how to live by your values instead of your symptoms. And that brings the most important shift of all: moving from fear to meaning.

The goal isn't to feel confident all the time. It's acting in line with what matters, even when confidence wavers. It's shaping your life around your values, not your fears. That might mean reaching out, speaking up, trying something new or simply showing up more fully in your everyday life. Your values – kindness, honesty, growth

and connection – are still there. They’ve always been there. Anxiety may have clouded them, but it never erased them. Now you can build your life around them again.

Yours is no longer a life where anxiety decides what you can do. Yours is a life where you tell anxiety what you’re going to do – and you do it. It won’t be perfect. There will still be days when doubt creeps in or the inner critic gets loud. But now, you’ll recognise what’s happening, and you’ll know how to find your way through. A bad day isn’t the end of progress; it’s just a bend in the road. So, keep going. Keep choosing action over avoidance, kindness over criticism and direction over perfection. You’ve already done something extraordinary – faced your fears, not in one grand leap but in steady, honest and brave steps.

Let this be the beginning of something more – not a life without anxiety but a life where anxiety no longer decides for you. You’re not alone. You’re not broken. You’re not behind. You’re still here, and that matters more than you know. Anxiety may still walk beside you, but it doesn’t get to lead anymore. You hold the map now. Go where you want to go. Be who you want to be. Live in the moments that matter most to you. Nice is more than enough, and you are already so much more than nice.

● INTRODUCTION TO THIS ● (PSYCHOLOGIST'S) LIFE

As we reach the end of this book, I'd like to share a piece of writing I created a few years ago about the work of being a psychologist. The work of a psychologist is rarely just about symptoms and strategies. It's about people. It's about sitting with their fears, their grief, their hopes and their quiet victories. Over the years, I have been entrusted with countless life stories – each one unique yet all bound by our shared human longing to be understood, supported and believed in. For those living with social anxiety, this journey is often one of courage in the smallest of steps, of showing up despite fear and of slowly discovering that connection is possible. Every time someone takes that risk – to speak, to be seen and to share their inner world – it's an act of bravery that inspires me deeply.

This (Psychologist's) Life is a glimpse into that world. It's a reflection on what it means to walk alongside others through life's storms, to search for the small flickers of light in the darkest moments and to witness the extraordinary resilience that so often hides in plain sight. I hope that, after reading it, you'll not only understand a little more about what psychologists do but also feel the same sense of awe I do – at the courage it takes to open up, the strength that can emerge from struggle and the quiet beauty of human connection.

● *THIS (PSYCHOLOGIST'S) LIFE* ●

After decades of working as a psychologist, I'm amazed how fast the years go by. Just when I think I've heard it all, a new life story emerges. There are always fresh stories to hear, novel challenges to encounter and new hurdles to overcome.

As time passes, the topics change. What's explored in therapy mirrors what our country is dealing with at the time – from the global financial crisis and its consequences to devastating bush-fires, drought, climate change, and COVID-19 and vaccinations. Today's buzzwords include inflation, housing affordability and the cost-of-living crisis. These are never abstract concepts, though. We explore the lived experience of these challenges and the human pain and suffering. The fear of not finding a rental property and being homeless is very real for those who are living it. Psychologists live in eternal hope of encountering friendlier times and calmer waters, but will we ever get there?

Sometimes, I'm asked a question like, 'How can you put up with all the misery, day in and day out?' It's a fair question because most people don't really know what psychologists actually do. The vast majority of our time is spent searching for opportunities to foster improvement by determining people's strengths. How can we better utilise their strengths? Can we get them speaking to themselves more compassionately and helpfully? Can we get them to take better care of themselves? Like personal trainers for the mind, we guide and encourage. We try to turn setbacks into stepping stones to growth and to find reasons for hope amid our clients' challenges. Sometimes, being a psychologist means holding on to hope for a client who can no longer see a way forward.

Clients share their inner lives and most intimate secrets. In doing so, they're always teaching us. Lessons in resilience are a personal favourite, as it's endlessly fascinating. Why do some people seem to possess it in abundance, while others struggle to find it? Time and again, clients who think they have no resilience at all show the most admirable and inspiring resilience.

It's such a privilege and a pleasure to be a psychologist and walk alongside my clients. People place extraordinary trust in their psychologists, and psychologists almost always get treated with the utmost respect. That trust and respect have been earned by all the psychologists who came before the current generation. With great privilege comes great responsibility to serve every client and uphold the values of this wonderful profession. The possibility of making a meaningful difference in another person's life is a constant motivator. Hopefully, there will be many more clients left in my career, many more journeys to go on and many more lessons to be learnt.

● ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ●

Over the past two decades, I have had the privilege of sitting with more than 2,000 fellow travellers – each carrying their own story, with its shadows and its light. This book was born from those journeys. The ideas within these pages have been shaped not in isolation but in the work of therapy. They have been tested and refined in the courage of those facing social anxiety and other mental health challenges. I have been taught at least as much as I have taught. My clients have been my greatest educators, revealing what it truly means to grow through their persistence, vulnerability, humour and grace. To every person who has trusted me with their fears and hopes, thank you. Your journey has given this book its heart.

I wish to acknowledge Chris Mackey, whose guidance, encouragement and belief in my work have left an enduring mark. He is very much missed, and I hope he would approve of the words and intentions found here. I also extend my gratitude to Steve Carroll for his steadfast support and the thoughtful challenges that have strengthened my practice and my thinking, from our university days more than 20 years ago to the present. I am also grateful to Brooke Woodhart for her steady, thoughtful administrative support, which created the time and clarity needed to bring this book to life.

Finally, my deepest thanks go to Jessica, Josie and Emily – for their love, patience and constancy. You are my greatest source of joy and perspective. Your presence reminds me every day what true connection looks like.

And to those I have yet to meet, I look forward to walking beside you and discovering together, step by step, what it means to live with greater courage, connection and freedom.

● ABOUT THE AUTHOR ●

Dr Brendan Meagher is the founder and principal clinical psychologist at Mind Health Care, a private psychology practice in Geelong, Australia. From 2019 to 2021, Brendan served as national chair of the Australian Psychological Society College of Clinical Psychologists. His work in the field has been recognised with several honours. He received an Australian Psychological Society fellowship in 2019 and the Significant Contribution Award from the Australian Psychological Society College of Clinical Psychologists (Victoria) in 2023.

Brendan is also the author of *The Tech-Savvy Psychologist* (2024), a guide to weaving AI and digital tools into modern psychology in ways that keep humanity at the centre. He regularly shares practical resources and reflections for psychologists on LinkedIn. Follow Brendan here: [linkedin.com/in/dr-brendan-meagher-b69b541a2](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-brendan-meagher-b69b541a2).

Away from work, Brendan enjoys the simple things, such as spending time with his wife, Jessica, and their two young daughters, Josie and Emily. He has completed more than 25 marathons and two Ironman triathlons. He believes growth comes from consistent, small and steady steps – a message he carries into both his work and his life.



● ABOUT MIND HEALTH CARE ●

Founded in 2008 by Dr Brendan Meagher, Mind Health Care is a leading psychology practice in Geelong, Australia. From the outset, Mind Health Care's mission has been simple: to provide accessible, high-quality and evidence-based psychological care in an environment that feels calm, professional and welcoming. Over the years, a diverse and highly experienced team of psychologists has supported more than 17,000 people across the Geelong region and beyond. Mind Health Care is recognised as a centre of excellence, known nationally for its innovation, collaboration and consistently high standards of care. A hallmark of the Mind Health Care approach is the matching service, which carefully pairs each client with the psychologist best suited to their needs. This personalised system has consistently led to improved outcomes, higher client satisfaction and greater professional fulfilment for the psychologists. When the fit is right, therapy simply works better for everyone. The team members at Mind Health Care believe that therapy should be both practical and personal – focused not only on reducing distress but also on helping people grow in confidence, connection and purpose. They work collaboratively with local GPs, psychiatrists and allied health professionals to ensure every client receives coordinated and effective care.

To learn more about Mind Health Care and referral options, call (03) 5242 8981 or visit www.mindhealthcare.com.au.

**MIND
HEALTH CARE**
Dr. Brendan Meagher & Associates

A psychologist's guide to overcoming social anxiety and building a life of confidence, courage and connection

What if a psychologist could walk with you and guide your journey from anxiety to confidence and connection?

From Social Anxiety to Connection is a practical guide for anyone who feels stuck in cycles of worry, overthinking or fear of judgement. Written by clinical psychologist Dr Brendan Meagher, it offers clear, steady steps to help you feel calmer, more confident and more connected in everyday life.

Drawing on more than twenty years of experience, Brendan explains social anxiety in a way that feels understandable and manageable. Through practical tools and relatable examples, you'll learn how to settle your body, challenge unhelpful thoughts and gradually build the confidence to participate more fully—in conversations, relationships and everyday situations that have felt hard.

This book is designed to feel like a supportive conversation in the therapy room—grounded, reassuring and focused on real change. If you're ready to move from avoidance to connection, these strategies will help you take the next meaningful steps.

