2

how can you interrupt the social anxiety cycle?

Chapter 1 helped you take a good look at how social anxiety is interfering with your life. Since you've gotten to this chapter, it must have reinforced your belief that it's wise to start taking charge of social anxiety and get on with living your best life. Now what?

You now have a working knowledge of how social anxiety operates. You certainly know how it feels! And you know that social anxiety takes different shapes for different people. You may have seen yourself in some of the people described in Chapter 1, who respond to social situations in some of the same ways that you do. But you may not have a clue about *why* you respond to social situations the way you do.

Understanding *why* is key to taking charge of your own social anxiety. Anxiety in general often elicits certain reactions before we even know what's happening. This chapter provides strategies for monitoring your own experiences with social anxiety so you know what's in play and can take advantage of opportunities to break what may seem like an impregnable cycle.

The Components of Social Anxiety: Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions

To break a cycle and understand why it happens, we need to identify its components. When you are anxious, your reactions happen quickly and tend to be a blur. Pushing pause to sort your reactions out and break the cycle down into its components will give you a sense of control.

Ten people in the same situation and will come away with ten different stories about it. We all interpret the world in different ways. These unique feelings and thoughts lead to different actions. You may have heard of or read about cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). If you have had CBT, it likely included learning about your thoughts, feelings, and actions and how to shift them so that you can feel better. While it is an oversimplification, psychologists talk about the cognitive behavioral triangle (see the diagram below) of thoughts—feelings—actions. How we feel both physically and emotionally affects how we think and what actions or inactions we take. Each of these points of the triangle affect the other two points, and it all takes place in the context of the situation.

> Lisa was on a work break during her job as a security guard at the mall. She went for a walk outside the building, as she tended to avoid people when she could. She had struggled with social anxiety for years. She felt uncomfortable and embarrassed when Jon, a colleague who she knew fairly well, did not respond to her greeting when walking down the street. Her first thought was that Jon must be angry at her, and she started thinking back to past events to figure out why. She hated it when anyone might be the least bit upset with her. Consequently, her **feeling** was discomfort, her **action** was

Feelings

Thoughts   Actions

Cognitive Behavioral Triangle
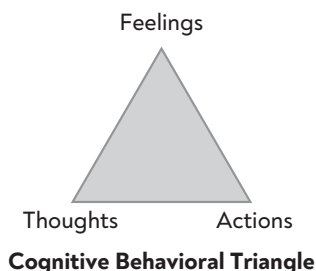
*first to say hi and then continue walking, and her **thought** was that Jon was angry. What she didn't see was that Jon turned around and waved at her as she walked away! It's easy to see how Lisa's first response (saying hello) initiated contact and how her thoughts led to her walking away and missing that Jon, distracted by his own thoughts, hadn't noticed her greeting right away. The next time Lisa encounters Jon, she might be hesitant and not say anything, leading him to feel confused and have thoughts of his own, such as "She is unfriendly." Given her worries about others becoming upset with her, Lisa is likely to be even more uncomfortable in this situation than someone who is not socially anxious.*

It's easy to see how Lisa's reaction led to certain follow-up actions or behaviors, which over time and left unchecked could influence her relationship with Jon. Misunderstandings are common and do not happen in a vacuum. They build on each other and exacerbate social anxiety.

Understanding through Self-Monitoring

One way to understand how thoughts, feelings, and actions work together to create social anxiety is self-monitoring. Monitoring is fairly easy in principle, but it takes time and practice to become proficient.
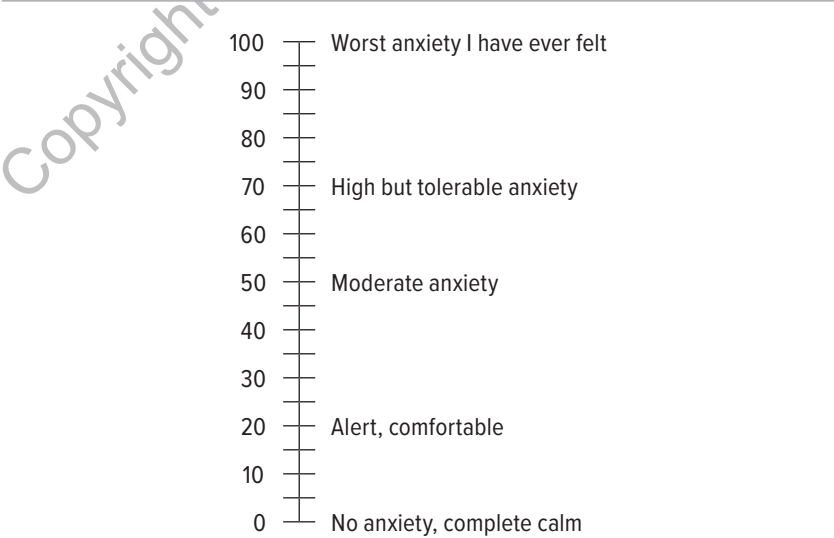
Jody attended a work party with her colleague Emily. They drove together in Emily's car and chatted about work on the way to the party, which helped Jody feel less anxious than she had felt while getting ready. Emily had a good sense of humor and after two years in the office knew many of their colleagues quite well, and provided the "inside scoop" on some upcoming changes that Jody had heard rumors about. Once they entered the door to the restaurant where the party was being held, Jody saw that the setting was formal—a sit-down dinner with assigned seats. This immediately threw her, and she became almost panicked as she saw that she wasn't seated with Emily. She was placed between two men who worked in the information technology department and across from one of the women whom she frequently saw laughing and talking in an animated way in the lunchroom. After checking her coat, she immediately went to the washroom as she felt

as though she might throw up. She looked in the mirror and saw that her
face was flushed and went into one of the stalls.

Jody's situation is a perfect example where self-monitoring could be used. Our responses tend to happen in a jumble, and we tend to react quickly before stopping to consider different options. We don't tend to naturally separate our feelings from our thoughts. Yet for each situation we encounter we can analyze our reactions and answer the following questions:

• What is the situation? (Where are you, who are you with, what is going on right now?)

• What is going through your mind? These thoughts—called your *automatic thoughts*—are your immediate internal commentary, and they come up without any planning. It can take practice to catch these thoughts before they disappear as quickly as they arose.

• What emotions are you experiencing? How intense are these feelings on a scale from 0 to 100? Think of this scale (shown below) as a kind of "feelings thermometer," with "no emotion at all" at 0 and the most intense emotion that you have ever felt at 100; you could also

EMOTIONAL INTENSITY SCALE FOR SOCIAL ANXIETY

100	Worst anxiety I have ever felt
90	
80	
70	High but tolerable anxiety
60	
50	Moderate anxiety
40	
30	
20	Alert, comfortable
10	
0	No anxiety, complete calm

think of the intensity in terms of a percentage. (While the example provided here is anxiety, this scale can be used for any emotion, including those typically considered positive, such as excitement or joy.) Most of the time you will feel more than one emotion. Our gut reactions are the physical sensations that occur in our body and are directly related to these feelings.

- What are you doing? Sometimes, even more importantly, what are you not doing or maybe avoiding? Have you taken any actions to reduce or avoid your anxiety?

You can use the Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions Record on page 36 (also available to download and print and at *www.guilford.com/ dobson3-forms*) to enter this information. It takes self-awareness and practice to become skilled at self-monitoring, but once you learn how to do it it's a very useful strategy for all sorts of daily situations. It tends to work best if completed during or shortly following a situation, although doing it a few hours later works as well. I have placed the thoughts column prior to the feelings column whereas some similar charts have them the other way around. As they are very interconnected, it is impossible to know if thoughts lead to feelings or the reverse. It doesn't really matter!

Jody had encountered a thoughts, feelings, and actions worksheet in a book she had read about social anxiety, and once she was in the washroom she decided she would try to work through it on the thought record she had created on her phone. As she was in the stall, she had a comforting amount of privacy . . . although she knew that people often were on their phones, so no one would have had any idea what she was doing anyway. (If she were in a public place, she could pretend she was posting something on social media.)

The situation was straightforward to record—taking a break in the washroom stall while attending a work party at a formal restaurant. She was unsure what to record in the automatic thoughts column because quite a few scrambled thoughts had gone through her head: "I have to leave," "I won't be able to think of what to say to those geeky IT guys," "The woman sitting across from me will look great and monopolize the conversation," followed by "That's good as I won't have to talk" and "My hands will start to shake and I will make a mess of my food," followed by "At least I have on a dark-colored dress."

THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND ACTIONS RECORD

Situation (date, time, event)	Automatic thought(s)	Feelings (include intensity, rating from 0–100)	Actions/behaviors

36

It was also a bit tricky to determine her emotions since the panic she had felt upon arriving almost immediately subsided once she was in the washroom. She put down "panicky" 80/100, "awkward and embarrassed" 70/100, and "frozen" 75/100, and then returned to the thoughts column to add "My mind will go blank and I will stumble over my words." The actions/behaviors column was the easiest to complete as it was clear that she had headed for the washroom, and then into one of the stalls, avoiding interacting with anyone on the way there. After filling in her chart, her next action was to read through it and take some deep breaths to help calm herself down. She then realized she could request a change in the seating arrangements and immediately felt better.

Later in the evening Jody reviewed her self-monitoring chart and realized she had taken a very positive step in completing it—it helped her become more aware of her thoughts and feelings. She saw that her immediate tendency was to want to leave, which she had frequently done in the past. She also realized that while she felt nauseous, she had not vomited, which had also occurred in the past. Although going to the washroom was a temporary form of leaving, this short-term avoidant strategy proved to be very helpful as it provided her with personal space and privacy and the opportunity to sort through her reactions and reduce her panicky feelings by taking some slow, deep breaths.

You too will be able to separate your reactions into thoughts, feelings, and actions and clear up the blur when anxiety strikes. The self-monitoring process forces you to slow down and be more aware, which in and of itself is a useful strategy. You will then start to have specific ideas of what to do differently. But it's important to go through the entire process of looking at each component of your anxiety in the situation at hand. If Jody had simply thought "I'm feeling anxious at this party," leaving or trying to reduce her feelings of anxiety would have been her only choice. She could also have slowed down her thoughts with deep breathing to reduce her sense of panic, but she would not have figured out what to do to resolve the problem that led to the panic. As it happened, once Jody went through the self-monitoring process and her fear subsided, she sorted out some options to deal with the situation so she felt more comfortable during the evening. She ultimately chose to change her seat.

The key to successful self-monitoring (other than just doing it!) is to analyze specific situations. If you don't know the details of what is happening, it's not possible to change. Over time, you will likely start to see some patterns in your reactions. For example, Jody noticed right away that her anxiety was higher in the formal restaurant than it might have been at a casual self-serve buffet. She realized it was helpful to be able to choose where and with whom to sit. If she had either left right away or forced herself to "just get through it" and stay in her assigned seat, she might not have had these realizations. If she had left right away, her anxiety would have probably dropped due to the relief, but she might have felt guilty at leaving Emily behind and frustrated and disappointed with herself. If she had forced herself to remain at the first table where she was seated and was anxious throughout the evening, her negative thoughts about herself could have been reinforced ("I have nothing to say" or "I don't have anything in common with these people"). Once you understand your typical patterns, you're in a position to take charge. In the future, Jody is likely to be more proactive with seating arrangements, including asking a friend to help out. She can consider the type of restaurant, the people involved, and other factors that contribute to her anxiety.

> Knowledge is power and leads to improved coping.

But It All Happens So Fast!

It's common to struggle to be aware of automatic thoughts and feelings as well as to differentiate between them. As thoughts and feelings happen so quickly and almost at the same time, they are easy to miss. Separating them, however, empowers you. You'll be able to see that, even though the sequence may be the opposite, *typically a feeling is the result of a thought*. Here are some ways in which to sort out your thoughts and feelings and to figure out the difference between them.

What Are You Thinking?

Automatic thoughts are those fleeting verbal reactions in our minds that we have all the time without really noticing or thinking about

them. They are our own personal narration of our experiences. They can be completely neutral and factual ("I see on my phone that it is 8:38 A.M."), positively tinged ("I really like the daily special that I saw posted in the cafeteria"), or negatively skewed ("They probably won't cook the special the way I like it"). Automatic thoughts can be about the situation itself, you, or other people. They can be both words or images and usually trigger other automatic thoughts, which trigger yet more thoughts. Memories may come to mind, such as thinking of a similar place, situation, or personal experience.

It can be tricky to figure out automatic thoughts, as they do happen so quickly. Automatic thoughts are not the same as underlying beliefs. For example, the automatic thought "I can't think of anything to say, and my mind is a blank" is probably related to a belief that it is important to talk to others and to make social connections in life. For the purposes of self-monitoring, don't worry about figuring out the underlying beliefs. Just try to catch some of the thoughts as they come into your mind.

What Are You Feeling?

Feelings come and go and affect us all the time. As noted earlier, they can be relatively stable or quite volatile. There is a broad range of human emotions, and they all occur on a continuum from mild to intense. Intense emotions can make it more difficult to think clearly. Our mind interprets how we feel and gives it a label. Some people are much more aware of their emotional state than others are—they could be said to have a larger emotional vocabulary. Some people prefer words to help identify emotions, and some prefer pictures such as emoticons.

How to Sort Out Your Thoughts and Feelings

Strategy 1: Check Out Pictures Representing Emotions

If you're not sure how you feel, try looking at the emojis on your cell phone. Emoticons or emojis are easy to use, and most people have access to them on their laptops or phones. Seeing the facial expressions

in a comical way can help you identify the feelings expressed. Many emotion pictures and charts are available online. It can be helpful to have a fridge magnet or poster as a visual reminder.

Strategy 2: Increase Your Emotional Vocabulary

Many resources can help you identify feelings such as The Feelings Wheel (*Feelingswheel.com*), which helps put words to emotions and increase your emotional vocabulary. It's useful to have lots of options. Check out *psychpage.com/learning/library/assess/feelings.html* for ways to increase your emotion words.

Strategy 3: Say the Words Out Loud

Look at a list of emotions and try to say the words out loud. What do you feel at this moment? If you're in a private place, say it out loud several times, first in a whisper, then a bit louder and louder. There is an added benefit to verbalizing the words—naming emotions can actually help reduce them. Dr. Daniel Siegel, one of the first scientists to show support for this simple strategy, called it "name it to tame it." How do you feel after you have named the emotion and repeated it out loud? Is the emotion the same or different? Is it less intense or more intense?

Strategy 4: Practice

The next time someone asks you how you are, even in the grocery store, try to respond with a feeling word. "Okay" is not a feeling! "Tired," "happy," and "excited about the weekend" are possible options. Do this exercise for a full day—saying the words out loud helps awareness.

Strategy 5: Learn to Distinguish between Thoughts and Feelings

It's also quite normal for people to say "I feel . . ." and the feeling is actually a thought. The sentence "I feel that . . ." is usually a thought

rather than a feeling, such as "I feel that I should not have come." Don't worry about getting it "right"—just get some thoughts and feelings down on a chart. It's much easier to figure it out once it's down in black and white.

Strategy 6: Be Curious

It can be interesting to practice awareness of feelings—ask yourself how you feel right now. It's quite common to have neutral or low intensities of emotion. That's probably the natural state of feeling! Some people have more up and down feelings, and others are more stable. Lots of times, when others ask "How are you doing?" you might respond with "okay" or "fine." Remember that these are not feelings.

Strategy 7: Try Body Sensations

If it's difficult for you to identify feelings, try body sensations such as an itch, warmth or cold, muscle tension, or a tickle in your throat. Body awareness can help get you started. What sensations do you have in this moment?

PRACTICE EXERCISE 1: Visualize being Jody

Imagine yourself in Jody's situation, walking through the door of the restaurant. Put yourself into the image as vividly as you can. What is the name of the restaurant? What is the décor like? What are you wearing? Do you notice any smells? Sounds? What is Emily saying? How do you feel? What is your first thought? Second thought? What do you see? Visualize the details of the scene before you imagine yourself heading off to the washroom. Picture yourself going into the washroom, feeling nauseous, and heading into the stall. Take a deep breath. Do you feel a bit better? Imagine yourself taking out your phone and pulling up a self-monitoring chart. Separate your reactions into thoughts, feelings, and actions. This brief exercise can help you figure out the difference between the thoughts and feelings that happen very quickly and auto-matically.

PRACTICE EXERCISE 2: Visualize your own example

Think of a situation that you find difficult and that leads to anxiety for you. Take a moment to think of something that happened in the past few days. Be as specific as possible—it could be meeting someone in person for the first time after you have talked on a dating app, or asking your boss for a promotion and a raise in pay, or running into a neighbor while out for a walk and not knowing what to say to them.

- Imagine yourself being back in this situation—let your imagination be as vivid as possible and put yourself into it fully. What happens? How does your body feel? What emotions do you experience? What are your thoughts? What do you do? What do you do next? How do you feel after your action? What are your next thoughts?
- How anxious do you feel in this situation? Rate your anxiety from 0 (complete calm) to 100 (worst anxiety I have ever felt) using the scale presented earlier in the chapter (page 34). Think of 20 as alert, 50 as moderate anxiety, and 70 as high anxiety. What other emotions do you have, and how intense are they?
- What thoughts and actions go along with these feelings? (See the cognitive behavioral triangle on page 32.) What do you do?
- Would you prefer to avoid any of these imagined actions?

This exercise can help you sort out your reactions as well as determine what level of anxiety you can tolerate before being tempted to avoid situations. Some people avoid readily where others power through.

Self-Monitoring in Real Life—Making It Practical

Many of my clients have said that self-monitoring is helpful but not always convenient or practical. You cannot always stop what you're doing and pull out a self-monitoring form—also called a thought record—or use an app on your phone! There are, however, many ways to make self-monitoring work for you. Just make sure you include the

"key ingredients"—the situation, your automatic thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Tip 1: Use Your Favorite Method

If you prefer paper, keep a small pad with you. Alternatively, you could set up a thought record on your phone or laptop. Some people use phone apps, such as MoodKit. Another idea could be to do a voice recording on your phone. Use whatever method or technology works best for you.

Tip 2: Keep It Simple

Many people customize their own records, but I would strongly advise you to keep it simple and straightforward. The more complicated the format, the less likely you are to complete it. I had a client create a very thorough, color-coded digital spreadsheet with drop-down options. While it was very thoughtful and creative, it was too complicated to use effectively for very long. I have had many clients create their own charts in a way that suits them.

Tip 3: Get It Out of Your Mind

You may think you will just remember what happened and be able to go through it in your mind later on. It is far better to write it down—seeing it "outside your mind" in black and white will help you be more objective and see things more clearly.

Tip 4: Keep It Private

Keeping your self-monitoring records private is important for many people. The use of your phone is very helpful in this regard—other people don't have access to it and you could use it for self-monitoring in a public space without anyone being the wiser. Self-monitoring looks much like any other activity, such as scrolling through social media and adding a few comments, so no one needs to know what you are doing!

Tip 5: Do It Quickly and Regularly

Complete the self-monitoring as soon as possible, as memory is fallible and biases may happen quickly. In this way, you can start to understand situations as they occur and see that there are other options in how you think and what you do. Most people do self-monitoring regularly when they start working on change and then are able to go through the steps quickly in their mind once it becomes routine.

Tip 6: Keep It Structured

Self-monitoring is not the same as journaling. Writing in a journal can mean many different things and can have numerous benefits, but typically it's far less structured and situation-specific than the type of monitoring discussed in this chapter. In my experience, people tend to write in journals when they are feeling sad or anxious. When reviewed afterward, journal entries can give a distorted perspective of situations as the notes are not kept in an organized or regular pattern. This can make it seem that life is actually worse than it is! Certainly, self-monitoring can be done in one of the lovely journals that are sold in bookstores. If that option appeals to you, go for it!

What You Can Learn by Comparing Predictions to Reality

When you're anxious about an upcoming event, you experience certain thoughts and feelings and can decide what you might do to manage the anxiety during the event. It's always important to look at the situation after the fact too, because you may very well have predicted very different results than what actually transpired. What happened when the actions you planned were taken? For people with anxiety many automatic thoughts are about the future, starting with "I will," "It might," or "Others will." Because these are future-oriented thoughts, and whatever they predict has not yet occurred, they are by definition untrue and untested. Try using the Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions

Record from this book to observe how different actual events can be from what you might predict.

PRACTICE EXERCISE 3: Predictions versus reality

Imagine that you're in your office about 15 minutes before a meeting. About 10 people will be in the conference room, including your boss, and you're going to present the results of a project that you've been working on for several months. While the project didn't turn out perfectly you are pleased with your work and the results, but you are worried that you won't be able to communicate very well. Here is an example of what you might enter into a thoughts, feelings, and actions record before the meeting begins. Notice that you're thinking about what might happen—how you may feel and what you could do to manage your anxiety. You are making a lot of predictions and entering the automatic thoughts in the record.

THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND ACTIONS RECORD (before meeting)

Situation (date, time, event)	Automatic thought(s)	Feelings (include intensity, rating from 0–100)	Actions/behaviors
Sitting in my office waiting for the 10:00 meeting. It is 9:45 A.M., March 14.	I won't be able to express myself very well. There will be challenging questions from my boss. I will stumble over my words and won't be able to think of what to say. Others will laugh at me. I will get fired for making too many mistakes and not being able to present my work. I will run out of the meeting.	Nervous—75 Apprehensive—80 Anticipation—40 Terrified—85 Embarrassed—60 Worried—65	Practice the first few sentences of the talk. Go over the PowerPoint slides. Poke my head into my next-door neighbor's office and walk to the meeting with her. Think of ways to respond to predictable questions. Realize that it's okay to say "I don't know." Take my water bottle to the meeting in case I get a dry mouth.

Here's an example of what you might record about your thoughts, feelings, and actions after the meeting regarding what actually happened.

THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND ACTIONS RECORD (after meeting)

Situation (date, time, event)	Automatic thought(s)	Feelings (include intensity, rating from 0–100)	Actions/behaviors
In my office, 11:15 A.M., March 14.	Well, I'm glad that's over! I didn't do a great job, but at least I got through it. No one laughed (out loud anyway!). I was able to respond to some of the questions. When I said "I don't know" to one question, another person had the answer. My boss smiled at me at the end of the meeting, so perhaps I won't be fired (today anyway!).	Relief—90 Embarrassed—50 Nervous—40 Tired—60 Proud—30	Close my eyes and take a breather. Post my slides on the shared drive so that others can review them. Send a message letting my colleagues know that I've posted the slides. Ask my colleague next door what she thought of my presentation. Think of a possible rewarding activity for the evening.

In the post-meeting exercise example, you can see that most of the thoughts are no longer future oriented. Some of the feelings are the same, but their intensity is reduced. The nervous or embarrassed feelings are still about the future ("I won't be fired today" implies that it could still happen in the near future). A key point is that anxiety is a future-oriented emotion, tending to escalate just before and at the beginning of a feared situation, that can easily lead to avoidance ("I'm so terrified that I can't manage it, so I'll just not go"). Anxious thoughts are predictions about the future and not focused on the present. Just as in the examples above, it can be helpful to compare a thoughts, feelings, and actions record from before an event to a record completed after the event occurred. This exercise can help you see that your predictions are not the same as reality!

Early in my career I heard an expert say that anxiety is about the future and depression is about the past. That statement rang true then and has stuck with me. While this book is not focused on depression, many socially anxious people have regrets about opportunities not taken and sadness about events in the past.

The Value of an Outsider's Perspective

Sometimes it's hard to figure it all out—what thoughts, feelings, and actions are involved in your social anxiety and how your predictions differ from what actually unfolds. It can help to get someone else's thoughts. While no one else knows what you think or how you feel, they can comment on your actions and provide their view on your strengths and how you counteract your anxiety. Others' opinions may be quite different from yours and provide good information. As in the office example in the preceding exercise, you may know someone whose opinion you trust and who was present at the event that caused you anxiety, and you could ask them what they thought. You may have noticed all of your mistakes while others didn't even see or hear them. Take their opinion as a piece of information. If you talk to someone who wasn't present, try to provide an unbiased description of what happened. It can take courage to talk to someone else about a situation that led to anxiety, but it's extremely useful to get multiple perspectives.

Consider the Situation: Context Matters

Situations do not occur in a vacuum, and the context makes a huge difference to how your social anxiety comes into play. Most people know this intuitively, but it will become much more evident when you start self-monitoring. Here are some of the considerations to think about.

What Is at Stake?

If you give a presentation for a job interview, the stakes are high and most people would be nervous. If you are showing a slideshow of your

vacation photos to friends, the stakes are not very high, but it's easy to have negative thoughts. These thoughts could include that your pictures are not very good or that the vacation was not that interesting and your friends may judge your choices or photography skills. If the situation is your attending a lecture where you are not expected to participate, the stakes are low and you're not likely to feel very anxious. The stakes go up, though, and anxiety may start to creep higher if you decide to ask a question or you're interested in talking to someone else who's there. If the situation involves taking a long hike in the mountains when no one is around, a socially anxious person is not likely to feel uncomfortable, whereas a person who believes there may be hidden dangers (for example, bears) or is worried about their fitness may be terrified. As you are aware, people who struggle with social anxiety fear judgment, so the social context is very important.

Who Are You With?

Situations may involve other people with whom you share a history. Sharing a history may make your preferred response to a given situation either easier or much more difficult, depending on the relationship you have with the person. For example, if your relationship with the other person is positive and you think they are likely to be supportive, you'll often find it easier to take risks. At times this shared history can complicate your reactions, however, because thinking you know how the other person will respond may get factored into your predictions. And those predictions could turn out to be accurate or inaccurate! You can even make predictions about people you've never met before, because it's human nature to make assumptions based on first impressions, visual cues, or the location you're in. Jody, for example, made assumptions about the two men who worked in IT based on minimal information. You may find yourself gravitating toward or away from an interaction based on your assumptions. Just as your read of people that you know well can be inaccurate, your first impressions of strangers may be wrong. Be open to the possibility that you don't always know what others are like!

　　Consider how you feel and what thoughts you have when you're with the people you typically see during the day. People you've never

met may be easier to approach as you may have fewer expectations and assumptions about how the interaction will proceed. These expectations will, of course, depend on many factors, such as where the interactions occur. I have had clients tell me they feel much less anxious traveling far from home, even in a different country, where no one knows them and they are not expected to talk. They reported that it was "freeing" and allowed them to be more rather than less sociable. People may feel more comfortable in a waiting room at a mental health clinic as they know that everyone who is waiting also has mental health struggles. Or they may feel less comfortable as they are worried that someone may recognize them and make judgments.

What Is the Setting?

There are lots of other patterns that you can see from your self-observations, and these can help you understand the components of your responses to social anxiety. Like Jody, many anxious people feel more comfortable in casual social situations, often when they are outdoors where there is a lot of space to move around. That way, there are choices of where to go and who to talk to or places to escape to and be less visible. On the other hand, many anxious people dislike "cocktail party chatter" or what is commonly called *networking* as the conversations are unstructured and it is not clear what to talk about. Structured interactions tend to be easier as in these situations it is clearer what is expected of you.

PRACTICE EXERCISE 4: Rank situations from most to least comfortable

This exercise helps you understand some of your reactions and realize that they are on a continuum from least to most difficult. Almost all reactions are like this, and figuring it out will give you a "way in" to making the situation a bit easier for yourself. You may also see that there are already situations that you can handle with a moderate degree of comfort.

　　List some sample situations that you would put in the following categories, from most to least comfortable:

Most comfortable:

Moderately comfortable:

Moderately uncomfortable:

Most uncomfortable:

Ryan preferred to go for long walks late at night so that he would not run into people and be expected to talk. He felt most comfortable interacting with peers in the context of gaming as it was clear what the topic of the chats would be. He felt moderately comfortable talking to his mother and slightly less comfortable talking to his father. Lisa felt comfortable at work at the shopping center when very few people were around. When she noticed teenagers out shopping in groups, she tended to avoid looking at them as she thought that they would judge her. She felt more comfortable walking the periphery of the parking lot and enjoyed interacting with young families with children.

PRACTICE EXERCISE 5: Notice how the situation affects you

Imagine that you are riding on a city transit bus. You have a seat, but the bus is full and lots of people are standing up. You are looking down, minding your own business, but feel self-conscious and wonder if you should give up your seat. As you look at the floor, it feels as though many eyes are staring at you and people are wondering why you don't stand up and offer your seat to someone else. You feel guilty and start to shift your position to look out the window. Force yourself to lift your eyes and look around. Notice who is nearby. How many people are staring at you? What is the expression on their faces? Are they looking at anyone else? How many people are looking out the window? Talking to someone

else? On their phones? Is there a good reason here to feel guilty? Do you feel more self-conscious when looking down or looking up?

This exercise helps you understand the importance of the social environment around you and how your behavior affects how you feel. Most people feel much more uncomfortable and anxious when avoiding contact with others. Self-monitoring can encourage you to look around, and doing so can reveal a great deal. You are likely to notice that other people are not looking at you or even noticing much other than what is in their immediate vicinity (especially their screens!).

Consider Personal Characteristics: You Matter

Everyone lives in different circumstances. We all have unique barriers that get in the way and qualities that can help us move ahead in living our best lives. Some people have more privileges than others, including adequate financial support and safe housing, good health, and being part of a majority group. Others contend with obstacles that make change more challenging. It is certainly hard to focus on dealing with social anxiety if you do not have money to buy medicine, food, or safe housing. On the other hand, necessity may force some people to do things they would prefer to avoid, and this may turn out to be a good thing.

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at how negative thoughts and predictions can be identified through self-monitoring. These negative thoughts can be accurate. A thought that others are looking at you and judging you negatively can be accurate. The thought that others may not like you could be true. People can judge and have negative thoughts about themselves as well as about others.

Life is not the same for everyone, and it is certainly not fair. Most people who are part of a visible minority group have likely experienced discrimination and intolerance from other people. If you have mobility issues and use a wheelchair, life is going to be more complicated, and you face physical barriers to getting around. Many people live with histories of trauma, societal injustice, and economic disparity. Any or all of these obstacles can make change more challenging and have to

be considered in working to live your best life. While some obstacles can be overcome, some have to be accepted and some may be best dealt with on a societal level through social justice initiatives.

We all have characteristics that can help as well as those that get in the way. Determination, wanting wholeheartedly to live your best life, and tenacity are all important characteristics. Curiosity about yourself, other people, and the world around you is helpful. The desire to learn can help you try new activities and talk to different people. The realization that other people struggle and have their own fears can be eye-opening and help you feel less alone. The ability to not only tolerate but welcome surprises is helpful, especially as life truly is unpredictable. The only certainty is uncertainty. That statement can be exhilarating and terrifying at the same time!

For more self-awareness, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the major obstacles that you face in your life at present?
- What are some ways that they could be either overcome or reduced?
- If they are unchangeable, can you imagine yourself accepting them?
- What are five personal characteristics that you have that are helpful?
- If you have trouble identifying your helpful characteristics, can you think of someone that you could ask this question of? Even if you are able to answer the question, getting someone else's perspective can be illuminating.
- Think of ways in which these qualities might help you make changes. For example, tenacity is a real asset and can be manifested as persistence!

Moving Forward

In this chapter we have discussed the details of understanding yourself, your life situation, and things that might either get in the way or help

you along the way. Through self-monitoring, you will be able to separate your thoughts, feelings, and actions and work toward shifting them in more positive directions. Practice labeling your feelings through the use of emoticons or words, whichever you prefer. Say the emotion words out loud when you are by yourself. Slow down and create space between the immediate reaction and what happens next. It's an important first step to slow down enough that you can reduce some of the initial first reactions. Once you do that, you can figure out the next steps. Keeping track for yourself or getting other opinions helps you get a different perspective on what's happening. Now that you have a deeper understanding, the next chapter will turn to how to set goals that work and keep you on track toward living your best life.