

## MINDFULNESS PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL ANXIETY

**Mindfulness:** paying attention to something in the present moment with curiosity rather than judgment.

**Thought defusion:** being aware of your thoughts and feelings without becoming involved with them.

**External mindfulness for social anxiety:** paying attention with curiosity (taking interest) in the conversation, person, activity and/or situation in the present moment, while treating your thoughts and feelings like background noise. Get absorbed, engrossed, lost in the conversation or activity. Focus on what you see and hear (touch, taste, smell), rather than what you feel and think. *Get out of your head and into the moment.*

### Curiosity training while observing:

- Daily watch one or more of these attention training videos. Start with videos 6-8, then watch 1-5: [youtube.com/playlist?list=PLjGQ1qp\\_IGNW8OdES0K5pITPvz4pVPp0d](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLjGQ1qp_IGNW8OdES0K5pITPvz4pVPp0d). Get absorbed in all that you see and hear in these videos, while treating your thoughts and feelings as background noise. Gently return your attention to what you see and hear whenever you're distracted.
- Watch this music video about a socially anxious high school senior (Waving Through a Window from the musical, *Dear Evan Hansen*): [youtube.com/watch?v=REIOnCTwjF0](https://youtube.com/watch?v=REIOnCTwjF0). Optionally watch any other music video of your choice. Slowly alternate your focus on the lyrics, the instruments, the different singers and actors. Watch the video again and switch your focus to different elements. Get engrossed in what you see and hear. Treat your thoughts and feelings as background noise.
- When you tire of the recordings, go into a location with a variety of sounds and sights, and ideally including people you are not interacting with. Spend 10 minutes or so closely paying attention to what you see and hear, slowly alternating your focus from one sight or sound to another. Treat any thoughts and feelings you may have as background noise.
- For all of the above, daily log the per cent mindful you were each time you practice.

### Curiosity training while participating:

- Every day for at least 5 minutes, focus mindfully (with an attitude of curiosity as opposed to judgment) during conversations you are in. **Get absorbed / lost in the conversation.** Treat your thoughts and feelings like background noise.
- Make sure you put yourself in such situations daily so you can practice.
- Ideally start with conversations in which you are pretty comfortable. Proceed to conversations you are more anxious about as you get better at this. Consider signing up for anonymous conversations with eager strangers through the **dialup** app.
- Adopt an attitude of curiosity: ie. take interest in the person(s) and what they are saying.
- Practice this gently, patiently and persistently; don't criticize yourself or strain to be perfect at this.
- Optional: silently say "mindful," "curious," or "background noise" when you slip and focus on thoughts or feelings; then return your attention to the conversation or activity in the moment. Or simply return your attention to what you see and hear without using the silent word.
- If you have difficulty remembering to practice, **turn your social anxiety into a cue:** whenever you feel anxious during an interaction, **treat that anxiety as a reminder to get out of your head and focus externally on the conversation / activity / person in the moment.**
- Daily log the minutes and per cent mindful you were each time you practice.

# MINDFULNESS PRACTICE LOG

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## Curiosity training while...

<b>Write date</b> ➔							
<b>OBSERVING</b> (log what you observed, how long, % mindful)							
<b>PARTICIPATING</b> (log conversation / activity, how long, % mindful)							

<b>Write date</b> ➔							
<b>OBSERVING</b> (write what you observed and your % mindful)							
<b>PARTICIPATING</b> (log conversation / activity, how long, % mindful)							

<b>Write date</b> ➔							
<b>OBSERVING</b> (write what you observed and your % mindful)							
<b>PARTICIPATING</b> (log conversation / activity, how long, % mindful)							

<b>Write date</b> ➔							
<b>OBSERVING</b> (write what you observed and your % mindful)							
<b>PARTICIPATING</b> (log conversation / activity, how long, % mindful)							

# EXPERIMENT WORKSHEET

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Before experiment		After experiment		
SITUATION & DATE:	PREDICTIONS:	EXPERIMENT:	EVIDENCE:	WHAT I LEARNED:
	What exactly do you fear will happen (your verbal hot thoughts and disturbing images)? What are the underlying core beliefs? ⇒ <b>Rate belief: 0-100%</b>	What will you do to test your predictions? Specify your behavioral goals. Include mindful focus & eliminating safety-seeking behaviors.	What actually happened? Did your feared predictions come true? If so, how bad was it for you, and how did you cope with it?	What do these experiments tell you about your hot thoughts & core beliefs? ⇒ <b>Rate belief: 0-100%</b>
5/11: going to a party where I know few people	--I won't know what to say, or I might say something stupid. --I'll appear tense & nervous. --People will think poorly of me, and won't enjoy talking to me. --I have an image of people snickering, giving me disapproving looks, and getting out of the conversation quickly. --85%	--attend party & stay 2+ hours --greet 5+ new people --start 2 conversations --focus mindfully on the conversation --try to keep the conversations going for at least 15 minutes --speak more expansively	--One conversation seemed to be enjoyable to both of us. We both talked actively for about 20 minutes. --No one appeared to react negatively to me, not even in the first awkward conversation. --Two people came up to me and started conversations.	--If I approach people, focus mindfully and speak longer, I'm pretty good at making social conversation, and some people enjoy talking to me. A little awkwardness with a new person is no big deal. --70%
5/9-12: social conversation with coworkers	--I won't know what to say, or I might say something stupid. --I'll appear tense & nervous. --People will think I'm bothering them. --People will think poorly of me, and won't enjoy talking to me. --I have an image of people snickering, giving me disapproving looks, and getting out of the conversation quickly. --65%	--initiate social conversation with at least 1 coworker daily --focus mindfully on the conversation --try to keep each conversation going for 2-3 minutes --speak more expansively	--Most people reacted in a friendly way. They asked me follow-up questions and seemed interested in chatting. --Steve was brief with me and kept looking at his work. I took that to mean he was busy & wanted to be left alone, so I excused myself. But he was friendly the next day. --Kim initiated a conversation with me the day after I talked with her.	--Most of the time coworkers enjoy talking to me. If someone turns out to not want to talk, I can excuse myself and no harm has been done. I'm good enough at making conversation so long as I focus mindfully and speak more expansively. --75%

# EXPERIMENT WORKSHEET

Name \_\_\_\_\_

<i>Before experiment</i>		<i>After experiment</i>		
<b>SITUATION &amp; DATE:</b>	<b>PREDICTIONS:</b> What exactly do you fear will happen (your verbal hot thoughts and disturbing images)? What are the underlying core beliefs? ⇒ <b>Rate belief: 0-100%</b>	<b>EXPERIMENT:</b> What will you do to test your predictions? Specify your behavioral goals. Include mindful focus & eliminating safety-seeking behaviors.	<b>EVIDENCE:</b> What actually happened? Did your feared predictions come true? If so, how bad was it for you, and how did you cope with it?	<b>WHAT I LEARNED:</b> What do these experiments tell you about your hot thoughts & core beliefs? ⇒ <b>Rate belief: 0-100%</b>

# COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING WORKSHEET

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**SITUATION & DATE** event, circumstance or experiment (past, present or future) when you feel distressed or avoid  
*5/11: going to a party where I know few people*

**FEELINGS (intensity 0-100% before & after completing CRW)** emotions and physical sensations  
*--nervous: 90% → 60%                      --embarrassed: 50% → 35%                      --jittery: 50% → 25%*  
*--tense: 75% → 50%                      --self-conscious: 100% → 50%*

**HOT THOUGHTS (belief 0-100%)** your most distressing ideas, concerns, images, predictions &/or core beliefs  
*--I won't know what to say, or I might say something stupid. 75%*  
*--I'll appear tense & nervous. 80%                      --People will think poorly of me,*  
*--I've got to find a way out of this. 75%                      and won't enjoy talking to me. 100%*

**SAFETY-SEEKING BEHAVIORS** things you do or avoid to try to cope, including how you focus your attention  
*--don't initiate conversations                      --stay off by sidelines                      --withdraw, say very little*  
*--try to script what to say next                      --focus on myself to try to appear less nervous*

**COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS** in your hot thoughts  
*--perfectionistic thinking                      --magnifying & minimizing*  
*--fortune telling                      --self-defeating thinking*

**CHALLENGING QUESTIONS** to debate your hot thoughts  
*--What's the objective evidence?                      --How likely is it that this would happen,*  
*--What good things might I experience?                      and how could I handle it if it did?*

**CONSTRUCTIVE ATTITUDE (belief 0-100%)** a truer, compassionate & helpful alternative to your hot thoughts, predictions &/or core beliefs (including answers to your challenging questions)

*While mingling in other settings, I've found that the conversation is more likely to go well if I focus mindfully in the moment, and not on my feelings and how I think I'm coming across. If one conversation doesn't go so well, I can feel proud that I was being friendly and took a risk. Then I'll simply move on and talk to someone else. Some people have told me I don't appear as anxious as I think I do. In the rare event that someone is so rude as to say I appear nervous or that I said something stupid, I can simply acknowledge it non-defensively and point out that everyone has this experience at times. Some people will enjoy talking to me and I'll enjoy talking to some people, despite some initial awkwardness. But no one is liked by everyone, so I don't have to be afraid of being disliked by a stranger at a party. 65%*

**Positive motivators** specific ways you expect to benefit (short- & long-term) by doing the experiment or action steps

*This is good practice at meeting people and making small talk. I'll feel proud of myself for trying and for being friendly, no matter how it goes. I'll probably enjoy some of the conversations. I might meet someone I like. In the long run, this will help me make friends and get a date. 80%*

**Short version** *Focus on enjoying the conversation.*

**BEHAVIORAL GOALS & ACTION STEPS** a more helpful alternative to your safety-seeking behaviors

[Rerate your feelings after completing this worksheet.]

*--attend party & stay 2+ hours                      --focus mindfully on the conversation*  
*--greet 5+ new people                      --try to keep the conversations going*  
*--start 2 conversations                      for at least 15 minutes each*

# COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING WORKSHEET

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**SITUATION & DATE** event, circumstance or experiment (past, present or future) when you feel distressed or avoid

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**FEELINGS (intensity 0-100% before & after completing CRW)** emotions and physical sensations

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**HOT THOUGHTS (belief 0-100%)** your most distressing ideas, concerns, images, predictions &/or core beliefs

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**SAFETY-SEEKING BEHAVIORS** things you do or avoid to try to cope, including how you focus your attention

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**COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS** in your hot thoughts

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**CHALLENGING QUESTIONS** to debate your hot thoughts

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**CONSTRUCTIVE ATTITUDE (belief 0-100%)** a truer, compassionate & helpful alternative to your hot thoughts, predictions &/or core beliefs (including answers to your challenging questions)

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**Positive motivators** specific ways you expect to benefit (short- & long-term) by doing the experiment or action steps

Short version

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**BEHAVIORAL GOALS & ACTION STEPS** a more helpful alternative to your safety-seeking behaviors  
[Rerate your feelings after completing this worksheet.]

## COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

**ALL-OR-NOTHING / BLACK-OR WHITE / PERFECTIONISTIC THINKING:** You see things in black and white categories. There are no gray areas in between. If something is less than perfect, you see it as terrible or as a failure.

**OVERGENERALIZING:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern, or representing a character defect.

**MENTAL FILTERING:** When something is a mixture of negative and positive aspects, you dwell overwhelmingly on the negative details. Your view of the whole thing becomes negative as a result.

**DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:** You reject or belittle positive experience by insisting that it doesn't count for some reason.

**MIND READING:** You jump to the conclusion that someone is thinking or feeling negatively toward you. You're probably projecting your negative thoughts about yourself onto someone else.

**FORTUNE TELLING:** You jump to the conclusion that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact.

**MAGNIFYING & MINIMIZING:** You exaggerate the importance of some things (eg. your deficiencies or someone else's achievements), and you shrink other things down until they appear unimportant (eg. your desirable qualities or someone else's imperfections).

**CATASTROPHIZING:** You attribute extreme and horrible consequences to the outcomes of events.

**EMOTIONAL REASONING:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are in the external world. For example, you feel embarrassed or ashamed, so you assume you behaved poorly.

**SHOULD / MUSTS:** You have a strong and inflexible sense of the way that things should / must / have to / ought to be.

**LABELING:** Instead of describing a situation or behavior you don't like, you attach an all-encompassing and negative label to a whole person. For example: "I'm a loser;" or "He's selfish."

**PERSONALIZING:** You see negative events as indicative of something wrong with you, or as somehow your responsibility.

**SELF-DEFEATING THINKING:** Any thought that causes you needless pain or turmoil, or which makes it harder for you to get what you want. Such thoughts often lead to vicious cycles and self-fulfilling prophecies.

## CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

- → What's the *objective, concrete* evidence supporting or refuting my hot thoughts?
- → How likely is it that this bad thing would come to pass? How would I cope with it or overcome it if were to happen?
- → What's the WORST that could happen? What's the BEST that could happen? What's MOST LIKELY to happen?
- What would an impartial, independent observer think of this situation?
- What would I say to a friend who is thinking and feeling the way I am? What would a good friend say to me?
- What aspects of this situation are simply not in my control, no matter how much I worry about it? What are the advantages of *accepting* that these things are not in my control?
- Instead of simply worrying, what action steps can I take now to prevent or cope with problem that concerns me?
- What's the worst that could happen? How awful would that be compared to the worst thing I ever experienced?
- What are the advantages vs. disadvantages for me to believe or worry about this?
- What alternative explanation or possibility is there? What's the evidence for that alternative?
- How important is my concern? To what extent does my future really reside on this?
- How much will this matter to me one week / one month / six months / one year from now? Why will this change over time?
- If I were in his / her shoes, what are the possible reasons why I would have acted that way?
- Does \_\_\_\_\_'s opinion reflect that of everyone else? Could other people feel differently?
- Is an old button of mine is being pushed in this situation? How is that affecting my response to the present situation?
- What would be a more helpful way for me to think about this?

## HEAD-HELD-HIGH ASSERTION

### Fear-Come-True

*[Write the things you fear the most in social or performance situations that make you anxious. Be specific as to what you most fear will happen, and what you most fear people will say or do in reaction to you. Include anything you most fear, no matter how unlikely it is to occur.]*

*1 -I start blushing/sweating when mingling with new people at a social event, and someone tells me I look weird and weak.*

*2 -I say something stupid or incorrect during a conversation, and the other person gives me a weird look. I assume he/she thinks poorly of me and has lost respect for me.*

*3 -I unintentionally offend someone in a conversation, and s/he tells me how hurt and angry s/he is at me.*

*4 -Someone tells me that s/he thinks I'm boring, unappealing or unattractive, and so doesn't want to have anything to do with me.*

*5 -I appear nervous when speaking at a meeting and people tell me that must mean I don't know what I'm talking about and am not good at my job.*

*6 -I go blank when speaking at a meeting because I am so anxious. I can't continue speaking, and people start looking at me strangely. I presume they must be thinking poorly of me, and that they no longer respect me.*

### Head-Held-High

*[Write the specific ways you would like to handle your fears-come-true, including both what you would SAY and DO. Write out how you would like to assert yourself to the persons who criticize or otherwise react negatively toward you. Use a tone of confidence and conviction. Don't be defensive, overly apologetic or aggressive. Disarm the critics by starting your assertion with acknowledging any truth there may be in the criticism or other negative reaction, but minus any exaggeration or insult. Then stand up for yourself. Write it out even if you don't think you would have the nerve to say it, as long as you would want to.]*

*1 -It's true that I do blush and sweat easily when I'm uncomfortable. We all have quirks, and that happens to be mine. [Then continue the conversation.]*

*2 -It's true, that was a silly thing for me to say. I'm sorry about that. I'm just like everyone else in that I sometimes say silly things. Oh, well. Let's move on. [Then continue the conversation.]*

*3 -I apologize. I certainly didn't mean to offend you. I sometime make mistakes. [Then continue the conversation.]*

*4 -Oh, well. It's unfortunate that you don't find me to your liking. Fortunately, we all have different tastes and other people like me as I am. [Then move on and start a conversation with someone else.]*

*5 -It's true that I get nervous speaking in front of groups. Lot's of people do. But I happen to be very good at my job and have important things to say. [Then continue speaking at the meeting.]*

*6 -Excuse me. I'm afraid I just lost track of what I was saying. Oh, well. I'm going to go back to my previous point and continue from there. I'd appreciate your patience and attention. [Then continue speaking at the meeting.]*



## HEAD-HELD-HIGH ASSERTION

### Fear-Come-True

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### Head-Held-High

*[Write the specific ways you would like to handle your fears-come-true, including both what you would SAY and DO. Write out how you would like to assert yourself to the persons who criticize or otherwise react negatively toward you. Use a tone of confidence and conviction. Don't be defensive, overly apologetic or aggressive. Disarm the critics by starting your assertion with acknowledging any truth there may be in the criticism or other negative reaction, but minus any exaggeration or insult. Then stand up for yourself. Write it out even if you don't think you would have the nerve to say it, as long as you would want to.]*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## INVENTORY OF SELF-DEFEATING CORE BELIEFS

Please read all of the following core beliefs and put a check by the ones you believe much of the time, especially when you are anxious / depressed / insecure. **Make changes, if necessary, in the wording of these beliefs in order to improve the fit.** When you are done, go back and place additional checks by the 4 or 5 beliefs that seem to be most influential in your life.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I can't find happiness unless I'm very attractive / intelligent / rich / successful / creative.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. To be rejected is horrible because it means I'm worthless / undesirable / not good enough.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. People will think less of me if I make a mistake or don't handle something very well.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. My life is empty / meaningless if I'm not loved.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Taking even a small risk is foolish because the loss could be devastating.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. People like / respect me for what I do, not what I am.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I cannot be happy unless most people I know admire / approve of me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. If I ask for help it is a sign of weakness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I'm not a good / worthwhile / likable person if I don't completely meet my responsibilities & expectations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. If I fail at my work then I am a failure as a person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. If I cannot do something well there is little point in doing it at all.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. People who don't follow all the rules are bad / selfish.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. If someone criticizes or disagrees with me it indicates that s/he does not like me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. If I fail partly it is almost as bad as being a complete failure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. If other people knew what I was really like they will think less of me and probably reject me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. I have never learned how to meet people / make friends / make small talk / relate to people well.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. I must always be in control or there will likely be terrible consequences.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. If I let someone get too close that person will take away my control / freedom.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. My value as a person depends greatly on what others think of me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. It is weak / immature to not be in control of one's emotions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. It's terrible to hurt someone's feelings, and I should never do that.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. People who have good ideas are better than those who do not.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. There are only winners or losers in life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. I should never express anger or I will hurt someone or lose control.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 25. To be a good / moral / worthwhile person, I must help everyone I know who needs it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26. I don't measure up to others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 27. If someone does something displeasing to me it means that s/he doesn't like / care about me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 28. If I don't have other people to depend on I cannot cope / be happy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 29. It is wrong to be proud / boastful / rude / angry.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 30. I can't stand unpleasant feelings, and I should avoid situations that make me feel that way.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 31. It is dangerous to trust or get close to other people because they might hurt me badly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 32. If others dislike or are displeased with me I cannot be happy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 33. It is best to give up my own interests if necessary in order to please other people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 34. My happiness depends on other people and circumstances; I have little control over how happy I am.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 35. I need the approval of other people in order to be happy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 36. If I avoid problems the problems tend to go away.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 37. I am socially inept.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 38. I can't make good decisions on my own
- \_\_\_\_\_ 39. I cannot be happy if I am alone / single.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 40. I can't cope with difficulties in life without someone's help.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 41. If I am not special / among the best then I am not good enough.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 42. Rules are often arbitrary, unfair and stifling, and I shouldn't have to follow them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 43. If I don't have order / systems / control then everything will fall apart.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 44. I have been unfairly treated and I am entitled to get my fair share.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 45. I am a very special person compared to most other people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 46. It is wrong to be focused on pursuing pleasure / sexual gratification / selfish interests.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 47. In order to be happy others have to pay attention to me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 48. Don't feel too good about something that happens or it will just turn out bad and I'll get disappointed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 49. Other people will try to use / manipulate / hurt me if I don't watch out.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 50. I'm different from others and don't really fit in or belong.

# CORE BELIEF ACTION PLAN

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## UNHEALTHY OLD CORE BELIEFS (briefly stated)

*I'm fundamentally deficient.*

*If someone sees any of my deficiencies, s/he will not respect, like or love me.*

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## HEALTHY NEW CORE BELIEFS (briefly stated)

*I have strengths and weaknesses, just like everyone else.*

*People respect, like or love me for who I am and don't expect perfection, just like I value others despite their imperfections.*

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## RULES (dos & don'ts) DICTATED BY YOUR OLD CBs

- Don't go to social activities unless a few good friends will be there.*
- Don't initiate conversations with strangers, especially those I'm attracted to.*
- Don't join group conversations, or stay quiet when I am in groups.*
- Do script to make sure I have things to say.*
- Do avert eye contact, speak softly and speak briefly.*
- Do monitor my anxiety symptoms to try to hide them.*
- Do ask lots of questions to keep the focus on the other person.*
- Don't talk about myself, tell stories or assert myself.*
- Do end conversations early so I don't embarrass myself.*
- Don't speak up at meetings, or keep it very brief if I have to speak.*
- Do use fast-acting drugs (alcohol, benzos, beta blockers) to hide my symptoms.*

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## PERSONAL GOALS you want to make good progress on before ending therapy

- Meet new people and invite them out socially.*
- Make friends.*
- Date people I'm attracted to.*
- Give reports and presentations in meetings.*

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## EXPERIMENTS you want to do before ending therapy to REBEL against your old CBs or ACT AS IF you fully believe your new CBs (straightforward and paradoxical)

- Attend a group social activity each week, and initiate conversations with strangers (especially those I'm attracted to), and join group conversations with strangers.*
- Invite and go out with people as friends.*
- Invite out people I'm attracted to and go out on dates.*
- In all above conversations: no drugs/alcohol; focus mindfully on the conversation; reveal more about myself; speak expansively; have balanced conversations; tell stories; make more eye contact; speak louder; extend the conversations longer.*
- (Paradoxical) During some conversation, show anxiety symptoms or ask/say something stupid, then use brief HHH assertion, then continue the conversation.*
- Speak up more often and longer at staff meetings (without taking meds).*
- Give a presentation or speech at work or Toastmasters (without meds).*

# **CORE BELIEF ACTION PLAN**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**UNHEALTHY OLD CORE BELIEFS (briefly stated)**

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**HEALTHY NEW CORE BELIEFS (briefly stated)**

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**RULES (dos & don'ts) DICTATED BY YOUR OLD CBs**

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**PERSONAL GOALS you want to make good progress on before ending therapy**

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**EXPERIMENTS you want to do before ending therapy to REBEL against your old CBs or ACT AS IF you fully belief your new CBs (straightforward and paradoxical)**

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## Group or Individual CBT for Social Anxiety *Which is right for me?*

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is the most effective treatment for social anxiety according to a huge, recent meta-analysis of 101 individual studies involving some 13,000 participants. Individual CBT was demonstrated as more effective than: medications, self help, meditation, exercise, social skills training, exposure therapy, and talk therapy. That same meta-analysis revealed that individual CBT is a little more effective than group CBT for most people, but that group CBT is still more effective than other approaches.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that this meta-analysis contains a lot of individual variation: what is most effective for most people may not be what is most effective for you.

***So what is the most effective option for you?*** Having provided both individual and group CBT for more than a 1,000 socially anxious individuals in the past 30 years, and having conducted nearly 100 social anxiety CBT groups during this time, here is what I have seen: ***how much progress you make in CBT depends on how much therapy homework you do and how regularly you do it, regardless of whether you are in group or individual CBT.***

You choose this homework for yourself based on suggestions from me, or ideas of your own. The homework includes: completing worksheets (eg. for cognitive restructuring and core belief change work); practicing skills (eg. mindful focus and free associating rather than scripting); and above all, behavioral experiments (doing anxiety-provoking activities of your choosing, in gradual small steps, in which you practice what you are learning in session in real life settings.) ***The group requires a commitment to doing about one hour of worksheets weekly, and at least two hours of experiments weekly (ideally a little every day, when possible).***

Homework is just as important in individual CBT as in group CBT. Nevertheless, I have observed that some people do more homework more consistently in individual CBT, while other people do more in group. Please consider how the following factors apply to you:

1. ***In group, you have far, far less individualized attention than you do in individual sessions.*** In individual, you get 60 minutes of individualized attention. A typical group has 8 or 9 members, meets for 3 hours, and includes lots of activities. So you only get 10-20 minutes of individualized attention in group, although you have 180 minutes of learning.
2. Are you a self-starter? Group may be for you! If you have a strong history of avoiding things you find challenging, you will probably find individual CBT more effective. ***If, in your heart of hearts, you know it as unlikely that you will do most of your therapy homework most of the time—ideally a little homework every day—you will probably make more progress in individual CBT than in group.*** Reporting back to other group members weekly about the homework you have done—or have avoided doing—motivates some group members to be better about doing their homework. Big avoiders, however, tend to avoid even more in group because they get much less individualized attention there. Your therapist can spend much, much more time in individual CBT than in group helping you identify and overcome your roadblocks to doing therapy homework.

3. **Individual is a better choice over group if you have some other serious problem that would get in the way of regularly doing therapy homework**, eg.: debilitating depression; heavy alcohol/drug use (homework experiments must be done sober); personal crises; etc. Individual therapy can focus on whatever needs attention that week. In group, the focus is overwhelmingly social anxiety and other problems get little or no attention.
4. Group requires a commitment to attend the entire 20-weekly-session program, and to not miss more than two sessions. If you leave group early, you will have to pay the remaining tuition for the weeks you don't attend because you are still taking up a slot that no one else can fill after the first session. So, **do not join the group if you are uncertain you can or want to fulfill these attendance commitments**. Individual therapy only requires that you give 24 hours notice for any cancellation. You can stop attending at any time, and can move to every-other week sessions when you feel ready. You cannot do this in group.
5. On the other hand, group has a number of advantages:
  - Group sessions are less expensive than individual sessions. (If you pay monthly, group is \$260 per month, averaging \$65 per 3-hour session with 8 or 9 members. Individual is \$120 per 60-minute session. But remember, group requires a financial commitment to all 20 weeks. Individual only requires at least 24 hours notice for cancellations.)
  - In group, you will be able to identify with others who share similar problems, which will help you feel less different and less alone.
  - In group, you can support each other which feels good, and is also empowering.
  - In group, you can do some of your homework experiments with other members.
  - There are a great many in-session experiments that we do in group: role plays; many conversational activities; assertion practice; and field trips in which we speak to strangers in stores, bars and on the sidewalk together with other group members. These in-session experiments are much more limited in individual therapy because there are only two of us.
  - In group, you will be encouraged to socialize and make friends with other group members which will help you continue making progress after group is over.
  - You will probably feel more anxious in group. This is actually an advantage because it is a safe setting in which to learn to overcome your anxiety with others who feel like you do.

### **What do I do next?**

**IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING GROUP CBT:** send an email to me ([larrycohen@socialanxietyhelp.com](mailto:larrycohen@socialanxietyhelp.com)) in which you describe why you think group is a better choice for you. If you are unsure whether group or individual CBT is the better choice, include your reasons on both sides of this question. Refer to all of the five points above that are relevant to you.

If you are considering joining the social anxiety CBT group, **convince me in your email that you really will do your 2+ hours of self-chosen therapy homework weekly, and that you will usually resist the urge to avoid**. Tell me why any other problems you may have (eg. depression, alcohol & other drug use, situational stressors) won't get in the way of your attending regularly and doing group homework every week (and doing it sober).

I don't care about your writing quality at all, by the way; I just care about what you say! I suggest you write 100-300 words. **Make sure you send me your email statement at least a day before our individual assessment-orientation session**. Thank you!

--Larry Cohen, LICSW