Anxiety! At the Expo

Why we get social anxiety... and what to do about it

GAMING THE MIND

Gaming the Mind is a UK-based mental health charity (no. 1186983) run by mental health experts. Our aim is to improve mental health within the games community by increasing awareness and fighting stigma.

We're online at: www.gamingthemind.org

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Younger readers should read this booklet along with a parent, guardian, or trusted adult.

Do you feel overwhelmed in public spaces such as games conventions? Perhaps you think...

I'm scared to get into conversations... What if I have nothing interesting to say? What if I say something wrong?

Everyone looks so confident! They probably think I'm awkward and that I don't belong here... I just wanna be invisible!

Have you ever thought...

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* I feel so anxious in social
  situations!
* I'm really awkward interacting
  with people!
* It feels like everyone is
  looking down on me!
* People can see how worried I
  am!
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Thoughts that people will judge you, or that you may embarrass yourself, are common in **social anxiety**.

You may feel like you only have a few bad actions available to you in order to cope with the situation...
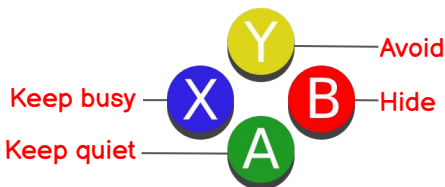
This leaflet can help you understand what **social anxiety** is, why it happens, and the first steps to dealing with it.

Because tackling these kind of thoughts can take a long time, and some people may need more help, we've also referenced additional resources that you may find helpful.

We've all experienced *some* shyness or nervousness in a social situation where people might observe or judge us... Like when going to a games expo.

What social situation makes you nervous?

✎

Social anxiety is more intense than shyness:

- You worry excessively that people will judge you negatively, either directly, or because they've noticed how anxious you are.

- It happens almost every time you are in that social situation, for many months.

- You end up either enduring the social situation with intense fear and anxiety, or avoiding the situation, entirely.

- Living this way causes you big problems. You might experience significant distress. You might experience a negative impact on your life, in terms of work, school, recreation, or relationships.

Social anxiety can affect people of any age or gender. Some people may be more susceptible to it, for various reasons:

Biological

It's normal to need to be social: we've evolved as social animals because it's safer in groups. So, we're coded to feel bad when social interactions aren't going well. But people with social anxiety are more sensitive to this than other people. That's partly related to genes: if someone in your family is socially anxious, it's more likely you will be, too.

Social

Some people with social anxiety may have gone through events such as bullying or abuse. This can have a lasting impact on how they react to social situations, so they may associate social interactions with danger. Indeed, any adversity or trauma can increase a person's susceptibility to mental health conditions.
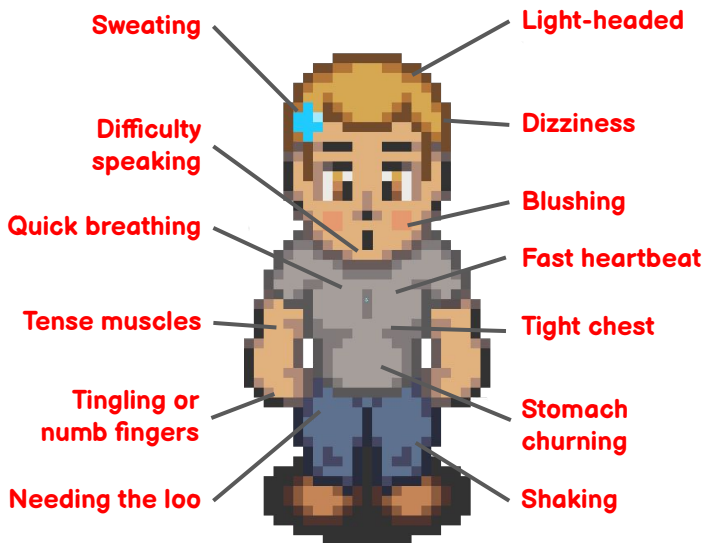
Psychological

We all develop different thinking patterns as we go through life. Some people will get into patterns that favour negative thoughts.

Having other mental health conditions such as **generalised anxiety disorder** or **depression** can also increase the negative thoughts you have.

But it is possible to adopt more helpful ways of thinking!

We get anxious when we feel **threatened**, and our body enters a state where we are ready to **fight** or **flee** the threat. A lot of physical symptoms of anxiety involve your body trying to get resources like blood and oxygen to your muscles, and away places like your digestive system…

- Sweating
- Light-headed
- Difficulty speaking
- Dizziness
- Quick breathing
- Blushing
- Fast heartbeat
- Tense muscles
- Tight chest
- Tingling or numb fingers
- Stomach churning
- Needing the loo
- Shaking

But in social anxiety there's no threat that requires you to **fight** or **flee**, so it's like you've taken an energy buff for no reason. As a popular tweet says: "Anxiety is like having boss music playing, but you can't see the boss".

All you're left with are physical symptoms that are distressing or feel embarrassing.

In an anxiety-provoking social situation, our rush of emotions can be so overwhelming, it's hard to know what's going on. Putting a name to our feelings can help us understand them. Circle the ones you experience...

Anxious
- Nervous
- Worried
- Scared
- Panicky

Embarrassed
- Silly
- Humiliated
- Self-conscious

Shame
- Remorse
- Guilt
- Wrong

Jealous
- Envious
- Resentful
- Scared
- Spiteful

Lonely
- Rejected
- Left out
- Abandoned
- Unwanted

Worthless
- Insecure
- Useless
- Fake
- Lousy

Sad
- Melancholy
- Unhappy
- Depressed
- Miserable

Angry
- Irritated
- Mad
- Annoyed
- Grumpy

Confused
- Overwhelmed
- Lost
- Puzzled
- Mixed-up

Disappointed
- Upset
- Discouraged
- Hurt
- Let down

Social anxiety will influence what you think, all throughout a social situation. While social situations really *can* be intimidating, our thoughts can make it feel like we're playing on hard mode. These thoughts are called **negative automatic thoughts** because they come into our minds even though we don't intend them to. Here's some examples…

Before an event:
- "I'm gonna be so bad at this"
- "I don't deserve to do this"
- "I'm so boring and awkward"
- "I'm going to embarrass myself…"

During an event:
- "Everyone's looking at me"
- "I don't know what to say"
- "Everyone thinks I'm so weird"
- "I'm sweating and everyone can see"

After an event:

Nobody likes me, now…

I'm such a poser…

Everyone could tell that I didn't belong there…

Going out was such a big mistake!

I can't stop thinking about that silly thing I said!
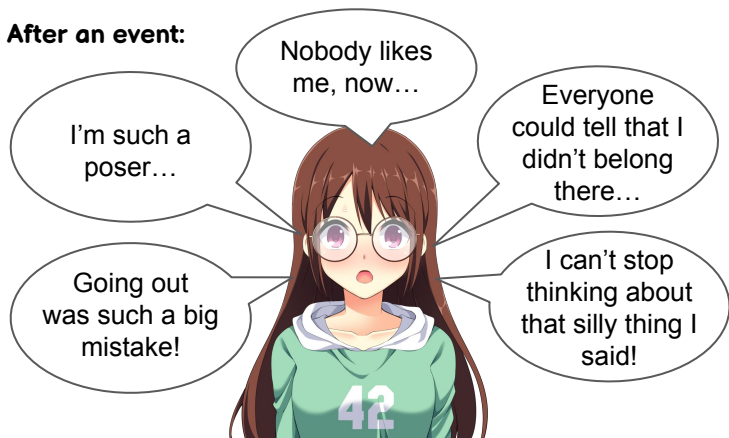
Ultimately, social anxiety influences how we act. It's like being in a roleplaying game but all the options we *want* to choose are unavailable.

Alex
"Hey, are you gonna come
to the games convention?"

You
"Well, uhh..."
Avoid the situation
☞ Go but leave as soon as you can
Go but try not to be noticed
Use alcohol or drugs for confidence
Go but hide where nobody can see you
Go but keep busy to avoid talking
Go but always stay close to Alex
~~Go and have fun!~~

These remaining actions are **safety behaviours** - they may help us cope with the social situation, but don't really help us enjoy it like we want to. Some behaviour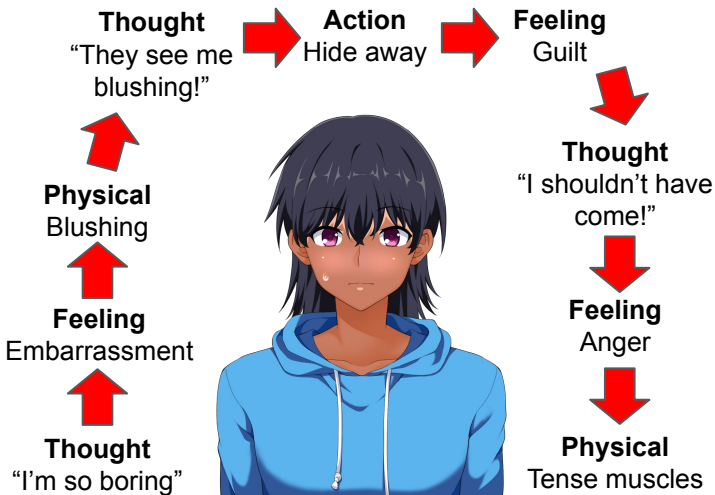s, like **avoidance**, can cause problems for our life and relationships because it stops us doing what we need to do. Coping with **drugs** and **alcohol** can harm your health and may lead to addiction.

Now you know the components of social anxiety, do you see how they can all make each other worse?

Thought
"They see me blushing!"

→ **Action**
Hide away

→ **Feeling**
Guilt

↓

Thought
"I shouldn't have come!"

↓

Feeling
Anger

↓

Physical
Tense muscles

Physical
Blushing

↑

Feeling
Embarrassment

↑

Thought
"I'm so boring"

And on, and on… our thoughts, feelings, sensations and actions all affect each other!

It doesn't help that social anxiety makes us very self-conscious. This increases our **self focus**, like we've put a spotlight on ourselves. Because we're so concentrated on ourselves, we'll more easily notice our own signs of social anxiety (like sweating), which makes us even *more* anxious.

We also worry that *other* people will notice our anxiety, too, even though they're not paying as much attention to us as we are to ourselves. See page 16 for tips to deal with this!

When we deal with an event by **avoiding** it or using other **safety behaviours**, that fuels our social anxiety, too!

Think of social anxiety as a tough boss in an RPG. The only way to beat it is to gain EXP and level up. You don't gain EXP by avoiding all battles!

Avoidance feels good because you don't have to deal with the problem. But it also means you never find out how well you *can* handle social situations, and so your **negative automatic thoughts** remain unchanged. Also, you won't get the practice you need to handle social situations better. And as long as you avoid them, social situations will just feel more and more daunting.

Didn't recieve EXP

Avoiding a situation is like running from battles: you don't get EXP for that!

Safety behaviours can help you cope in a social situation, but it's like gaining skill points for the wrong skills. You'll think you managed only because of your safety behaviours, and thus become reliant upon them. Also, your safety behaviours might fuel your **negative automatic thoughts** - for example, if you hide at a social event, nobody will be able to speak to you, but you might think it's because people find you boring.

SP
HIDE SKILL LEVEL UP!

Using safety behaviours will just make you better at using *those* behaviours. It's like training the wrong skills!

If your friend said "nobody likes me", even though that's how they really feel, you'd know they are wrong! Sometimes when we're anxious, our thoughts get glitched, and don't match what's really going on. And the glitched thoughts can make us even more anxious! Here's some examples.

Mind reading

You assume you know what people are thinking, and it's usually something bad!

Example: "My friend got distracted; they are so bored with this conversation."

Being the main character

You think everything that happens is to do with you... especially bad stuff!

Example: "Those people are laughing... I just know it's because I look weird."

Focusing on negatives

You ignore good things that happen and obsess over whatever was bad, instead.

Example: "I forgot the name of that game... they must think I'm such a poser!"

Labelling

If something bad happens, you give yourself a label, so that it defines who you are.

*Example: "They didn't text me back... I'm such a **loser**."*

Catastrophic thinking

You assume the worst possible outcome will happen.

Example: "They'll tell everyone how boring I am... my social life is over!"

All-or-nothing thinking

Things can't simply be "good enough". Anything short of perfect is a disaster.

Example: "They didn't laugh very hard at my joke... I am not funny at all."

Pay attention to your thoughts when you are anxious, so you can identify glitched thoughts.

What thoughts do you have while anxious?

The way to handle a glitch is by patching it. We can patch our glitched thoughts by asking a series of questions to see how much sense they make.

Consider the following glitched thought:

My friends are talking about Megaten Gaiden V. I haven't played it and have nothing to say... they must think I'm so boring!

By using careful questioning, we can patch this glitched thought and get to the truth!

Use these questions to patch the glitched thought!

1. Is there any evidence this thought is true?
"It's true that I don't know what to say about the game... but my friends haven't actually said that they think I'm boring."

2. Is there any evidence this thought is false?
"I don't always know what to say, but my friends haven't stopped hanging out with me..."
"My friends are still involving me in the conversation, even if I'm saying nothing."

3. Are there any glitches in this thought?
*"I'm **mind reading**. Assuming what my friends think, when I don't actually know if that's true."*
*"I'm **focusing on negatives**. I talk to my friends about lots of stuff, but I am worrying about the one time that I can't."*

4. If your friend was thinking the same thing, what would you tell them?
"Nobody has played every game; there's nothing wrong with that! It's fine to sit out of a conversation for a while."

5. What is everyone <u>actually</u> focusing on, besides you?
"I guess they're paying more attention to their conversation. They're not scrutinising how anxious I am."

6. What would be a less drastic outcome?
"Well, rather than them thinking I'm boring, they'll probably just move on to another topic where I'll join in. In all honesty, nobody will even remember this conversation by tomorrow!"

Turn off your spotlight!

When we pay too much attention to our own mind and body, instead of the situation we are in, this is **self focus**. It makes us easily notice our own signs of anxiety (such as blushing), which makes us even more anxious. Self focus can feel like a bright spotlight is shining upon us, so we worry other people will notice all the signs of anxiety that we are experiencing. But, in reality, people aren't paying as much attention to us as we are to ourselves.

Remember this advice for reducing self focus:

1. Try to pay more attention to what's happening around you, rather than your own body and thoughts.

2. It's not solely your job to keep a conversation going. Silences are normal!

3. While *you* may notice your symptoms of social anxiety, nobody *else* notices them as much as you do.

4. Even if someone notices you're anxious, that doesn't mean they dislike you. After all, you wouldn't dislike someone just because they were anxious!

5. Just like you're not always focusing on one person, you're not always the focus of other people's attention.

6. It's fine to be who you are. Nobody is perfect!

7. Don't try too hard to be entertaining. Life isn't like a film: nobody can have amazing conversations *all* the time!

If you immediately skipped to the final boss as soon as you started a game, you'd probably get wiped! It's the same with dealing with social anxiety: you shouldn't jump in at the deep end, as you might get overwhelmed and end up more anxious as a result.

Think about all the anxiety-provoking situations you want to handle more comfortably, and rank them in order of difficulty. Then you can tackle them in order, like progressing through a game:

LEVEL 1 – Eat in a cafeteria

LEVEL 2 – Make eye contact while ordering food

LEVEL 3 – Talk to a co-worker/schoolmate about my hobbies

...and so on, until...

LEVEL 9 – Attend a games expo

LEVEL 10 – Cosplay at a games expo?!

Your goals, and how you rank them, depends on you. The above are just examples! Handling easier tasks first will give you more confidence. Keep doing a level until you can do it with minimum anxiety. You might still have *some* anxiety, but it should be bearable. Then you can progress to the next level. Use the tips on the next page to help you!

Take everything level by level. Remember, the more you practice each level, the better you'll be at managing that situation, and the easier it will become.

If a level really is too overwhelming to deal with, see if you can adjust the challenge to something easier you can tackle first. For example, if a challenge is "cosplay at a games expo", maybe you could start by cosplaying with some friends until you're ready to dress as Cloud in a crowd.

Just try to keep at it! If you keep trying, you'll eventually reach your goal. Remember to reward yourself at each successful step: you earned it!

When you do experience social anxiety, try to keep a note of your **physical** reaction, **thoughts**, **feelings**, and **actions**, so you can understand what's happening.

Think about your **glitched thoughts** and see if you can patch them.

When in an anxiety-raising social situation, it's tempting to **avoid** it or use a **safety behaviour**. But if you stay in that situation for long enough, your anxiety will soon lessen. After all, your anxiety can't just keep climbing higher and higher - it has a level cap!

Think about what **safety behaviours** you are using, or if you are **avoiding** the situation. Instead of doing these things, which will only increase your anxiety, try using a relaxation technique to make the situation more bearable...

Try this breathing exercise when you feel anxiety. It might help you ride out the wave of anxiety till it feels better, so you can stay in the social situation for longer!

- You can do this standing, sitting, or laying down. Be as comfortable as you can. Have both feet resting on the ground, hip-width apart.

- Close your eyes, if you can. Imagine the scenery of your favourite outdoor place... or video game level!

- Place your hands on your belly. Breathe in gently and deeply so that your belly expands.

- Breathe out slowly. Feel the tension leave your body as your belly contracts.

- Continue breathing like this, steadily and regularly.

- Try to control your rate of breathing. It may help to count steadily to five with each breath in and out. You can pick a lower number if five is uncomfortable.

- Continue for 3 minutes, then open your eyes and breathe normally. Stop at any point if you feel discomfort.

Try practicing this every day for even more benefit! Set some time aside: perhaps as part of your morning chores!

Please Stay Until Midnight (by Miguel Condez)

JEFF

IF YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED WE UNDERSTAND IF YOU NEED TO GET SOME SPACE FROM PEOPLE AT THE PARTY

Press Enter to continue

Game set at a party. "*Give people attention so they don't think you are ignoring them, while getting the space you need to be able to deal with all of this.*"

Keep it Together (by Fenreliania)

Play as rats pretending to be human. Say the right things during conversations in order to pass by. But say the wrong things and your stress will increase.

Life is Strange: True Colors (by Deck Nine Games)

Main character Alex Chen has been noted to be socially anxious. She has trouble making eye contact, and is highly sensitive to how people around her feel and react.

I Can't Find The Words (by Michael Iantorno)

You must navigate a school, while looking for the principal. Your social anxiety makes you avoid certain paths and people. It also makes it hard to talk to others. But you'll find some people who are kind and supportive!

Agoraphobia (by Quaking Aspen)

A student struggles with social anxiety and panic while at college, and eventually seeks help and sees things in a new light.

Bird Problems (by Lithic Entertainment)

Narrative game about an "awkward and anxious canary trying to make friends", in which you navigate social interactions with other characters. Pictured: the main character practices what to say when ordering coffee.

VR therapy for social anxiety

Oxford VR is using virtual reality to help people with social anxiety work through anxiety-raising scenarios in the relative safety of a virtual environment.

Dungeons & Dragons (and other TTRPGs)

Many have commented on how D&D can be a way for people with social anxiety to practice social skills. They can roleplay as a character who is more confident, and it's safer to experiment with different approaches, because it's not the real world! Players have also found it useful for exploring different identities.
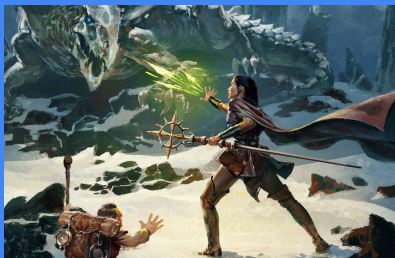
Join a gaming group!

Student Matthew Penn, who is autistic, wrote for the Rowan University Blog: "*If you have any kind of social anxiety, asking to join in a group of people playing a video game is a perfect starting point,*" calling it "*perfect for anyone looking to make some new friends.*"

Multiplayer games (like Sea of Thieves)

Writing for Windows Central, Miles Dompier describes Sea of Thieves as "social gaming", saying it can help people with social anxiety because it demands that you socialise to get the most out of it, and because the cooperative nature of the game creates productive interactions.

VTubing

VTubers stream with virtual avatars instead of their own image. This can allow them to act more confidently than they normally would, because they're taking on a character. Also, interacting online can be easier than in real life. "I know a lot of people that may have illnesses or anxiety... and VTubing has allowed them to express themselves", Nyatasha Nyanners (pictured) told Crunchyroll.

Dealing with social anxiety in MMORPGs

"Elinzia The Crafting Rogue" wrote a guide for Geek to Geek Media on dealing with social anxiety in World of Warcraft (pictured). They established four rules in order to enjoy the game:

1. Don't worry how others are playing the game
2. Experiment with more relaxing parts of the game when stressed
3. Don't lose track of time
4. Find a supportive guild

Many people have spoken out about dealing with anxiety at conventions.

Kaitlyn Lundy spoke to BBC News about managing anxiety at Comic-Con. She had been dealing with depression and anxiety for three years, and attended the convention with her service dog Lilo. While she still experienced the stress of large crowds, she felt having Lilo with her was like having someone telling her "Ignore them, focus on me", which helped. She said she will always experience anxiety, but gave this important advice: "Take time out for yourself, but connect with other people. We are like a family. I know what you're going through."

Jeff Sparkman wrote for CNET about coping with crowds at Comic-Con, describing how attending a convention can give him the physical anxiety symptoms of his heartbeat quickening, stomach dropping, and tingling sensations. He knew it would be easier to avoid going to Comic-Con, but he still wanted to have fun! He finds it easier meeting people if he has his friends with him, as he can let one of them start a conversation and then he can join in. He's made progress over years, no longer just dashing for the door at the sight of a packed room.

Sarah wrote on her blog Raiin Monkey about attending Comic-Con with anxiety disorder. She had a great time, despite her anxiety. "It was a great learning experience of how I can cope with stressful situations if I am really focused on getting through it," she said.

Check out these tips, collated from people who have attended conventions and dealt with anxiety themselves!

Plan ahead. Prepare your travel and accommodation early. Have your schedule planned, so you're set for the day.

Arrive early. This can help reduce waiting in queues. This will also give you plenty of time so that you don't feel in a rush.

Find the things you need. When you arrive, look around and know where the quiet areas are, as well as toilets and exits. It's better than having to search when you're in a pinch or feeling anxious.

Go with someone you trust. This not only can help with confidence, it can give you someone to focus on if things are overwhelming.

Try a relaxation technique. For example, the breathing exercise on page 19. This can help you ride out a wave of anxiety and carry on.

Take care of yourself. Sleep well the night before. Take breaks, give your legs a rest, eat healthy meals, and stay hydrated (carry water with you). Getting physically worn out can increase your stress, so treat yourself well!

Take time out, if needed. If you feel you've hit your limit, go outside and get some space and fresh air, or find a chillout area, to recharge your mental batteries. You can always come back later when you're ready.

Try cosplay. If you enjoy it and feel confident to do so, you may find that you feel less anxious when dressed as your favourite character, especially when other people are cosplaying, too.

Ease yourself in. You can start with a smaller convention, attend on quieter days, or go to smaller panels… You don't have to jump in at the deep end!

Always speak to a medical professional if you have concerns about your mental or physical health. If you have concerns regarding your immediate safety, please seek emergency medical attention.

NHS
Find out more about social anxiety from the NHS:
www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/social-anxiety

FRANK
Don't use drugs or alcohol to cope. If you are concerned about drug and alcohol use, talk to FRANK:
www.talktofrank.com

Anxiety UK
Support for people with anxiety disorders:
www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Audio relaxation guides
Audio tracks to help guide you through relaxation techniques. Download the files and take them with you.
www.cntw.nhs.uk/resource-library/relaxation-techniques

Samaritans
Whatever you're going through, Samaritans are here to listen.
www.samaritans.org
Call 116 123 for free (open at all times)

Childline
For under-19's, a free, private and confidential service where you can talk about anything.
www.childline.org.uk
Call 0800 1111 for free (open at all times)

We have more resources listed at:
www.gamingthemind.org/findhelp