Social attention experiment

Compare specific observations. A difference is useful information, not a demand to feel calm or certain.

Editable PDF: replace or delete the fictional examples. Blank PDF: print and write. Guidance follows.

Agreed conversations, participants and purpose

A: usual self-focus and habits

Attention, selected habits and prediction

Observations from the interaction

Participation / recall; anxiety 0 (none)-10 (most)

B: engaged attention; agreed habits reduced

Attention, selected habits and prediction

Observations from the interaction

Participation / recall; anxiety 0 (none)-10 (most)

What I learned / what is still uncertain

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Using this resource

Social attention experiment

What this helps with

Social anxiety can make you watch yourself while also trying to prevent signs of nervousness. This can use attention that would otherwise help you connect with the situation. A guided comparison lets you experience whether these strategies help or get in the way. You and your therapist plan two brief, similar interactions, changing attention and selected safety behaviours. The comparison explores their combined effect; it does not prove that any one habit causes all your anxiety.

How to use it

1. Agree two brief, similar conversations with your therapist and a willing participant.
2. Identify your usual self-focus and one or two safety behaviours. Predict their effects.
3. In the first interaction, notice the usual pattern without intensifying distress.
4. In the second, engage with the speaker and reduce the agreed habits. Do not force eye contact.
5. Compare engagement, what you remember and observable responses; discuss limitations and further practice.

A fictional worked example

With her therapist, Sara has two short chats about everyday interests with a consenting colleague. In the first she notices monitoring her voice and preparing each answer before the question ends. In the second she listens for the other person's meaning and allows a less rehearsed reply. She feels some nerves in both, but remembers more of the second conversation and asks a follow-up question. Her therapist helps her distinguish these observations from a new rule that she must focus outward perfectly. They note that the two conversations were not identical and agree to practise flexibly in another familiar setting.

Keep in mind

Use this as a therapist-guided exercise. Do not deliberately increase self-consciousness for a prolonged period or remove genuine access needs. Agree the participants and boundaries in advance. If the comparison becomes a performance test or causes marked distress, pause and review the method together.

Sources and attribution

Clark, D. M., & Wells, A. (1995). A cognitive model of social phobia. In Social phobia: Diagnosis, assessment, and treatment (pp. 69-93). Guilford Press.

NICE (2013). Social anxiety disorder: recognition, assessment and treatment (CG159).

Leigh, E., Chiu, K., & Clark, D. M. (2021). Self-focused attention and safety behaviours maintain social anxiety in adolescents: An experimental study. PLOS ONE.

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