Social anxiety experiment

Make a specific prediction and a fair test. Plan any safeguards before practice; record observations afterwards.

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

BEFORE PRACTICE

Situation / goal / prediction (0-100%)

e.g. If I ask a question, people will ignore me. Prediction 75%.

What I will change / support to keep

e.g. Ask one ordinary question; reduce rehearsing.

Keep useful support.

What I will observe / when to finish

e.g. Observe the actual reply once, then continue

the conversation.

AFTER PRACTICE - observations and learning

What happened: facts rather than guesses

e.g. A colleague answered and asked me a question.

Learning / uncertainty / prediction now

e.g. Being ignored did not happen this time.

Prediction now 50%.

Next step

e.g. Repeat in another suitable conversation.

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Using this resource

Social anxiety experiment

What this helps with

A thought such as 'Everyone will think I am awkward' is difficult to test because you cannot read minds. A behavioural experiment narrows it to something observable and explores what happens when you change a habit that keeps anxiety going. The purpose is learning, not earning a perfect reaction. An ordinary pause or a mixed response can still help you find out whether you can participate and respond flexibly without all your usual precautions.

How to use it

1. Choose a safe interaction connected to something you want to do.
2. Specify an observable prediction and estimate its likelihood from 0-100%.
3. Choose one anxiety-related precaution to reduce, keeping genuine safety and communication needs.
4. Agree what you will observe, then take part without repeatedly checking your performance.
5. Record facts, any uncertainty and a practical next test. Re-rate the original prediction.

A fictional worked example

Owen predicts an 80% chance that asking a question in a small training group will make people laugh and the trainer dismiss him. He usually keeps quiet or apologises repeatedly. He plans to ask one relevant question without a long apology, then listen to the answer. The trainer answers; another person says they were wondering the same thing. Owen still feels hot and notices one person looking away, whose reason he does not know. He records both facts rather than guessing. He lowers his prediction to 40% and plans another question at the next session, allowing for different responses.

Keep in mind

Choose ordinary, respectful interactions. Do not disclose private information, break workplace rules or deliberately provoke people to test a belief. Keep disability accommodations. If the situation involves harassment, coercion or significant risk, discuss support and protection rather than treating it as an experiment.

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).

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