



I have social anxiety but still want to socialise

If fears and worries around social situations prevent you from stepping out of your comfort zone, then try these simple steps.

No one wants to feel left out, so when you're invited to an event but you have social anxiety, it feels like a Catch-22.

You want to go and have fun, but being around all those people makes your heart race and your palms sweat. If you've been feeling nervous or anxious, don't worry because you're not alone! It's completely normal to feel this way.

After all, social anxiety is the fear of how others judge and perceive us, which everyone thinks about to some extent. However, if your fears and worries make you think twice about attending social events or preventing you from enjoying them, here are a few things to keep in mind.

Avoidance isn't the answer

Avoidance is a normal reaction to anxiety, but it certainly doesn't help. If you've had a bad experience, it might be tempting to avoid social events altogether. Still, research shows that avoidance strategies tend to have the opposite effect by increasing social anxiety. Try to remind

yourself that even if you experience some anxiety about attending an event, the positive benefits of socialising will outweigh the negative feelings caused by your anxiety. For example, a psychology study found that even people diagnosed with social anxiety disorder were happier when they were socialising compared with being alone. Connecting and interacting with others is incredibly important for our mental well-being. Having higher well-being also helps decrease anxiety.

Start small

While it's not helpful to say no to every invitation, it's also not a good idea to jump into big social situations while experiencing anxiety. If you try and take on too much too soon, this could be overwhelming and increase your anxiety. Instead, start small and gradually expose yourself by getting accustomed to socialising with smaller groups of people before attending a large event.

Choose situations where you feel comfortable and safe, and slowly work your way up to bigger activities as you build your confidence. Professor

Jennifer Casarella recommends building your confidence through activities like going for group meals in restaurants with friends or family, saying hello to people you pass by on the street, or making small talk next time you're out shopping.

Turn anxiety into excitement

Many people with social anxiety worry that they might say or do something embarrassing in social situations or that their minds will go blank and they won't have anything to say. Fortunately, feelings of anxiety and excitement are very similar physically. By reframing our mindset, we can help to turn these negative fears and worries into positive anticipation.

Allowing your mind to shift focus from worrying about the impression you'll make on others to focusing on the positive aspects of the event simply takes a little planning beforehand. Try making a list of why you're looking forward to this event and who you're excited to talk to. Secondly, prepare a list of questions you might want to ask them, about their family, job or maybe a holiday they've been on recently. Instead of making small talk, practice asking open-ended about their opinions and experiences.

Having these conversation starters prepared in advance will help you build positive expectations and excitement about connecting with people again and reduce the fears and worries about saying the wrong thing or not knowing what to say.

Avoid using alcohol to cope

Although having a drink can feel like a quick fix to calm your nerves, substances like alcohol can make social anxiety worse in the long term. Research shows that even drinking regular amounts of alcohol is associated with increased anxiety, bad moods and disrupted sleep. Additionally, socially anxious people seem to be particularly vulnerable to these harmful effects.

Consuming alcohol can also make you feel less in tune with your surroundings. It affects your ability to connect naturally with others, making you feel more anxious about interacting with people. Relying on alcohol to help you socialise at events can also lead to dependence.

Eventually, you might feel unable to socialise without alcohol or drinking more to achieve the same effect. However, you can still enjoy drinking without using alcohol as a coping mechanism. Healthline recommends adopting a mindful drinking approach at social events. You stop and pause before each new drink and ask yourself whether it supports you.

Pace yourself

When you have social anxiety, it's essential to pace yourself and give yourself time to rest after events or new social situations. Social anxiety causes your brain to experience a heightened sense of fear, telling your body to operate in a state of high alert. This means you'll expend more mental and physical energy both in the lead up to the event and while you're there, leaving you feeling exhausted and overwhelmed the next day.

Psychiatrist Dr Jonathan Garabette often tells his patients with social anxiety to plan a rest day after a big event. He advises them not to plan any social activities and instead focus on doing activities they find soothing and relaxing. Our brains take time to adjust and get comfortable with new changes and environments. If you've pushed yourself out of your comfort zone, take some time off to reward yourself and recharge your social batteries.

Key points to remember

Many people experience anxiety about attending social events, but that doesn't mean you have to miss out. Instead of avoiding social events, start small to build your confidence and gradually work on your more significant fears. Limit alcohol while socialising and take time to rest in-between social settings. This will also help prevent social exhaustion and stop you from feeling drained. Most importantly, be kind to yourself!

Contact us

Social anxiety can make it tough to socialise, but there are ways to make it easier. If you're struggling with social anxiety, don't hesitate to reach out for help. The counsellors at Validium are experts in helping people with social anxiety learn how to manage their symptoms and enjoy socialising again. Contact us today for a free consultation – we'd be happy to chat with you about how we can help.

