

Anxiety and Your Mind ^[1]

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How Does It Really Work?

Now that we know all about the common signs and symptoms of social anxiety, it's time to take another step into the depths of our mind. To be more specific, we're going to see how anxiety is triggered and maintained by our own faulty thinking. Yes, you heard that right! Social anxiety is the result of our own negative thoughts.

Through our fears and worries, we've created and fed this 'monster' - social anxiety, which is now bringing pain and suffering into our lives. It's actually a pretty simple vicious circle. Social anxiety impairs your ability to perform well in social contexts. A poor social performance will intensify your anxiety and determine you to avoid certain situations. Basically, anxiety fuels anxiety and this entire process is mediated by a series of negative thoughts. Let's take a look at the 3 basic cognitive mechanisms that are responsible for your poor social performance.

Automatic Negative Thoughts

Also known as ANTs, these thoughts seem to appear out of the blue. Next time you feel anxious about eating in public or speaking in front of a group, pay attention to the first thoughts that pop into your head. Those are the ANTs that usually disturb our mood, making us feel anxious, worried, troubled or simply 'stuck'. The way each person faces a challenge depends on how they perceive their own ability to cope with that situation. This is exactly where ANTs hit you! When you walk in front of the group and you're just starting a presentation, a thought suddenly appears in your head. It could be something like 'OMG everybody is looking at me'. Then comes the next one 'They all look so serious.' which is followed by another one 'What if they ask me questions that I don't have answers for'.

Automatic Negative Thoughts Come in Heaps

What you need to understand is that automatic negative thoughts are like a swarm of bees. One is harmless, but a 100 can cause serious damage. This is the main reason why most experts recommend the 'Stop and refocus' technique. In other words, these ANTs are complete nonsense, but we don't see that because our conscience is clouded by them. If you stop and focus on one thought at a time, you'll see that it's completely illogical. Eventually, that thought disappears along with the next one, leaving room for a much needed boost of confidence.

Dysfunctional Schemas

ANTs are just the tip of the iceberg. Dig deeper and you'll find the 'creators' of negative thoughts. Dysfunctional schemas act like filters. Every piece of information is passed through them. If the filter is broken, it will expel 'garbage'. If you live with the impression that 'everyone will laugh at you' (dysfunctional schema), your mind will look for evidence to support this theory. This is the reason why when you speak in front of an audience and two people are whispering and giggling, you get the impression that they're laughing at you. Next thing you know, your mind is 'flooded' with ANTs. 'They're laughing at me', 'Maybe I said something wrong', 'They know that I'm anxious'. These are just some examples of ANTs that could be the result of the upper mentioned dysfunctional schema.

Replacing Dysfunctional Schemas with Healthy Ones

The worst thing about dysfunctional schemas is that the more you use them, the stronger they get. Unfortunately, there aren't any quick fixes for this issue, but if you learn the basics of rational thinking and thought challenging (the main focus of our upcoming articles), you'll eventually replace them with new, healthy schemas.

Core Cognitions

As you might have guessed, core cognitions are the 'centerpiece' of your anxiety. These thoughts are deeply embedded into your conscience. Maybe you don't know it yet, but your mind perceives them as absolute truths and that's why they're so hard (but not impossible) to change. Core cognitions are 'old structures' that probably came to existence during childhood, under the influence of our family members and other significant figures.

Core Cognitions in Real Life

For example, if your parents repeatedly told you that you're not good enough, you'll eventually integrate this statement, turning it into an absolute truth. When you grow up, thinking that 'you're not good enough' will prevent you from asking a girl out, standing up to your boss or even riding a bike in public spaces.

All the automatic negative thoughts and dysfunctional schemas boil down to this one, single thought.

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