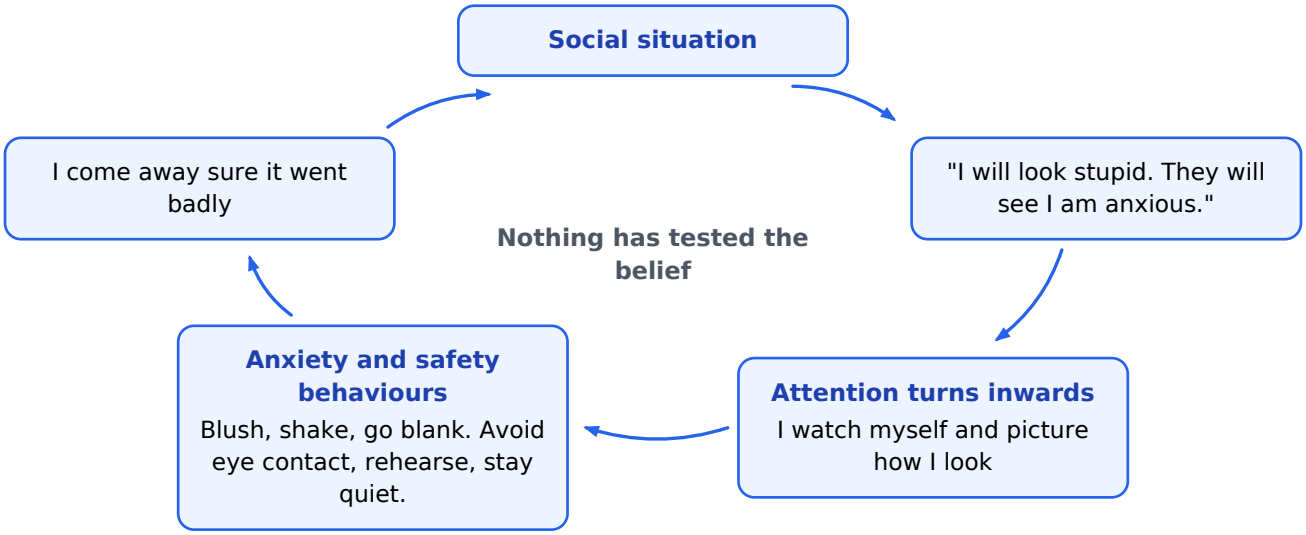
Understanding social anxiety

A fear of being judged by other people, and what keeps it going.

Social anxiety is an intense fear of doing or saying something that will lead to embarrassment, rejection or being thought badly of. It can show up in conversations, meetings, eating in front of others, phone calls, or simply walking into a room.

What happens in a social situation



Three things that keep it going

Self-focus
Attention goes on to yourself. You miss the smiles and nods that show it is going fine, and take your feelings as proof of how you look.

Safety behaviours
Things you do to avoid disaster. They can make you seem distant or tense, and stop you learning that you would have been fine without them.

Before and after
Dreading the event for days, then replaying it afterwards and picking out every flaw.

What people with social anxiety usually discover

- Anxiety is far less visible than it feels. A blush that feels obvious is barely noticed.
- Other people are mostly thinking about themselves.
- Small slips (losing your thread, a pause, a shaky hand) are common and quickly forgotten.
- People are warmer and less critical than the anxious mind predicts.

How therapy helps
We find out what you fear will happen, then test it: dropping safety behaviours, turning attention outwards, and comparing what you believe you look like with what is actually there.

Draws on the cognitive model of social anxiety developed by David M. Clark and Adrian Wells.

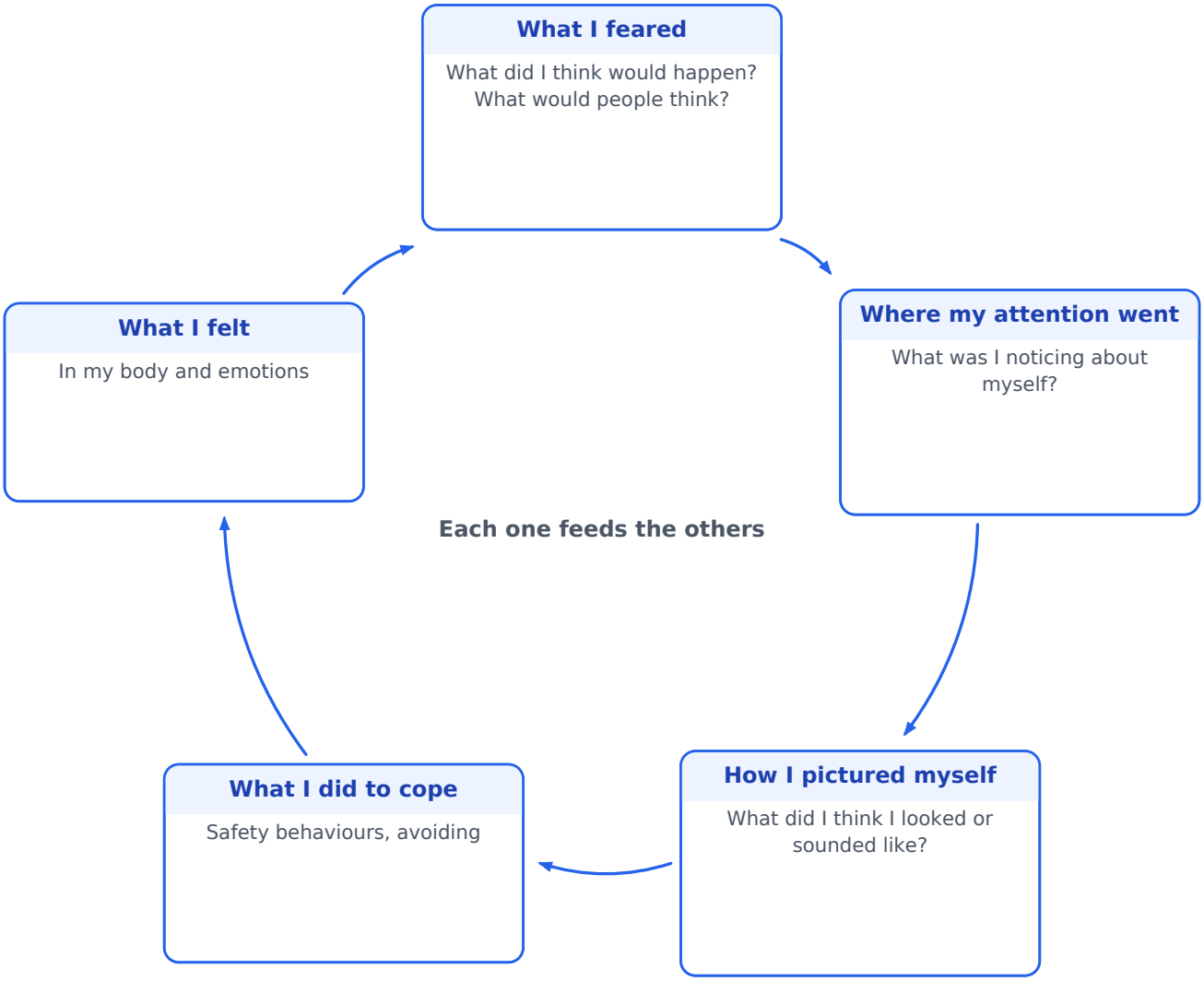
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My social anxiety map

Map a recent situation where you felt anxious around people.

Name _____ Date _____

The situation



What did I notice about the other people? (If the answer is "not much", that is useful to know.)

What did I tell myself afterwards? Was it a fair account?

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Safety behaviours in social situations

The small things you do to get through, and what they cost.

Name _____ Date _____

Tick what you do. Most people are surprised by how many there are.

To avoid attention

- [ ] Stay quiet or say very little
- [ ] Stand at the edge of the group
- [ ] Avoid eye contact
- [ ] Keep my head down or look at my phone
- [ ] Let others do the talking
- [ ] Leave early or arrive late

To control how I come across

- [ ] Rehearse sentences before I say them
- [ ] Check afterwards that I said it right
- [ ] Speak quickly to get it over with
- [ ] Plan topics and questions in advance
- [ ] Agree with everyone
- [ ] Try to be funny or interesting all the time

To hide signs of anxiety

- [ ] Wear make-up or clothes to hide blushing or sweat
- [ ] Grip a glass or keep hands in pockets
- [ ] Keep my arms close to my body
- [ ] Hold on to something
- [ ] Use alcohol to loosen up
- [ ] Sit down or lean on something

My main safety behaviours	What I fear would happen without it	How it might backfire
Rehearsing what to say	*I would dry up and look stupid*	*I miss what is being said and seem distracted*

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The spotlight effect

People notice and remember far less about us than we think.

When we feel self-conscious, it seems as if a spotlight is following us around. Every stumble, blush or awkward pause feels lit up for all to see.

Psychologists have tested this. In one well-known set of studies, students were asked to walk into a room wearing an embarrassing T-shirt. They guessed that about half the people there would notice it. In fact only around a quarter did.

Why we get it wrong

- **We assume our feelings show.** We know every detail of how we feel, and assume other people can see it.
- **Nerves are hard to see.** Nerves that feel obvious from the inside are mostly invisible from the outside.
- **Other people are thinking about themselves.** Most people in the room are busy wondering how they are coming across.
- **People forget.** Even when something is noticed, it is rarely remembered for long.

Check it against your own experience

Think of the last gathering you were at. What can you remember about what other people wore, said wrong, or did awkwardly?

When someone else blushes or loses their words, what do you think of them?

An experiment

This week, deliberately do one small thing you fear would draw attention. Wear something slightly different, ask a question in a meeting, or pause mid-sentence. Count how many people react.

What I found

The T-shirt studies were carried out by Thomas Gilovich and colleagues (2000).

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Shifting your attention outwards

Practice in moving your attention from yourself to what is around you.

When you are anxious, attention turns inwards: to your heartbeat, your thoughts, how you are coming across. The more you watch yourself, the worse you feel and the less you take in of what is really happening around you.

Attention is like a torch. You can learn to point it where you choose.

Practice 1: sounds (5 minutes, at home)

1. Sit quietly. Pick one sound and give it your full attention for a minute.
2. Switch to another sound, perhaps further away. Stay with it for a minute.
3. Move between three or four sounds, one at a time.
4. Finally, open your attention wide and take in all the sounds at once.

Practice 2: everyday tasks

Choose something ordinary: washing up, a shower, a walk. Put your attention fully on the task. What can you see, hear, feel and smell? Each time your attention slides back to yourself or your worries, notice it and return to the task.

Practice 3: with people

In a conversation, focus on the other person. What exactly are they saying? What colour are their eyes? What is their mood? When you catch yourself checking how you are doing, turn the torch back to them.

When	What I practised	Where my attention went	How well could I bring it back? (0 to 10)

Your mind will wander back to you many times. That is expected. Noticing and returning is the exercise.

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Social experiments

Ideas for testing your fears, from small to bold.

Name _____ Date _____

The aim of a social experiment is to find out what really happens, not to perform well. Choose things that test your own particular fear.

Ideas

- [ ] Say hello to a neighbour
- [ ] Ask a shop assistant a question
- [ ] Make a phone call instead of texting
- [ ] Give an opinion in a group
- [ ] Ask a question in a meeting
- [ ] Eat or drink in front of others
- [ ] Start a chat with someone I do not know
- [ ] Disagree politely with someone
- [ ] Leave a pause without filling it
- [ ] Say "I do not know"
- [ ] Let my hand shake without hiding it
- [ ] Stumble over a word on purpose

The experiment	What I predict	What happened	What I learned

Do each one without your usual safety behaviours, and keep your attention on the other person and the surroundings.

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How I think I look, and how I look

Compare the picture in your head with the evidence.

Name _____ Date _____

In social anxiety, the picture you have of yourself is built from feelings, not from what others see. This experiment checks the picture. Record yourself (a short talk to camera, or a conversation with my help in session), then follow the steps.

Before watching

How do I think I came across? Describe what I expect to see.

What I expect to see	How strong (0 to 10)
Shaking hands	*8*

Watching

Watch as if it were a stranger. Look at the whole person, not just the feared signs. Then rate what is actually visible.

What I expected	What I actually saw (0 to 10)

What else did I notice about this person?

What does this tell me about the picture I carry in my head?

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Before, during and after

One social situation, looked at in three parts.

Name _____ Date _____

The situation

Before

What I predicted would happen

What I did to prepare or avoid

Anxiety beforehand

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

None — Extreme

During

Where my attention was

On myself, on the task, on other people?

Safety behaviours I used

Anxiety at its highest

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

None — Extreme

After

What my mind said afterwards

The replay

What actually happened, as a bystander would describe it

What I would like to try differently next time

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After the event: stopping the replay

Why going over it again and again makes it look worse than it was.

After a social situation, the anxious mind runs a post-mortem. It replays the event, searches for mistakes, and usually finds some. By the end, an ordinary conversation has become a disaster in memory.

Why the replay cannot be trusted

- It is based on how you felt, not on what happened. Feeling awkward gets remembered as looking awkward.
- It picks out the worst moments. The parts that went fine are left out.
- You were watching yourself at the time, so you have very little information about how others reacted.
- Each replay adds detail that was never there.

Stepping out of it

1. **Notice the replay has started.** "I am doing a post-mortem."
2. **Ask what it is for.** Is it helping me solve anything, or just making me feel worse?
3. **Do one fair review, in writing, then stop.** Use the boxes below.
4. **Move your attention.** Do something that takes concentration. When the replay returns, label it and come back.

Facts	What went fine, or even well
What a camera would have recorded	

If a friend described this evening to me, what would I say to them?

What I will take from it. One line, then leave it.

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My rules about social situations

The hidden standards you hold yourself to with other people.

Name _____ Date _____

Many people with social anxiety hold very high standards for how they must come across. Tick any that feel familiar.

- [ ] I must always have something interesting to say
- [ ] I must never look anxious
- [ ] If I blush, people will think I am weak
- [ ] If there is a silence, it is my fault
- [ ] If someone disagrees with me, they dislike me
- [ ] If I make a mistake, people will remember it
- [ ] I must be liked by everyone
- [ ] If people really knew me, they would not like me

My strongest rule

Do I expect this of other people?

What do I think when someone else is quiet, blushes or stumbles?

Where did I learn this rule?

A fairer version I could live by

One way to test the new version this week

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