

3 Mistakes to Avoid ^[1]

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Each person experiences social anxiety in his/her own way. We never know what kind of logic errors might interfere with a person's thoughts. However, there are some predictable patterns. For instance socially anxious individuals are usually vulnerable to 3 logic errors: generalizations, dichotomous thinking and mind reading.

We call them 'the 3 critical mistakes' because these fallacies are actually the dysfunctional schemas that give rise to negative thoughts. Although most people with social anxiety are affected by these 3 mistakes, try not to take it as a general rule. There may be other logical errors that can cause and maintain your social anxiety. This is the main reason why we put so much emphasis on keeping a journal and challenging your negative thoughts. In this article, we're going to challenge 'the 3 critical mistakes' responsible for your social anxiety.

1. Generalizations

You might not know this but your brain runs on generalizations. Basically, each and every piece of new information is carefully categorized and 'labelled'. That's how the brain maintains a high level of functionality with minimal effort. This mechanism evolved thousands of years ago and back then it was extremely adaptive. For example, our ancestors knew that animals with large fangs posed a serious threat so whenever they encountered an animal that possessed this trait, they would immediately stand 'on guard'.

Generalization and the Modern World

Since then, our world went through major changes. Things are a lot more complicated these days which means that generalizations are no longer reliable. People who suffer from social anxiety often use generalizations to 'reinforce' their dysfunctional schemas. For example, one negative comment during their public presentation is enough to trigger the 'Everyone hates me' schema. Unfortunately, the same principle doesn't apply to positive comments because those of us who deal with social anxiety are primarily focused on the 'negatives'.

What to Do About Generalization?

The best strategy is to simply eliminate this 'broken tool'. Consider this, there are 7 billion different people on this planet. Just because 100 or even 1000 of them manifest a certain behavior, is still not enough data to conclude that everyone behaves the same way in certain situations. In addition, when you label someone as 'mean' or 'scary', you'll involuntarily adjust

your behavior according to this assumption.

2. Dichotomous Thinking (or Black and White Thinking)

Black and white thinking is often described as 'primitive', 'rigid' and 'inflexible'. This thinking tool is also linked to our brain's tendency to label and categorize everything. Unlike generalizations, dichotomous thinking simply divides everything in two categories, for example: smart-stupid, perfect-flawed, wrong-right, etc.

Dichotomous Thinking and Social Anxiety

Those of us who struggle with social anxiety, often think in terms of complete failure or total success. We don't take into account the large number of possibilities that are somewhere in between 'total success' and 'complete failure'. It's either an absolutely successful presentation or 'no' presentation. Unfortunately for us, the solution to most of our daily struggles is somewhere in the middle. There's a little bit of good and bad in everything. A public presentation can be great, but never perfect. A romantic date with the boy/girl of your dreams can go wrong, but it's never an absolute failure (At least you tried!).

Consider Your Perfectionism

In order to eliminate this flawed strategy, you need to take care of your perfectionism because that's where it usually starts. Whenever you deal with a public presentation, date or any other social event, instead of aiming for the highest performance, try to settle for a decent performance.

3. Mind Reading

This basic dysfunctional schema gives you the 'ability' to draw conclusions without having any actual proof. In real life situations, mind reading usually sounds a bit like this: 'People think that I'm ...' or even 'My co-workers believe that I'm ... although they never told me.' Just because we deal with these irrational thoughts, it doesn't mean that others think the same way about us. For those who struggle with social anxiety, mind reading is particularly disturbing because it prevents them from even attempting to interact with other people.

What Do You Know and What Do You Think You Know?

Why should we interact with others when we already know how they perceive us? That's just an illusion, because we don't actually know their opinion. Assumptions turn us into 'bystanders'. Moreover, the assumptions that are generated by mind reading can lead to false beliefs about other people.

What Should You Do Then?

If you think your boss hates you, this untested, unverified opinion will lead you to believe that he's a mean person. In order to eliminate mind reading, here's what you have to do: 1) If you want to know other people's opinions, just ask them; 2) Accept the fact that you cannot be loved and appreciated by everyone.

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