How to Make a Good First Impression When Socially Anxious

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Abstract

Making a good first impression is integral to forming and maintaining relationships, which affect nearly every aspect of one's life. Whether interviewing for a job or meeting a partner's friends and family, making positive first impressions can significantly improve one's quality of life. Research shows that social anxiety impedes a person's ability to make a good first impression. Wherein appearing anxious (i.e., tense, fidgeting, unstable vocal pitch) can cause a person to come across as less desirable, more submissive, detached, and less expressive. Social anxiety also contributes to one's negative interpretation of their impressions on others, further perpetuating this fear. However, there are specific strategies that can help people conquer social anxiety and make better first impressions. By creating self-distance (e.g., non-first-person self-talk, reflecting as if watching a stranger), focusing on others (e.g., learning about others, performing acts of kindness), and increasing self-expression, one can decrease social anxiety and make better first impressions.

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Andy just got hired at a new job and is getting ready for their first day. They have previously worked in a position like this and feel competent in their abilities. However, when Andy arrives, they find themself feeling nervous. Their voice sounds shakier than usual, they cannot stop fidgeting, and they are having trouble finding the right thing to say. The way Andy is presenting themself does not match with the competent worker they are. Andy is worried that their new co-workers will not perceive them positively. How can Andy conquer these invasive feelings and make a good first impression?

Andy is experiencing social anxiety: an emotional state characterized by a fear of being perceived poorly by others (Leary et al., 1988; Schlenker & Leary, 1985). High social anxiety is associated with increased nervousness and negative expectations about anxiety-provoking social situations (Harvey et al., 2000). Andy is not worried because they are incompetent but because it is essential that their new co-workers like them. Most people experience social anxiety since making and maintaining relationships is vital for quality of life (e.g., social support network, career success).

Social Anxiety and First Impressions

People with high (vs. low) social anxiety are perceived less accurately and less positively (Aiken et al., 2014; Bielak et al., 2018; Kross et al., 2014; Plasencia et al., 2016; Pontari & Glenn, 2012; Voncken & Dijk, 2013). People who appeared anxious (i.e., tense, fidgeting, uncertain vocal tone) were viewed as less desirable than people who appeared confident (i.e., relaxed,

animated, clear vocal tone; Bielak et al., 2018). When anxious, people are more likely to fidget, appear uncoordinated, make less eye contact, speak less, speak at an inconsistent pace, and speak with an unstable vocal pitch (Burgoon & Koper, 1984; Schlenker & Leary, 1985). Perceivers pick up on these anxious cues and view visibly anxious people as more submissive, detached, less credible, and less expressive (Burgoon & Koper, 1984).

Social anxiety leads to a protective style of self-presentation rather than an acquisitive style (Plasencia et al., 2016; Schlenker & Leary, 1985). A protective style focuses on preventing negative evaluation, whereas an acquisitive style focuses on obtaining social approval (Plasencia et al., 2016; Schlenker & Leary, 1985). When one is overly concerned with protecting themself (i.e., protective self-presentation), they are less likely to disclose information about themself for fear of being judged negatively (Plasencia et al., 2016; Schlenker & Leary, 1985). Expressiveness is critical in being perceived accurately and positively. Accurate impressions can only be made when a target expresses relevant cues to their personality (Funder, 2012).

It is not easy to get to know someone when they do not express themselves. Being perceived according to one's unique combination of personality traits is differential accuracy (Aiken et al., 2014; Human et al., 2014; Human et al., 2019). People are perceived with more differential accuracy when they are well-adjusted (i.e., high self-esteem and satisfaction with life; Human et al., 2019). High social anxiety leads to being seen with less differential accuracy (Aiken et al., 2014). Although being viewed with less differential accuracy does not mean a person is automatically disliked, differential accuracy is essential for developing relationships (Aiken et al., 2014; Human et al., 2012).

When people are socially anxious, they also perceive their impressions as less favorable (Leary et al., 1988; Tissera et al., 2020). Those high (vs. low) in social anxiety perceived themselves as making a worse impression after an interaction as minimal as being glanced at by a stranger (Leary et al., 1988). When people feel anxious, they are more likely to perceive others as threatening, even when their anxiety is not caused by that person (i.e., a stressful anagram task; Curtis & Locke, 2007). A highly socially anxious person may interpret an otherwise average interaction as overly negative if the social information they receive is ambiguous (i.e., not overly positive).

Self Perpetuating Interpersonal Cycle

Social anxiety is maintained through a self-perpetuating interpersonal cycle. The self-perpetuating interpersonal cycle begins after a negative social interaction, leading to further negative expectations about similar interactions and avoidance of those situations whenever possible (Alden & Taylor, 2004). Suppose Andy runs into a co-worker in the break room who asks them about their previous work experience. Andy stumbles over their words as they try to sound competent. Their co-worker appears confused and quickly ends the conversation. Andy becomes even more concerned about being evaluated poorly and starts eating alone at their cubicle.

This self-perpetuated interpersonal cycle illustrates what happens when social anxiety goes uncorrected. At the interaction stage, anxious cues lead to more negative overall interactions. At the expectation stage, the individual perceives their impression as less positive and accurate, developing negative social expectations. At the avoidance stage, the individual avoids similar stressful social situations, resulting in fewer opportunities to make better impressions and develop positive social expectations.

What should Andy do? Researchers have investigated strategies to improve interpersonal outcomes for the socially anxious. Andy can reduce their social anxiety and make better first impressions by creating self-distance, focusing on others, and increasing expressiveness. These strategies target different stages in the self-perpetuating interpersonal cycle by reducing anxious cues, negative expectations, and social avoidance.

Self Distance

Self-distancing involves perceiving or speaking to oneself like a stranger or a friend (Kross & Ayduk, 2017; Kross et al., 2014). Reflecting from a non-distanced perspective immerses oneself in those emotions (Kross & Ayduk, 2017). Those who report self-distancing spontaneously tend to ruminate less over time and report feeling less distress (Kross & Ayduk, 2017). Self-distancing is more than not focusing on negative emotions. Compared to self-distraction, self-distancing significantly reduced short- and long-term distress in highly anxious caregivers of child cancer patients (Penner et al., 2016). Self-distancing helps reduce social anxiety whether done visually (i.e., reflecting as if watching a stranger) or linguistically (i.e., non-first-person self-talk; Kross & Ayduk, 2017). Imagine Andy talking through their negative expectations before their first day (e.g., "I'm so nervous my co-workers won't like me"). While it feels natural to talk about oneself in the first person, research suggests that using non-first-person language (e.g., "Andy is nervous their co-workers won't like them") is better for reducing social anxiety.

Participants using non-first-person self-talk before delivering a speech or meeting a new person performed better and displayed less distress (Kross et al., 2014). This effect was not moderated by social anxiety, meaning those high and low in social anxiety benefited similarly from using non-first-person self-talk (Kross et al., 2014). Using non-first-person self-talk interrupts the self-perpetuating interpersonal cycle at the interaction stage by reducing visible cues to anxiety and improving performance.

Kross et al. (2014) also found that non-first-person self-talk led to less negative post-event processing (Kross et al., 2014). However, these results could be attributed to participants making a better impression during the interaction since the manipulation occurred before participants delivered their speech or met a new person.

Harvey et al. (2000) explored the usefulness of self-distancing following a stressful social event by recording participants' public speaking and instructing half to watch their performance using visual self-distance (i.e. as if watching a stranger). Even though participants with high (vs. low) social anxiety reported feeling more nervous beforehand and expected to perform worse,

they rated their performance more positively than high-anxiety participants who watched the feedback without instructions (Harvey et al., 2000). Since the participants' performance was not affected by self-distancing, these results show that self-distancing could disrupt the self-perpetuating interpersonal cycle at the expectation stage. Following a negative social interaction, taking a distanced perspective can help the individual reflect on their impression more positively.

Focus on Others

When socially anxious, people focus on protecting themselves from negative evaluations (Schlenker & Leary, 1985). When one's attention is consumed by attempting to decipher how their interaction partner perceives them, they end up having a less positive interaction (i.e., cognitive resource depletion, negative affect; Sasaki & Vorauer, 2010). Research shows that switching one's focus onto others can lead to more positive interactions and lower avoidance behaviours.

In stressful social situations (e.g., first meeting, interethnic interactions), Sasaki & Vorauer (2010) found that participants who focused on forming an accurate impression of their partner evaluated the impression they made as less negative. By improving the perception of one's impression, focusing on getting to know others interrupts the negative expectations stage of the self-perpetuated interpersonal cycle. Furthermore, both parties left the interaction with a higher positive effect (Sasaki & Vorauer, 2010). Participants in interethnic interactions reported feeling less uneasy (i.e., uneasy, tense, anxious) when they focused on forming an impression of their interaction partner (Sasaki & Vorauer, 2010). Focusing on getting to know others interrupts the interaction stage of the self-perpetuated interpersonal cycle by improving the quality of interactions in stressful social situations.

Beyond getting to know others, acting to benefit someone (i.e., an act of kindness) can reduce social anxiety. Trew & Alden (2015) had participants perform three acts of kindness or engage in three social interactions two days a week for four weeks. Those who performed acts of kindness reported lower social anxiety and social avoidance. However, this study is limited by a small sample size (N = 115) and low response rate. A more recent study with a larger sample size (N = 549) found that a twelve-minute walk focusing on one's well-wishes for others (vs. interconnectedness vs. downward comparisons) resulted in lower anxiety (Gentile et al., 2020). In addition, reflecting on well-wishes led to greater happiness, greater empathy, and higher feelings of caring and connectedness (Gentile et al., 2020). These findings demonstrate that kind intentions alone have the potential to reduce social anxiety. Furthermore, focusing on others is more effective when that focus includes kind intentions.

Both Trew & Alden (2015) and Gentile et al. (2020) demonstrate strategies capable of interrupting the avoidance stage of the self-perpetuated interpersonal cycle. Wherein both an act of kindness (e.g., opening the door for someone, picking up litter) and thinking kind thoughts about someone can reduce social anxiety and make an upcoming stressful social event more

approachable. Additionally, these strategies take minimal effort and are unlikely to result in negative interactions.

Self Expression

The simplest way to express oneself is to talk about oneself. Research finds that self-disclosure (i.e., openly sharing about oneself) is the strongest predictor of likeability for those high in social anxiety (Voncken & Dijk, 2013). Engaging in more self-disclosure interrupts the self-perpetuated interpersonal cycle at the interaction stage by providing relevant cues and leading to more positive interactions. However, people are less likely to self-disclose when socially anxious (Gee et al., 2013; Voncken & Dijk, 2013). Gee et al. (2013) found that the most common reasons participants report disclosing anxiety are to seek assistance, reassurance, manage their impression, and decrease discomfort. These findings point to anxious disclosures as a common strategy people use to reduce social anxiety.

There is mixed research on negative self-disclosures. Kashdan et al., 2007 found that relationships can be enhanced by negative self-disclosures of those low in social anxiety but damaged by negative self-disclosures of those high in social anxiety. Different attributions could lead to different impressions following negative self-disclosure. A critical difference between the anxious disclosures of high (vs. low) socially anxious participants was attributing their anxiety to the situation (i.e., parties make me nervous) as opposed to themselves (i.e., I am a shy person; Gee et al., 2013).

Notably, Kashdan et al.'s (2007) findings are limited to the perceived closeness of the socially anxious participant and did not account for their partner's actual reactions. Socially anxious individuals often expect to be perceived negatively (Leary et al., 1988; Tissera et al., 2020) and are more likely to view ambiguous social stimuli as threatening (Curtis & Locke, 2007). Other research found that while low self-esteem participants reported negative outcomes after disclosing a personal failing to their partner (i.e., less support, more judgement), this was not reflected in their partner's reaction (Cameron et al., 2009). The relationship damage may be only in the perception of the socially anxious discloser, and negative self-disclosures of those high in social anxiety are not perceived more negatively.

Overall, self-disclosure is necessary for providing relevant cues and being perceived accurately. Negative self-disclosure may also play a role in reducing social anxiety, and therefore anxious cues, during an interaction, though a causal relationship cannot be drawn from the study by Gee et al. (2013). Future research should investigate the relationship between disclosing anxiety, visible anxious cues, and reported social anxiety. Negative self-disclosures should be used cautiously, especially at the first meeting.

Self-disclosure can also be increased through behaviour changes. Socially anxious individuals tend to engage in habitual safety behaviours (e.g., avoiding eye contact, trying not to attract attention) in anxiety-provoking situations as part of their protective self-presentation strategy (Plasencia et al., 2016). By reducing these safety behaviours, socially anxious

participants increased their self-disclosure, responsiveness to others, and emotional expression (Plasencia et al., 2016). Furthermore, interaction partners reported wanting to interact more with participants who reduced safety behaviours (Plasencia et al., 2016). In another study, socially anxious participants disclosed more about themselves and presented themselves more positively to a stranger when they had a friend present (Pontari & Glenn, 2012). The presence of a friend can help socially anxious participants rely less on a protective presentation style and present more acquisitively.

Conclusion

Using self-distance, other-focused, and expressive strategies can reduce social anxiety, increase expressiveness, and reduce avoidance, allowing them to make better first impressions in anxiety-provoking situations. Self-distance prevents immersion in negative emotions leading up to and following anxiety-provoking situations, interrupting the self-perpetuated interpersonal cycle at the interaction and expectation stages. Focusing on getting to know, helping, and wishing well on others reduces social anxiety, interrupting the self-perpetuated interpersonal cycle at the avoidance stage. Increasing expressiveness by engaging in self-disclosure interrupts the self-perpetuated interpersonal cycle at the interaction stage. Given the mixed results, one should be cautious when disclosing anxious feelings or other negative information. Future research should further investigate the relationship between social anxiety and negative self-disclosures, particularly as a potential strategy to reduce social anxiety during interactions. For now, the next time Andy is nervous about being perceived positively, they should create distance, focus on others, and express themselves.

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