

A guide for coping with SOCIAL ANXIETY





What is Social Anxiety?



Did you know?

1 in 5 people struggle with anxiety at some time in their life

It's natural to feel self-conscious, nervous, or shy in front of others at times. Most people get through these moments when they need to. But for some people, the anxiety that goes with feeling shy or self-conscious can be really difficult to cope with. Anxiety is our emotional and physical response to danger, or our belief that danger is present. Everyone experiences anxiety at certain times in their lives, so it's important to remember that you're not on your own.



Understanding Social Anxiety

Did you know?

Anxiety is our bodies alarm system. It helps to prepare us for the fight or flight response when we fear danger.

- Anxiety is the body's way of responding to being in danger.
- It is the body's alarm and survival mechanism.
- This 'stress reaction' is known as the '**Fight or Flight Response**'. Adrenaline is rushed into our bloodstream to enable us to either run away or fight the danger; it is designed to keep us safe.
- Our ancestors never would have survived without the '**stress reaction.**' Our bodies evolved during a time when it was essential to react quickly to danger in order to stay alive.
- This happens whether the danger is real, or whether we believe the danger is there when actually there is none.
- With **social anxiety**, this response gets activated too often, too strongly, and in situations where it's out of place. Because the physical sensations that go with the response are real - and sometimes quite strong - the danger seems real too. So the person will react by freezing up, and will feel unable to interact. As the body experiences these physical sensations, the mind goes through emotions like feeling afraid or nervous.

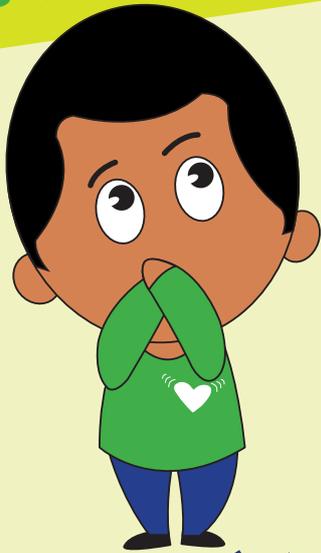


What are the physical sensations?

- Increase in heart rate
- Breathing becomes rapid
- Back/neck ache
- Needing to swallow more
- Head aches
- Restlessness
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Nervous tension



What fears are involved?



Tom is struggling with social anxiety. His fears and concerns are focused around what other people think about him. He feels self-conscious and uncomfortable about being noticed or judged by others. Tom worries that when he's around people, he will get embarrassed, look foolish, make a mistake, or be criticized or laughed at.

Tom has been staying safe at home with his family during the Coronavirus pandemic, but he's worried about returning to school and being around lots of people again.

In the past, Tom has tried to avoid situations where there are groups of people and although this has reduced his anxiety in the short term, Tom has realised that he is missing out on opportunities at school.

Let's see how social anxiety has affected Tom at school

Tom's thoughts and fears about what others are thinking about him have become exaggerated in his mind. He has started to focus on the embarrassing things that could happen, instead of the good things. This makes situations seem much worse than they are, and has influenced Tom to avoid social events.



Tom has identified some missed opportunities due to his social anxiety

- He would like to join an after school club but feels worried that he won't be good enough to take part.
- Tom is a bright student and often knows the answer to questions his teacher asks, but he is too shy to volunteer the answer.
- Tom loves cricket and would like to join a local team. However, he worries that people will make fun of him.



Did you know?

Avoiding social events will provide short term relief. However, it helps to keep your anxiety going; leading to a vicious cycle of avoidance and fear.

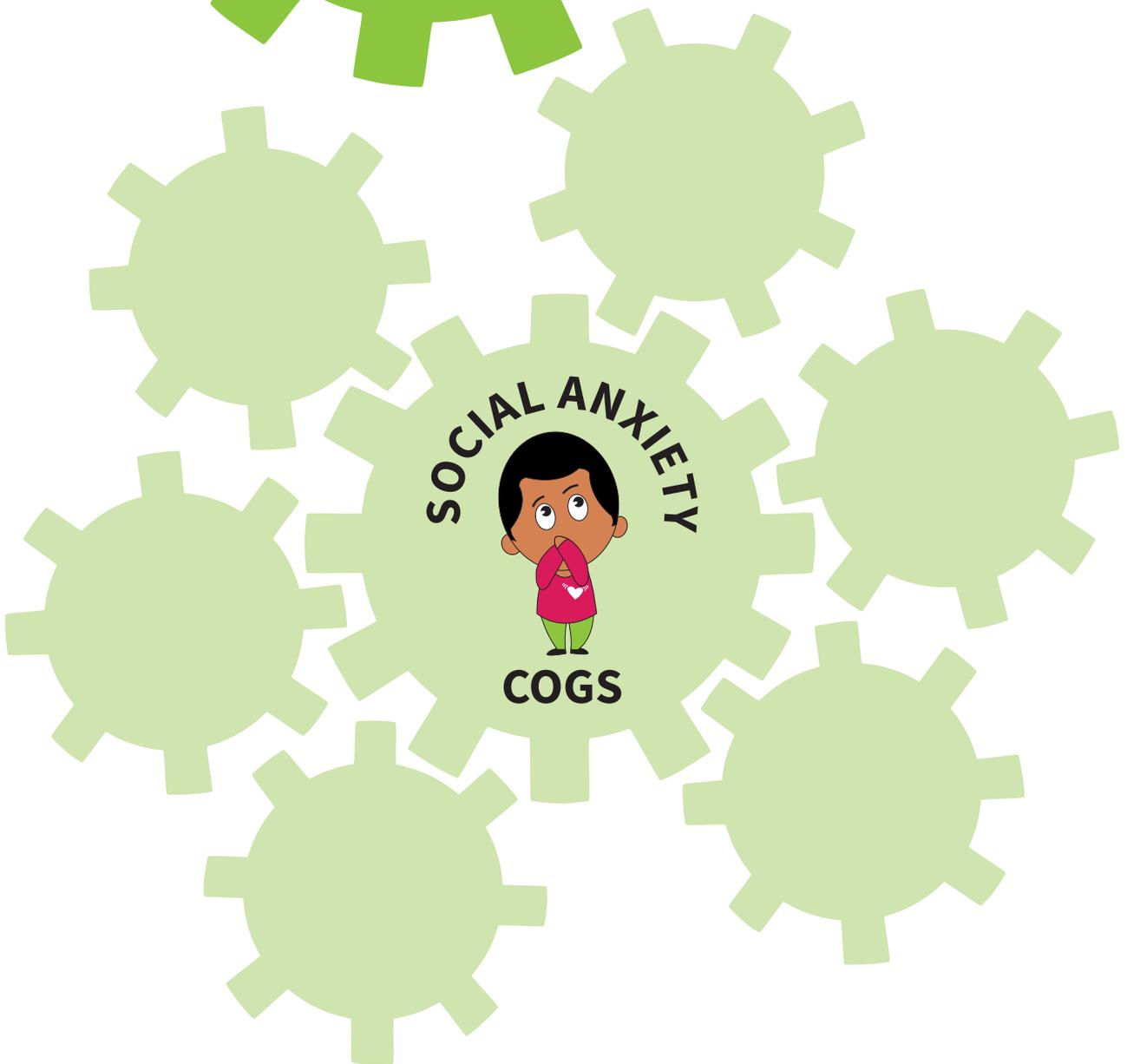
Tom's Social Anxiety Cogs

Tom has written down his fears in the cogs to help him to identify what causes his social anxiety and importantly, what keeps it going.

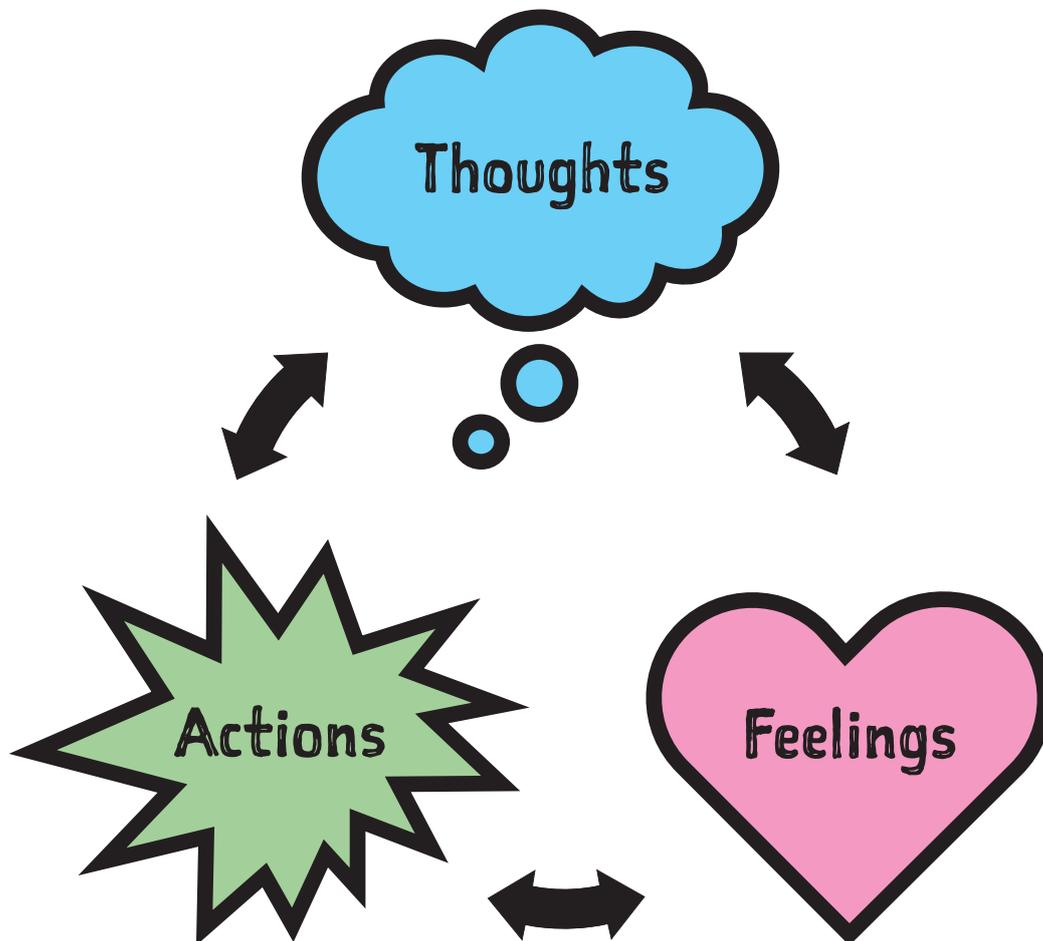


Tom's social anxiety is maintained by his focus on negative things, by his thinking style, and by his avoidance of feared social situations.

Have a go at identifying your fears in social situations. Fill in the cogs to see what is maintaining your social anxiety.



Thoughts Feelings Actions are connected



**Remember... our thoughts affect
how we feel and how we behave**

What really makes us feel and respond the way we do, is often not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but how we perceive that situation or that person's actions. It is how we see something or someone and what we think about it or them that really influences how we feel. It is our **thoughts** and **beliefs** about an event that significantly influences our **emotions** and **actions**.



TOP TIP

Percy the bird has been feeling socially anxious recently. His thoughts have been telling him that the other birds are judging him.

Percy has no evidence to support his thought, but he believes it is true. He has decided to test out his theory by stopping outside a shop window and observing the actions of the other birds passing by through the reflection in the glass.

He was surprised to discover that in the three minutes he was stood there, not actually looking at the contents of the shop window display, but at the birds passing by in the reflection of the glass, not one looked at him or even appeared to notice he was stood there.

This short but powerful exercise enabled Percy to challenge his prediction of the situation. The evidence presented to Percy, allowed him to identify that his irrational beliefs were based on opinions and not facts.

Why not test out Percy's top tip the next time you're out about?



Thoughts are automatic and we can't stop them from popping into our heads; but we can control how much attention we give to our thoughts.

It's important to remember that not all the thoughts we have are true.

What has Tom learned about managing his social anxiety?

Tom has learned how his thoughts can influence his feelings. He's finding it helpful to ask himself if these negative thoughts he experiences when he's with other people are fact or opinion.

Realising that many thoughts are opinion rather than fact makes it less likely that Tom will be distressed by them; enabling him to think about the situation differently and more able to make wise and calm decisions about the best action to take.

Coping with social anxiety takes patience, courage to face fears and try new things, and the willingness to practice. Little by little, Tom is making positive changes and beginning to overcome his fears. By taking small steps, you can do the same.

