

After the event: the post-mortem

When thinking about a social situation after the event is over, socially anxious people tend to engage in a kind of post-mortem that confirms their own biased view of what 'really happened'. If they felt hot and flustered they assume that others noticed and judged them 'accordingly'. The symptoms that were so distressing at the time sometimes flood back again when remembering what happened — usually because of the assumptions that the socially anxious person is making. So they tend to think that other people noticed the symptoms, or thought badly about them if, they did notice, or attributed the social difficulty — if indeed there was one — to them, as if they were entirely and solely responsible for how things went at the time.

As we have already seen, socially anxious people, because of their tendency to become preoccupied with themselves, often leave situations with incomplete or inaccurate information about what really went on. The post-mortem is counter-productive because it can only be based on this inaccurate data. Dwelling on things after the event becomes another way of perpetuating the problem. It leads people to conclude that their assumptions were correct even though they have not really tested them out.

Try to stop yourself going in for the 'post-mortem'. Looking back at what happened from the point of view someone with social phobia, it is only too easy to interpret everything that happened in terms of your own sense of failure, inadequacy or distress. Post-mortems of this kind are as unlikely to be accurate as exaggerated 'fishy' stories about the size of the one that got away

The post-mortem makes things worse. It is a way of thinking that brings all the negative biases, attitudes and beliefs into the front of your mind, and uses them to interpret, and even to elaborate upon, the bad side of what actually happened. The longer a post-mortem goes on, the worse it makes you feel. It can sometimes seem increasingly convincing, even though it usually involves a gradual shift away from reality. There is nothing useful about it. Despite what some people think, going over in your mind the things that happened, what you said and what other people said, what you both did, the way you looked and felt and so on, does not end in useful conclusions about how to do things better. It provides no valuable clues about how to overcome the problem. Far better to close down the process as soon as you notice it happening, and to distract yourself with something more interesting instead.