

## Alternative ways of thinking

A good alternative is one that makes you feel better, that fits with the facts (not with your fears or suspicions, or biased interpretations of the facts) and helps you to do the things that you want to do.

Good alternatives also help you to break old patterns of thinking, like the biases we looked at earlier (all-or-nothing thinking, catastrophizing, overgeneralising etc.). Unlike biased ways of thinking, helpful alternatives can usually be phrased in moderate or 'open-minded' language, as in 'maybe' rather than pressuring words such as 'I *must* think of something interesting to say', 'I *should* be able to like people more', 'I *ought* to try harder to be amusing and entertaining'.

Or extremist words such as 'They *totally* ignored me', 'People *never* like me', 'I am *always* messing things up', 'Nobody feels shy after the age of thirty'.

Or a combination of *pressuring* and *extremist* words such as 'I *should always* be polite', 'I *should never* be angry'. You *must always* let other people come first.

Good alternatives make you feel less pressured, and help you to adopt a balanced and flexible view of things rather than an extremist one. For example you could think in terms of *preferences* rather than pressures. Prompt yourself with: 'It would be better if . . .', 'Things often work out better if you can be polite', 'Everyone gets angry at times – but it does make a difference how you show it', or 'It's perfectly alright for me to come first at times'. Notice how these more balanced alternatives point the way forwards, and define the kinds of strategies that it can be helpful to develop, such as ways of negotiating differences, expressing anger and taking turns. Maybe you're not the only person responsible for the way the conversation went?

Doubting and criticising yourself, and saying 'Yes, but . . .' makes finding alternatives difficult. 'Yes, I know they seemed to like me *but* they don't really know what I'm like', or 'Yes, I didn't say anything stupid, *but* then I hardly said anything at all'. Alternatives: 'Maybe people cannot tell what you are really like until they get to know you better', 'Maybe saying more, and taking more initiative when you are talking to people, would be a fairer test of your thought about appearing stupid.'

It is easier to find alternatives if you use the kind of compassionate, understanding and encouraging approach you would adopt if you were helping someone else.

Typical themes, or patterns of thinking found in the thought records made by social anxious people are:

1. Taking too much responsibility
2. Emotional reasoning
3. Overly high standards for social performance
4. Believing you are boring, unlikeable or uninteresting

These might be good ones to watch out for

Evidence shows that completing thought records is extremely helpful. Although the exercises can be done in your head, research shows that it is much more useful for you in the long run if you also practice doing them in writing, especially in the early days.

<b>Situation</b>	<b>Upsetting thoughts</b> (keep the different thoughts separate)	<b>Possible alternatives</b> (there may be more than one)
Talking to Aron at a party	I sound really stupid	Perhaps everyone does once in a while. Even if I did, it would not mean I was stupid
Walking in to my brothers room with his friends there	They can see how nervous I am	Possibly, but that needn't make them think I'm a bad person. Maybe they are thinking of other things altogether, and have not even noticed me
My boyfriend did not reply back to my text	He completely ignored me: 'I must have done something to offend him'	
Someone I considered my friend just looked straight through me when we passed on the street	She completely ignored me, 'I guess she doesn't really like me'	