

Clark & Wells' Model of Social Anxiety

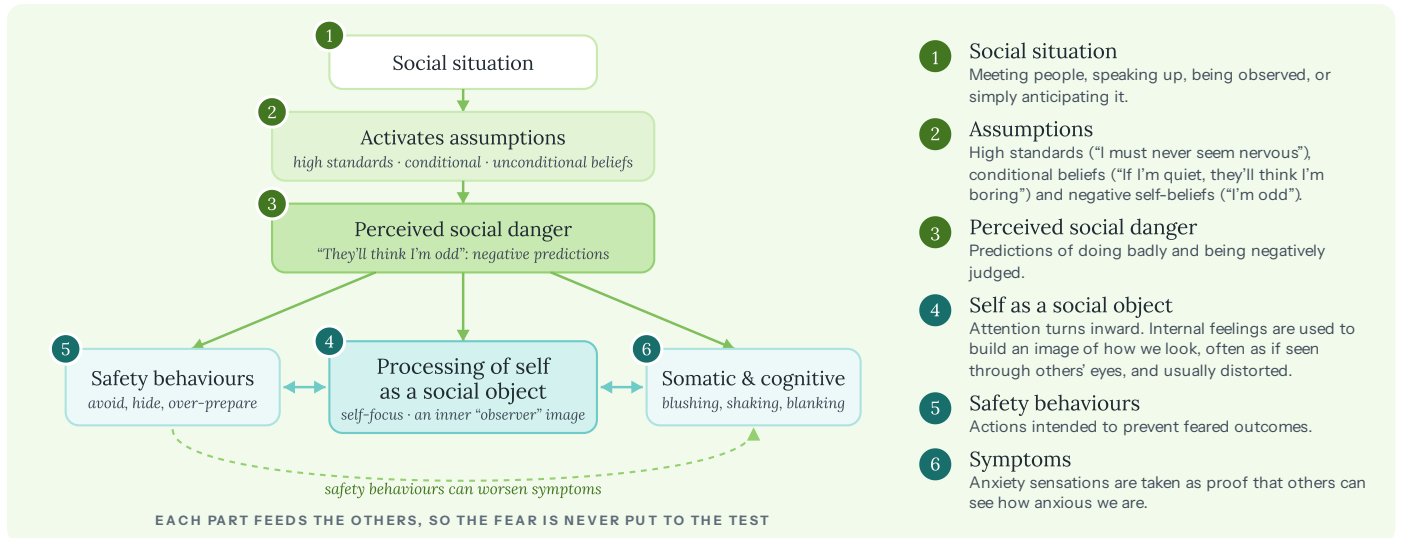
PSYCHOEDUCATION · THE CYCLE THAT KEEPS SOCIAL ANXIETY GOING

Why the fear persists, even when feared outcomes rarely happen

Clark and Wells' cognitive model (1995) explains why social anxiety can persist: beliefs trigger a sense of danger, attention turns inward, and safety behaviours and symptoms keep the fear from being tested.

01 The maintaining cycle

diagram adapted from Clark & Wells (1995)



02 Before and after

the cycle extends beyond the situation itself



BEFORE

Anticipatory processing

Going over what might go wrong, recalling past "failures" and picturing doing badly, so you may enter already in self-focused mode.



AFTER

Post-event processing

A detailed "post-mortem", based on how you felt rather than what happened. It can make the situation seem worse in memory.

03 Safety behaviours

why protective habits can keep anxiety going

COMMON EXAMPLES · TICK ANY THAT FIT

- ☐ Avoiding eye contact
- ☐ Rehearsing what to say
- ☐ Staying quiet or talking fast
- ☐ Over-preparing
- ☐ Hiding behind your phone
- ☐ Checking your appearance
- ☐ Gripping a glass tightly
- ☐ Staying near the exit
- ☐ Clothes to hide blushing
- ☐ Using alcohol to cope

HOW THEY CAN BACKFIRE

They block new learning

Success gets credited to the safety behaviour, not to the fear being wrong.

They can worsen symptoms

Gripping a glass tightly can make hands shake more.

They can affect others

Holding back can seem distant, so interactions may feel less warm.

04 How cognitive therapy breaks the cycle

key elements of treatment based on this model

STEP 1

Map your cycle

Build a personal version of the model from a recent situation.

STEP 2

Drop safety habits

Compare how a conversation goes with and without them.

STEP 3

Look outward

Focus on people and the situation, not on monitoring yourself.

STEP 4

Update self-image

Video feedback can show how you actually come across.

STEP 5

Test predictions

Behavioural experiments check feared outcomes, and the post-mortem is dropped.



Recommended. UK NICE guidance recommends individual CBT based on this model, or Heimberg's, as a first-line treatment for adults (NICE, 2013).



Tested in trials. In one randomised trial, cognitive therapy outperformed exposure plus applied relaxation (Clark et al., 2006).



Strong overall. A large network meta-analysis found individual CBT among the most effective psychological treatments (Mayo-Wilson et al., 2014).

Feeling anxious is not the same as being judged, and what you think others think is often not the reality.

A SAFETY BEHAVIOUR I TEND TO RELY ON

A PREDICTION I COULD TEST

GO AT YOUR OWN PACE Reflecting on social fears can bring up difficult feelings. Changes such as dropping safety behaviours are best planned gradually with your psychologist.

SOURCES

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