

Social Anxiety Following Return to Normal

Source: [Cleveland Clinic & Very Well Mind](#)

If you're feeling like your social skills have gotten a little rusty during the COVID-19 pandemic, you're not alone. As social distancing restrictions loosen and more people become fully vaccinated, social anxiety is increasingly common – and totally normal.

Clinical psychologist Dawn Potter, PsyD, shares practical advice for those feeling nervous about a return to relative normalcy after spending the last year in quarantine, communicating with others through a screen or from behind a face mask.

Q: Is anxiety typical after being isolated for so long?

A: Absolutely. As social distancing restrictions loosen, it's normal to feel some nervousness or anxiety, especially if you've been relatively isolated or in a small bubble during the pandemic and are now starting to socialize in larger groups or with people you haven't seen for a while.

In addition to standard concerns about health and safety, people with social anxiety are likely to be worried about doing things “right” – messing up social norms by making a misstep or not knowing what to do. They may stress about questions like, “Am I supposed to hug this person? Should I shake their hand or do an elbow bump? How close should I stand?”

Q: What, exactly, does it mean to have social anxiety?

A: Just like it sounds, the term refers to the experience of anxiety in a social context. But it's more than just feeling a little bit nervous. People with social anxiety often feel like others are laughing at them or judging them, even if that's not the case.

If you have social anxiety disorder, you may worry that you're going to trip over your words or that other people will notice how nervous you're feeling – or that you're blushing or sweating, even if you aren't. These concerns can be limited to certain settings, like public speaking, or they can apply to any social situations with other people, especially unfamiliar ones.

There's a lot going on in the mind of a person with social anxiety, which can be distracting and make it difficult for them to actually engage effectively in a social situation.

Social Anxiety Activities to Get Better

Social anxiety activities are those things you can do to challenge your anxiety. Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is estimated to affect around 12% of the population at some point in their lives.

Social anxiety disorder can be seriously debilitating, and the best treatment approach involves combining [cognitive-behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#) and/or medication (such as SSRIs). But there is much that can be done through self-help to overcome social anxiety.

Self-Help for Social Anxiety

Self-help strategies often draw on the effective components of more traditional treatment approaches. For example, self-help might incorporate aspects of relaxation, thought reprogramming, and exposure to feared situations.

Get Yourself Out There

If you suffer from mild to moderate social anxiety, you might just feel like you are in a rut most of the time. What is the best way to get out of a rut? Do something.

Although it can be tempting to avoid social and performance situations if you suffer from social anxiety disorder (SAD), it is important to get yourself out there. That means accepting invitations to go places and do things that make you uncomfortable. At the same time, you need to prepare yourself to properly handle being out there.

Ask for Help

Don't wait until tomorrow or next week or the next time you are in crisis. Make an appointment today to see someone. If you are too embarrassed to call your doctor, consider contacting a mental health helpline such as the one offered by the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) or your [EFAP](#) to get you started. You might find talking to an anonymous stranger less intimidating and it could eventually lead to receiving the help you need. Just take the first step.

Keep a Journal

Keep a daily journal so that you can see how much you have improved. Writing about your thoughts and experiences will also help you recognize when you are falling back into old habits and negative-thinking patterns.

Improve Your Health

Do everything in your power to ensure that poor physical health is not contributing to your problems with anxiety. Exercise on a regular basis (including cardiovascular exercise and weight training) and eat a healthy, balanced diet. Do your best to stay away from alcohol.

Set Goals

It isn't enough to have vague goals about what you want to achieve. Whether you want to overcome symptoms of social anxiety or become an Academy Award-winning actress, it is important to put your goals down on paper. This makes them real and measurable.

Part of goal setting involves deciding where you want to end up, but it also involves learning and setting a benchmark of where you are now. One way to do this is by taking some self-assessment quizzes to see how you score in terms of social.

Then down the road, after you have started to get yourself out of the rut, you can take the quiz again and see if your scores have improved. Remember not to compare yourself to others in terms of social success; compare yourself to how you were doing one week, one month, or one year ago.

Congratulate Yourself

You might not be a confident public speaker, but there are a lot of things in your life to be proud of. Recognize that you face more challenges than others and that you should feel good about the small accomplishments in your life. Some days you can even feel proud that you made it out of the house. Build on small achievements and you will feel better about yourself.

Become Your Own Best Advocate

Nobody else is going to look out for you the way you can look out for yourself. Gather knowledge about SAD so that you can make better decisions. Guide others toward better understanding of the struggles you face. Take time out at parties if you feel the need. Nobody else knows what it is like to be you.

Buy Yourself a New Outfit

Retail therapy is obviously no cure for social anxiety, but sometimes clothing really can make you feel like a new person with a new attitude. Try to get yourself out of a rut by purchasing something outside your comfort zone. Choose a unique accent piece both to try something new and to give others a conversation starter when they first meet you.

Cherish Being Alone

Some people with SAD are also natural introverts; this means that they recharge their emotional batteries by spending time alone instead of in the company of others. Choosing to take time alone to gather your thoughts (rather than because of fear) is a healthy, self-aware choice.

Start Saying Yes

Perhaps you have gotten into a rut of saying "No" to everything. Instead, why not start saying "Yes?" If you are invited to do something social, try to make a habit out of accepting the invitation. Although you might feel anxious at first, over time the more you do, the less fearful you will become. The next time an invitation crosses your desk or someone at work asks you to join the group for a coffee break, make an effort to go.

Start Saying No

Are you a pushover? Do others make unrealistic demands on your time or treat you poorly, but you feel powerless to stand up for yourself? This is a time to learn how better to say "No" and how to be more assertive. You don't have to go along with everything that everyone wants, and if you don't clearly communicate what you want and need, others are left guessing what you are thinking or how you feel.

Stop Trying to Be Perfect

Perfectionism and social anxiety often go hand in hand. Everything that you say and everything you do doesn't have to be perfect. Make a point of being imperfect and taking chances for a day.

Take a Vacation

As simple as it sounds, sometimes we all just need a change of scenery. If you are really stuck in a socially anxious mindset, try taking off for a weekend to a new locale, even if it is a solo trip. Soak up some of the local cultures, and immerse yourself in a different pace.

Read a Book

Choose either a motivational story or a social anxiety book for self-help. Read everything you can get your hands on about social anxiety and how to improve. Read true stories about other people who have been there. Read motivational books about life in general. Educating yourself will never hurt, and it might give you the insight or inspiration that you need to make changes in your life.

Start Paying Attention

Chances are your thoughts and feelings have become so automatic you don't even realize what runs through your head on a daily basis.

Slow down, take the time to focus on the present, and examine the thoughts that pass through your mind; especially the negative ones.

Make Changes for Yourself, Not Others

Be careful about your reasons for wanting to change. If daily life is painful, that is a reason to get a handle on social anxiety. However, if you just want to impress your friends on Facebook or in real life with your social skills and popularity, the changes you make won't last.

Stop Putting Things Off

Perhaps you envision some point in the future when you can conquer your fears. Maybe when you are older, have more money to pay for therapy, or when you are feeling stronger.

Reward Yourself

It isn't going to be much fun getting out of a rut if you never reward yourself for your efforts. Choose something that you know will be rewarding for you, and indulge when you have made changes in your life; be it daily, weekly, monthly or yearly. Ideas might include a special meal, new novel, or even a vacation you have dreamt of.

Make One Little Change

Sometimes we can get caught up thinking that the changes that we need to make to get out of a rut need to be big. Make one little change and see if it has ripple effects in your life.

The change could be as small as watching the news every evening to keep up on current events and have more to say during small talk.

Challenge Yourself

Are you working at a job that doesn't make use of your skills and talents? Have you always taken the "safe" route because of your social anxiety? Try breaking out of a rut by leaving your safe zone and taking on those challenges that help you grow as a person.

Accept the promotion at work, go back to school for a new career, or start your own business. Follow your passion and your dreams and don't let social anxiety stand in your way.

Appreciate What You Have

Though you may have been dealt a bad hand when it comes to having social anxiety, there is probably much in your life to be thankful for. Take the time to express gratitude for what you do have.

Get Adequate Sleep

Make sure you are getting enough sleep; lack of rest can cause you to feel less than your best and exacerbate anxiety.

Laugh

Sometimes people with social anxiety spend so much time worrying and fretting that they forget to laugh and have fun. When was the last time you watched a funny movie that made you laugh out loud? Who was the last person that made you chuckle? Try to bring more laughter into your life. If you aren't having fun, what is the point?

Stop Thinking Nothing Will Work for You

The key to getting out of a rut is to act; not think about why things won't work. Try to make some of the changes on this list and observe the outcome. Never dismiss an idea because you think that "it won't work for me."

Spend Time in Nature

Being outdoors has a natural calming effect. If you work indoors or spend most of your time indoors, try getting outside more often. Break up your routine with a walk through the park whenever you can.

Start Eating Better

If you suffer from social anxiety, make sure that you are eating a balanced diet and avoiding sugar and alcohol as much as possible.

Practice Social Skills

You may not have been born with the gift of gab, but you can improve on the skills that you have. Practice how to make introductions, make better eye contact, remember names, and give compliments.

Share Your Experiences

Whether you have conquered social anxiety or you are right in the midst of it, your experiences are valuable and should be shared with others. Sharing your story will help others realize that they are not alone, and will also bring more awareness to a problem that is mostly kept behind closed doors.

Say "I Am Nervous"

Everyone who speaks in public gets a little nervous. One of the best antidotes for anxiety about public speaking is to simply acknowledge how you are feeling before you begin.

In many settings it is completely acceptable to start off your speech with a laugh and a comment such as "Forgive me if I stumble over my words, I just get a little nervous speaking in public." Immediately you are helping yourself out of the rut of slipping into a panic attack while speaking. Others will also be more forgiving than you might think.

Go Somewhere New

Do you follow the same routine every week? Visit the same grocery store, same gas station, eat at the same restaurant, or walk the same block?

Try breaking out of your routine by going somewhere new. Not only will your challenge your social anxiety about new surroundings, but you might discover you have been missing out on some great aspect of your neighborhood.

Do Something Exciting

Try something totally off-the-wall like a hot air balloon ride or a zip-line adventure. Lose yourself in an exciting adventure and forget about your social anxiety. Best of all, the next time someone asks you what you do for fun, you will have a great story to tell.

Replace Negativity with Positivity

Being positive is contagious. If you have a habit of seeing the world through a negative lens (which most people with SAD tend to do), try becoming an optimist, if only for a day at first. Replace any negative thoughts with more positive alternatives. See if that doesn't help you start to climb out of your rut.

Surround Yourself With Positive People

If at all possible, try to spend more time with positive people; people who love you, believe in you, and see the beauty in who you are despite your social anxiety.

Spending time with these people will make you feel good and help you to weather any rough times as you try to make changes in your life.

Be Accountable to Someone

You may stay in your rut forever if nobody knows you are trying to move past your social anxiety and you are not accountable to anyone. Choose someone you trust (it could even be an online friend), and tell them about your plans to make changes in your life.

This works very much like having an exercise partner; the other person keeps you honest and keeps you from giving up when the road seems too hard and long.

Sign Up for a Cause

Join a cause that you believe in and that will get you out into the community and meet new people. Help animals find adoptive homes, walk for charity or fight third world hunger. Find a purpose beyond yourself and your space in the world, and some of the mundane problems of the day might seem just that.

Start Staying "Hi" to a Neighbor

Do you scurry for your door every time your neighbor appears? Next time, try to make a concerted effort to say hello, wave, and be friendly. Although this might feel out of character and anxiety-provoking at first, over time this new habit will become second nature.

Strike Up a Conversation

Do you shy away from talking to strangers? Do you avoid eye contact at the grocery store? Do you look at your feet in the elevator? Today, instead of doing what you normally do in those situations, try doing the opposite. Engage the other person in a bit of small talk, just for the sake of getting the practice and learning not to be afraid.

Give a Great Handshake

Are you known for limp noodle handshakes? Surprise everyone you meet with a firm solid handshake and great eye contact. This is an easy social skill to learn that can help you make the best first impression.

Take a Class

Take a class in something that interests you: pottery, cooking, skiing, golf... anything that gets you out meeting people and learning a new skill will do the trick. Joining a class will give you the opportunity to build confidence, expose yourself to social situations, and potentially make new friends.

Stop Complaining and Blaming

Perhaps you were dealt a bad hand in life. Maybe you had a controlling mother or a father who put you down. Although these life experiences may have contributed to your social

anxiety, you don't need to let them continue to influence the course of your life. Start taking responsibility for your actions and behavior.

Work With Your Strengths

In order to get yourself out of a social anxiety rut, you don't need to have an end goal of becoming a stand-up comedian or accomplished concert pianist.

If you love books, maybe joining a book club or even leading a book club would be your thing. Think about your interests and talents, and how you can bring more sociability into those areas in your life.

Tell Someone

One of the hardest parts about having social anxiety is that it is usually a very private battle. Perhaps you have never talked to anyone about your fears. If you really want to get out of a rut, you need to open up to at least one person.

Only you know who that person should be; perhaps you would feel more comfortable talking to someone who doesn't know you personally (such as a doctor, teacher, or clergy person) or maybe a friend or family member would be the right choice.

Work on a Friendship

Everyone has the potential for one or more friendships in their life. Perhaps there is someone you know that has tried to get to know you better but you have stalled the friendship; it's time to take the reins and work at turning that person into a friend.

Although it might seem hard at first, over time you will be glad to see a familiar face at work, at the gym, or in your college class. Take the initiative and extend an invitation to do something together; don't rely on the other person to always make the first move.

Make It a Competition

Do you have a competitive nature? If so, could you make a sport out of trying to overcome your social anxiety? If you clam up at dinner parties, try over-preparing with interesting stories to tell.

Try to ask every person at least one question. Keep track of how many times you speak and give yourself points. Make it a game!

Visualize What You Want

What exactly do you want? If you haven't defined this for yourself, then you don't know where you are headed or how to get there. Do you want more friends, a better job, or simply not to feel anxious all the time? Visualize having those things that you want; this will help motivate you to do what needs to be done to get out of a rut.

Avoid the Usual Temptations

If you have a bad habit of wasting too much time on the internet or watching television instead of socializing, try cutting back or making it educational time in terms of learning about SAD and social skills. See how much time you gain to focus on overcoming your social anxiety and building your social skills.

Stop Waiting to be Rescued

If you think that your problem won't be solved until the magic bullet appears, then you will never get started making changes on your own. Take responsibility for the changes that you need to make, and realize that nobody else is going to take the reins.

Seek Treatment

Sometimes you just can't get yourself out of a rut; especially if it is more of a deep hole that you have dug yourself into. If this is you, and you are finding yourself completely overwhelmed by social anxiety, to the point that it is interfering significantly with your daily functioning, it is time to seek outside help.

Your family doctor or the EFAP is a good place to start. Even though you might feel afraid to reach out and admit that you have a problem, you will be glad that you did.

The bottom line when trying to break yourself free of a social anxiety rut is to remember that everything takes time. No matter what changes you make in your life, you will not go from socially anxious to social butterfly overnight.

Be pleased with any small progress that you make; every journey begins with small steps and it is important for you to get started and not worry too much about your goal now. Focus on the journey and your actions will take you there.