

Social Anxiety in Youth: Breaking the Cycle with CBT

Organized by: Balochistan Emerging Leaders Initiative (BELI)
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01

Social Anxiety in Youth: Breaking the Cycle with CBT





What Counts as Social Anxiety Disorder?

- A** Marked fear or anxiety about social situations where the person may be scrutinized - conversations, being observed, or performing in front of others
- B** The fear is out of proportion to the actual threat posed by the situation
- C** The social situations almost always provoke fear or anxiety
- D** The situations are avoided, or endured with intense fear or anxiety
- E** The fear, anxiety, or avoidance is persistent - typically lasting 6 months or more



How Common Is It?

Global

4.7% children, 8.3% adolescents , 17% youth

Salari et al., 2024

South Asia

Up to 81.6% (India) and 68% (Pakistan) on school-based screens;
Pakistan's adolescent anxiety rate (21.4%) is the region's highest

Mudunna et al., 2025

Pakistan

22.5% of Karachi adolescents (12–19 yrs, N=716) reported high social
anxiety — middle adolescents most affected

Bano et al., 2019

How Social Anxiety Shows Up

Cognitive (Thought)

- Fear of embarrassment or humiliation
- Intense worry before an event (anticipatory anxiety)
- Replaying the event afterward, focusing on flaws
- Belief that others are constantly judging

Physiological (Body)

- Racing heart, sweating, trembling
- Blushing, nausea, dizziness
- Shaky voice, dry mouth
- Muscle tension

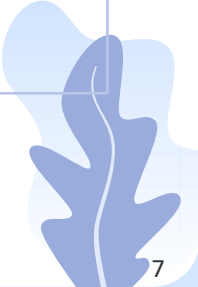
Behavioral (Action)

- Avoiding gatherings, meetings, or calls
- Using safety behaviors (rehearsing lines, avoiding eye contact)
- Speaking quietly or minimally
- Escaping situations early



Shyness vs. Social Anxiety Disorder

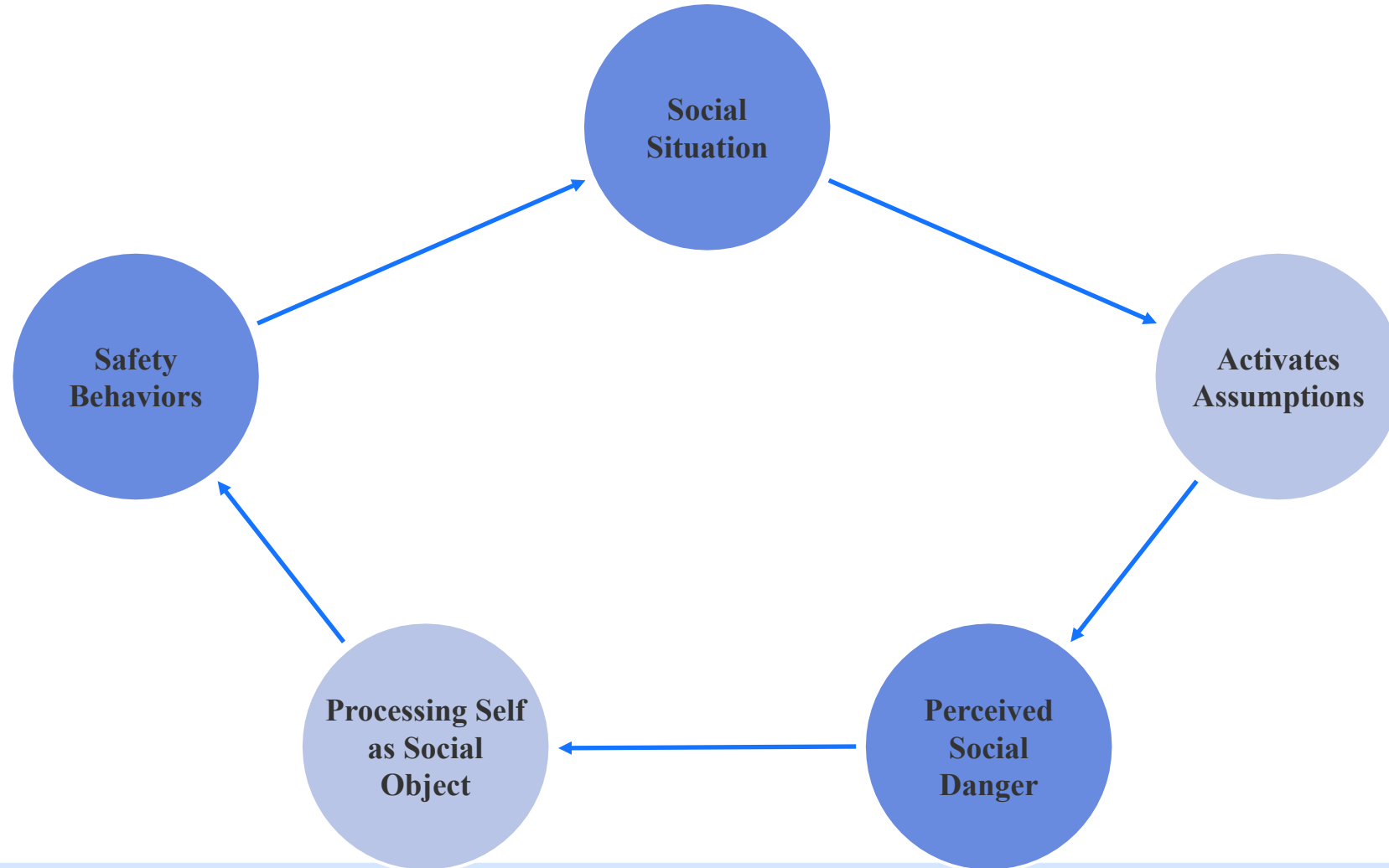
Shyness	Social Anxiety Disorder
A personality trait	A psychiatric condition
Comfortable with familiar people	Fear of negative social evaluation
Nervous and less confident with unknown people	Excessive fear of social embarrassment
Nervousness decreases as they become more comfortable	Intense anxiety in social gatherings
	May avoid situations that trigger anxiety
	Nervousness may remain or even increase over time





The Cognitive Model of Social Anxiety

Clark & Wells (1995)



Effects on Education & Relationships

Education

- ✦ Poorer psychological, social & environmental quality of life in Karachi adolescents screening positive for SAD (Farooq et al., 2017)
- ✦ Fear of embarrassment reduces classroom participation, even when the student knows the material
- ✦ Avoidance of extracurriculars, debates, leadership roles & academic networking
- ✦ Linked to lower academic self-efficacy and reduced academic success (Majeed et al., 2022)

Relationships

- ✦ Avoiding eye contact, speaking quietly, or staying silent in conversations
- ✦ Increases loneliness - even when the young person wants connection
- ✦ Neutral expressions or brief replies may be misread as rejection
- ✦ Pakistani adolescents with SAD report poorer social-relationship quality of life than peers without SAD (Farooq et al., 2017)

Effects on Confidence & Self-Esteem

Avoidance feeds itself

Anxiety leads to avoidance, avoidance reduces successful experiences, and reduced success further lowers confidence (Majeed et al., 2022)

Self-criticism erodes self-esteem

Persistent fear of judgment leads to intense self-criticism, directly lowering global self-esteem (Mahawar & Lohan, 2024)

Anticipatory anxiety undermines belief in ability

Worry before public speaking or group work erodes belief in one's capacity to perform (Leigh & Clark, 2023)

Self-focus distorts self-perception

Hyper-awareness of blushing or trembling makes people judge their own performance as far worse than it is (Peperkorn et al., 2026)

Post-event processing keeps the damage going

Replaying perceived blunders after an interaction continues to erode self-esteem afterward (APA, 2022; Leigh & Clark, 2023)



Common Cognitive Distortions

Thinking patterns that fuel social anxiety (Burns, 1980; Beck, 1972)

1 Mind Reading

Assuming you know what others are thinking about you

“Everyone here is judging me.”

2 Catastrophizing

Assuming the worst-case scenario when facing uncertainty

“They didn't reply - something's wrong with me.”

3 Personalization

Taking things personally even when unconnected to you

“They seemed distracted -I must have upset them.”

4 Polarized Thinking

Thinking in black-and-white extremes, no middle ground

“If I'm not perfect, I've failed completely.”

QUICK ACTIVITY

Spot the Distortion

Scenario:

Hussein gives a presentation. He forgets one sentence.

He thinks:

“Everyone noticed. They must think I'm incompetent.”

What thinking trap do you notice?

- A. Mind reading
- B. Catastrophizing
- C. Overgeneralization
- D. All of the above

Note: Keep the distortion in mind to apply any CBT technique.



What Is CBT and Why Use It?

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a short-term, skills-focused, present-oriented approach that teaches the cognitive and behavioral competencies needed for adaptive functioning - by changing thoughts, behaviors, or both.

Why CBT for Social Anxiety Disorder?

Gold-standard treatment

Presented as the gold standard for anxiety disorders, with meta-analyses confirming consistent, empirically supported effectiveness (Alomari et al., 2022)

Strong, replicated outcomes

Significant reductions in SAD symptoms, depression, and psychological distress found in routine clinical practice, with large effect sizes across 231 patients (Morina et al., 2023)



Core CBT Techniques for Social Anxiety

1

Cognitive Restructuring

Identify, evaluate, and replace distorted thoughts

2

Exposure Techniques

Gradually face feared situations to unlearn the fear response

3

Relaxation Training

Build the ability to physically de-escalate anxiety on cue



Cognitive Restructuring

1

Identify the negative thought

“Everyone will think I’m incompetent if I pause during my presentation.”

2

Evaluate its accuracy

Socratic questioning (“What evidence supports/contradicts this?”) or a behavioral experiment - e.g., ask one prepared question in class, then observe: did anyone actually react negatively?

3

Build a balanced alternative

“Pausing briefly is normal. People are likely focused on my message, not judging every detail. Even if some notice my anxiety, it doesn’t mean they think I’m incompetent.”



CBT TECHNIQUE 2

Exposure Therapy

1 Build the exposure ladder

Sequence feared social situations from mildest to most challenging using SUDS (Subjective Units of Discomfort Scale)

2 Plan the experiment

Pick one situation from the ladder; identify the feared prediction, rate initial SUDS, and rate belief in the prediction (BIP) - plan to face it without avoidance or safety behaviors

3 Run the experiment

Enter the situation, hold the prediction in mind, and observe what actually happens - success means staying, not feeling zero anxiety

4 Optimize & evaluate

Repeat until anxiety consistently drops; compare the prediction to reality, and track the fall in SUDS and BIP after each round



CBT TECHNIQUE 3

Relaxation Training

1 Rationale & self-monitoring

Learn the three-system model of anxiety (body, behavior, thoughts) and notice early physical signs (jaw tightening, rising shoulders) before anxiety escalates

2 Progressive muscle relaxation

Tense and release 15-16 major muscle groups in sequence, to feel the contrast between tension and relaxation

3 Release-only relaxation

Relax muscle groups directly, without tensing first - a shorter version of the same skill

4 Cue-controlled & differential relaxation

Pair the word “relax” with an exhale to trigger relaxation instantly, and practice staying relaxed in unused muscles during real activity (e.g., shoulders/jaw while talking)

QUICK ACTIVITY

Restructure the Thought

Automatic thought:

“Everyone noticed. They must think I’m incompetent.”

What question could we ask him to test this thought?”

1. What is the evidence FOR this thought?

→ **“I did forget a sentence.”**

2. What is the evidence AGAINST it?

→ **“I don't actually know what everyone was thinking.”**

→ **“People may have barely noticed.”**

→ **“I've successfully presented before.”**

3. What would you say to a friend in the same situation?

→ **“Forgetting one sentence doesn't make you incompetent. Everyone makes mistakes.”**

4. Create a balanced thought:

“I made a small mistake, but that doesn't mean people think I'm incompetent. I can pause, recover, and continue.”

QUICK ACTIVITY

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