



The Association  
for Child and Adolescent  
Mental Health

# Practical techniques for managing social anxiety in everyday clinical work

**What we've learned from  
Assoc. Prof. Eleanor Leigh**

*A guide to session recap, further  
resources and activities*



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## What You'll Find in This Guide



### Session recap

A summary highlighting the most important points from the session



### Further reading

Selected resources for further exploration



### Activity: behavioural experiment

A step by step set of key questions to help plan a behavioural experiment

[Click here and download this guide now!](#)

# Practical techniques for managing social anxiety in everyday clinical work

*What we've learned from Assoc. Prof. Eleanor Leigh*

“

*“Young people may well not be avoiding situations, but they may be enduring them with great internal distress”*

*“What keeps the problem going are the things that young people do to try and cope with their anxiety”*

”



## What keeps social anxiety going in everyday life

*Social anxiety is maintained by a cycle of understandable coping strategies that inadvertently reinforce the problem. Young people may:*

**Avoid situations where they feel exposed**

**Use safety behaviours (e.g., over-preparing, speaking less, avoiding eye contact)**

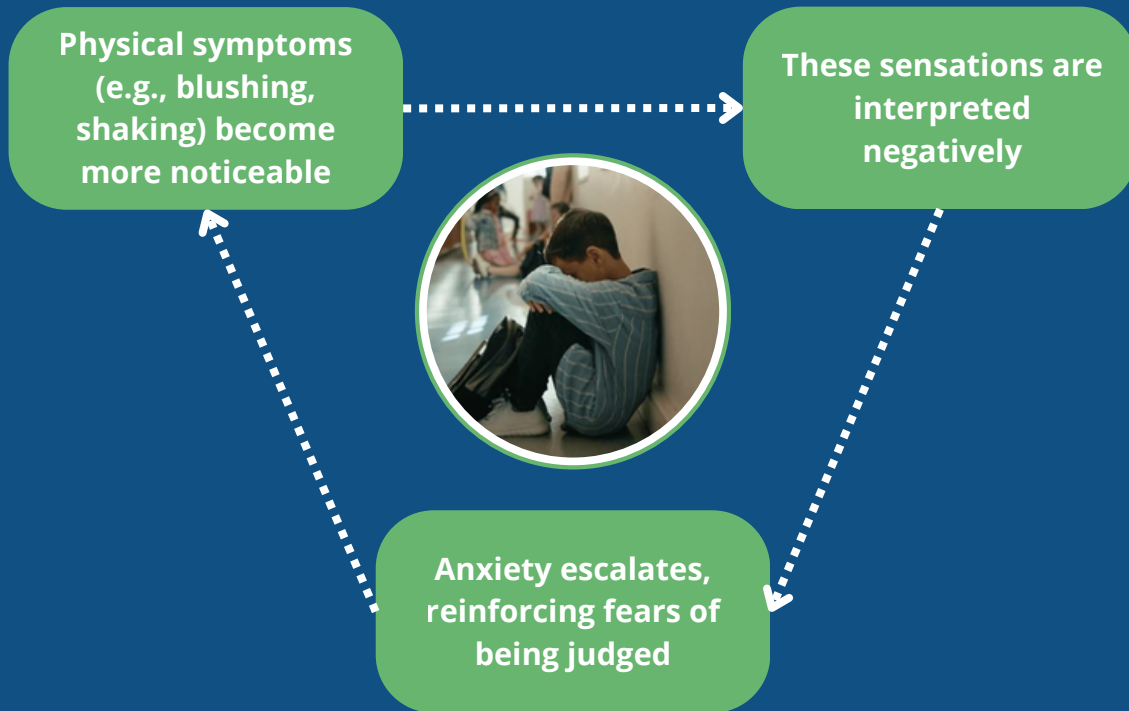
**Monitor themselves closely during interactions**



*While these strategies reduce immediate anxiety, they prevent the young person from learning that feared outcomes may not occur, keeping the anxiety in place.*

# When attention turns inward

A key mechanism in social anxiety is self-focused attention



*This creates a **self-perpetuating loop** where the young person becomes both the observer and the critic*

## Treatment focus: shifting attention to enable new learning

### SHIFT THE FOCUS...

...from what the young person feels to what they do in response to that feeling

### IN PRACTICE...

...help the child redirect attention outward, towards the task or the social interaction itself.



# Using behavioural experiments to create change

**Sustainable change** does not come from reassurance, but from **direct experience**.

Behavioural experiments allow young people to:

- 1 Test their predictions (e.g., “People will think I’m stupid”)
- 2 Drop safety behaviours
- 3 Gather evidence from real-life situations



*The goal is not simply exposure, but belief change through new learning, by **making predictions explicit, testing them collaboratively, and reflecting on what was learned.***

## Making it workable in real clinical settings

In everyday practice, interventions need to be feasible and relevant. This involves:

- Designing small, manageable experiments
- Embedding tasks in real-life contexts
- Using sessions to prepare and review learning, not just discuss

# Working with the beliefs underneath

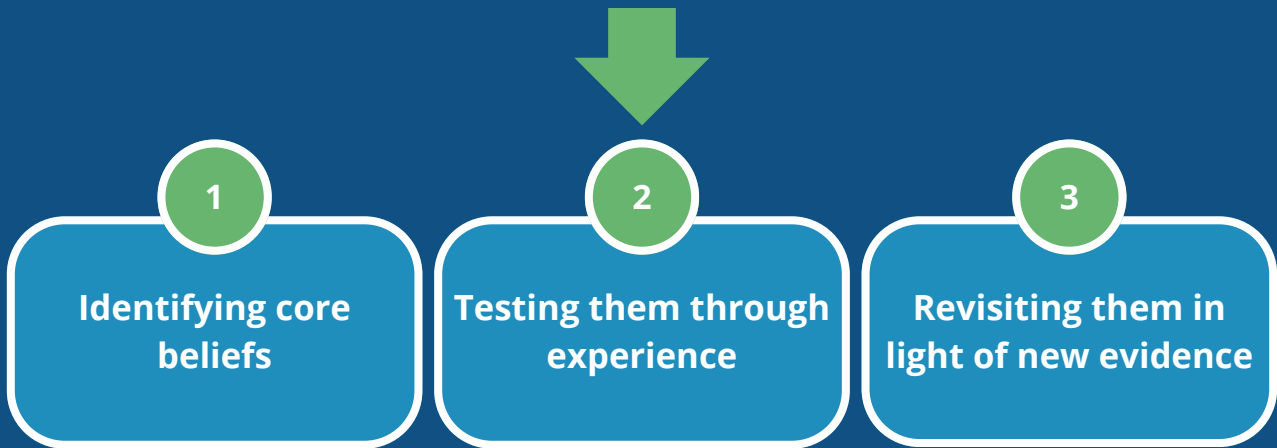
Underlying social anxiety are often strong negative beliefs, such as:

"I'll embarrass myself"

"People will reject me"

"I'm not good enough"

Behavioural work is most effective when clearly linked to these beliefs



## Information Worth Sharing

*Social anxiety is often difficult to detect. Young people may continue engaging in everyday situations while experiencing significant internal distress*

*The problem is maintained by coping strategies that feel helpful in the moment but prevent new learning*

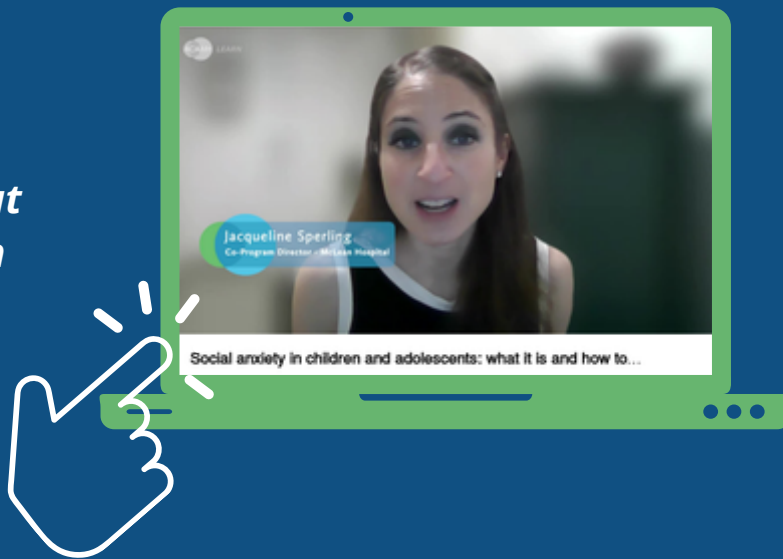
*It's not just exposure. The goal is to update beliefs through new learning*

*This involves making predictions explicit, testing them collaboratively, and reflecting on what actually happens*

*In practice, the focus shifts from what the young person feels to what they do in response to that feeling*

# Recommended Reading and Resources

Learn more about  
social anxiety in  
ACAMH Learn!



## Selected Articles



- [Meet the expert: Practical techniques for managing social anxiety in everyday clinical work, with Dr. Eleanor Leigh](#)
- [Social anxiety and paranoid beliefs in adolescents](#)
- [Cognitive and behavioural processes in adolescents with social anxiety disorder](#)
- [Internet-delivered therapist-assisted cognitive therapy for adolescent social anxiety disorder \(OSCA\): a randomised controlled trial addressing preliminary efficacy and mechanisms of action](#)
- [Social anxiety symptoms and their relationship with suicidal ideation and depressive symptoms in adolescents: A prospective study](#)

# Planning a behavioural experiment

*Think of a young person (YP) you are currently working with, or a typical case of social anxiety.*

*Start by identifying a specific situation they find difficult.*

## 1. Clarify the prediction together with the YP

- What do they think will happen?
- What are they most concerned others will notice or think?

*The more specific the prediction, the more powerful the learning*

## 2. Identify maintaining strategies

- What safety behaviours do they use?
- Where is their attention focused (internal vs external)?

*What helps in the moment often keeps the problem going*

## 1. Clarify the prediction together with the YP

- What could they try differently (e.g. reducing a safety behaviour, shifting attention outward)?
- How can you test the prediction in a small, manageable way?

*Small, targeted changes create better learning than big exposures*

## 2. Identify maintaining strategies

- What would count as useful new information?
- How will you and the YP reflect on what actually happened?

*The goal is to discover what actually happens*



# Thank you for joining us at this event!

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