

Tolerating Uncertainty in Social Situations

Objective

To increase your tolerance for uncertainty in social situations.

You Should Know

Life is full of uncertainty. Even though you may like to control your day-to-day activities, it is difficult to do this when other people are involved, particularly if you are interacting with people you do not know very well.

People with social anxiety typically try to avoid social situations where they experience a moderate to high degree of uncertainty. This can prevent them from meeting new people, going to new places, and even from taking on new projects on the job, at school, or in their community. Avoiding social situations because you cannot control them may reduce your anxiety in the short run, but in the long run, it will needlessly constrict your life and keep you from experiences that can bring meaning to your life.

If you are anxious about social situations, you likely assume that you cannot handle situations that are not in your control. But the truth is that you cope with and adjust to changing situations all of the time. What do you do if you are caught in the rain without an umbrella? What do you do if you leave the house and forget your wallet? What do you do if you misplace your cell phone? These kinds of events happen all of the time and yet you survive them.

This worksheet is designed to build your confidence regarding facing uncertainty in social situations. It will help you see that your resourcefulness can get you through any social situation, and although you may have some awkward moments, even these are not so bad.

Does This Sound Like You?

Jim was unhappy in his job, and he thought he might find a new position by joining a local service club like the Lion's Club. He had heard that these clubs were a good way to get to know business owners in the community, and he thought he might even make some new friends. But every month when it was time for a meeting, Jim started to get anxious about attending. He had no idea of what to expect at this type of meeting and thought he might be asked to stand up and talk about himself, which he never liked to do. As the time for the meeting came and went, Jim told himself that he would try again the next month.

Fearing uncertainty, Jim denied himself many opportunities. Is this something that you do?

What to Do

These are some common traits of people who avoid uncertainty in social situations. Place a check next to the traits you recognize in yourself.

_____ Seeking reassurance.

_____ Making extensive lists.

_____ Procrastinating.

_____ Refusing to delegate tasks or allow anyone to help you.

_____ Having to plan every vacation and every other event you are involved in.

_____ Looking for an exorbitant amount of information about every event, problem, or activity you want to engage in.

Do you think you can stop using these “crutches” to avoid facing social situations?

Exposure and response prevention therapy (ERP) is the best-known treatment for social anxiety. It involves gradually exposing yourself to your fears over a period of time. In this activity, you will expose yourself to social situations that make you feel uncertain until you feel less and less anxiety. Engaging in the exposures will allow you to acknowledge and accept your fear of recurring uncertainty so that your anxiety surrounding these situations will decrease significantly.

Start by asking yourself these questions:

What are some social situations you avoid because they trigger your uncertainty?

What are some ways that your life might change if you can participate in these social situations?

Next, follow these steps:

1. Make a list of uncertain situations that cause you anxiety. You can choose from the examples provided and/or add situations that are unique to you.
2. Rate the situations on a scale from 1 to 10, according to your anxiety level.
3. Expose yourself to one or more situations each week. Use the weekly exposure sheet to track your progress.
4. Engage in the exposure at least three times per week.
5. Repeat the exposure until your anxiety level drops to a 2 or below.
6. Increase your tolerance by inventing new and random exposure situations.

Uncertain Situations List

- Go to the grocery store without a list.
- Ask a friend to choose a movie for you both to see, without telling you its title.
- Eat in a loud or crowded restaurant.
- Go on a blind date.
- Have a friend or family member buy an item of clothing for you, and then wear it.
- Approach a stranger and ask for directions.
- Take a different driving route to work.
- Cut in front of someone standing in line.
- Go to a restaurant and order something you have never eaten before.
- Join a public speaking club and prepare a speech.
- Attend a social event alone.
- Go on a short errand without wearing something you always wear: earrings, makeup, your favorite shirt, or a lucky watch.
- Attend a dinner party or accept an invitation from a co-worker.

Uncertain Social Situations That Cause You Anxiety

Situation	Anxiety level from 1-10

Weekly Exposure

	Uncertain situation	Anxiety level before exposure	Anxiety level after exposure	Notes on experience
Day 1				
Day 2				
Day 3				
Day 4				
Day 5				
Day 6				
Day 7				

Was tolerating uncertainty easier or more difficult than you expected? In what ways?

Did most of your exposure practice turn out positive? If so, did that surprise you?

When your exposure practice did not work as expected, how did you cope with it?

What do you think it would look like if you incorporated uncertainty into your life on a daily basis?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
