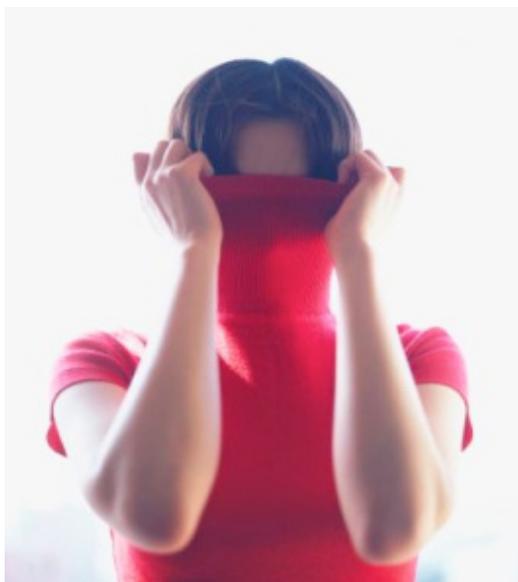


**Do you wonder if you have the actual disorder of Social Anxiety? Grab a highlight pen, then read through this post and highlight anything that you think applies to you, then review...**



**Are you desperately uncomfortable when attention is on you? Do you shake with nerves or blush?**

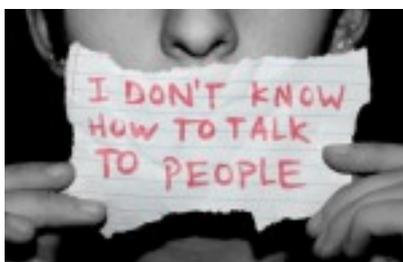
**Most people experience some form of shyness, but others are so immobilised by the *fear of being judged negatively* that they can barely function and develop avoidant behaviour to protect themselves.**

**This is 'social anxiety', the third most common emotional health disorder in the world, after depression and addiction - it is debilitating, it is an actual disorder and condition - and it can be treated very effectively once it's recognised and accepted.**

**For the purpose of this post let's call it 'shyness'.**

**Read the following and see if you recognise yourself:**

**Shyness can be crippling.** Always worrying what others are thinking of you, never being sure how you come across, worrying that people will 'see' how you are, that they will think you are socially awkward or inadequate or weird. (*Am I blushing? Have they noticed? Oh God why did I say that, it sounded stupid? Oh why is my tongue tied now? Oh this person is not even listening to me!* etc), and then afterwards analyzing every painstaking minute detail. Not to mention the anticipatory anxiety that accompanies events where you imagine you will be the centre of attention (*I'll be so nervous! I'll make a holy show of myself! People will be sniggering at me! I'm dull! Nobody really likes me!...*), worrying days, weeks, or even months in advance of a situation you fear. All the while thinking things about yourself like: 'I'm not normal', or 'I'm unattractive' and so on...



**You might find it very hard to relax and interact with people** as you are constantly watching out for, and misinterpreting, other people's reactions to you - often perceiving criticism where none was intended. Life becomes problematic and overwhelming when it is ruled by our worry of what people think of us... Throw in 'demand thinking' of 'musts, shoulds, and oughts' and we're in big trouble (*I must be funny like them, I should look great, I ought to be interesting and clever, ... and so on*).

**A shy person suffers from a neverending maze of worry and fear** – misperceiving situations and events as a *hazard or danger* - instead of a chance for human interaction and fun. When you are in social situations you may constantly be evaluating yourself and others perception of you, and reaction to you - always with a negative bias, discounting the positive... not able to fully engage with others as you are either busy analysing reactions, or preparing what you will say and how you will say it when it's your turn to speak. Always over analysing and misinterpreting what is going on – focusing on all the little pauses, someone looking over your shoulder, little awkward moments... and so on.

**Extreme shyness or social anxiety includes emotional and physiological discomfort** - this causes avoidant behaviour, and excessive self-focused attention. It is a condition that can be helped very effectively with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

**CBT is a form of psychotherapy that emphasises the important role of thinking (cognitive) in how we feel and what we do** (behavioural), using practical methods and techniques - the basic philosophy being that our thoughts and beliefs, (rather than events and situations), are the cause of many of our emotional disturbances and resulting behaviours – and that we can learn to examine and challenge and change unhealthy dysfunctional thinking, which will in turn change our emotional and physical responses and behaviours to healthy appropriate ones that enhance our lives.

**Controlled and measured scientific studies have shown great results in teaching sufferers of anxiety new ‘coping skills’ using CBT** – helping them to lower their anxiety to manageable levels that allow for a fuller and more comfortable life. Unfortunately most sufferers never seek treatment - they might feel ashamed and embarrassed, and believe they should be able to handle it themselves, or think that it’s ‘just the way they are’ and nothing can be done about it. But you *can* do something about it - you can learn to be less anxious with people and more comfortable interacting with people, you can learn new healthy thinking and behaviours that could be life changing.

**CBT skills will help you deal with the problem** by changing your thinking about feared events so that you approach them in a more rational way, which will ease your anxiety and your bodies reaction to the stress. CBT helps replace dysfunctional unhealthy thinking with healthy thinking – replacing negative thought patterns with more realistic ones, based on EVIDENCE - rather than, say, typical cognitive distortions like:

- *fortune telling* (where you negatively predict the future of events that haven’t happened yet)
- and *mind reading* (where you are convinced you know what other people are thinking about you)
- and ‘*catastrophising*’ (making mountains out of molehills)
- all of which (among others) go hand in hand with anxiety disorders.

**With CBT we also learn how to unconditionally accept ourselves** (blushing and all!). Some people think shyness and blushing is charming you know! Though of course, the problem is that it can be accompanied by all the other nasty fight or flight responses that cause discomfort and agitation – which brings us back to the smartest fix being to tackle the irrational thoughts and beliefs that cause the inappropriate response – replacing them (over and over and over and over) with rational evidence based disputes... until that becomes the way that you think. So what if we only improve our coping skills and never eradicate anxiety entirely? We can only do our best, and having fight or flight less often with less ferocity will help us to take more risks in our interactions - what’s not to like? Go with it...

**CBT teaches sufferers to understand that their ‘thinking’, their mental filtering and processing of events, is distorted** – causing them to see irrational danger alerts and hazards everywhere, and how and why their body is reacting to that. With CBT they are taught to identify their thoughts around particular events and situations – and then to challenge those thoughts with rational evidence and new realistic alternative thinking. An example of distorted thoughts that need to be challenged:

- People are watching & judging me all of the time
- People are criticising me
- Nobody likes me
- People think I’m dull
- People think I’m different to them
- I am ugly
- I am an oddball
- It’s hopeless, I’ll never be happy ....

**Common cognitive distortions** we all indulge in occasionally are stronger and more frequent for those with anxiety... eg:

- Fortune telling
- Catastrophising
- Mind reading
- Emotional reasoning
- Black and white thinking
- Low Frustration tolerance
- Personalising

**Typical behaviours** that disable and inhibit anxiety sufferers:

- avoiding situations you find threatening (busy places, parties, staff canteen etc)
- avoid talking on the phone
- avoid stopping for 'small talk' when bumping into people
- drink too much (alleviates anxiety, seems easier to interact)
- repeatedly calling in sick to work
- isolating yourself from friends and family
- sleeping too much (or too little)
- eating too much (or too little)
- spending money recklessly or compulsively... etc

Unfortunately, **the more you indulge in these behaviours, the less confidence you will have** – and you will never learn that you might actually not only survive the feared situation, but actually **manage it comfortably, and even enjoy it as others do** (yes, really!). These kind of behaviours are obviously self limiting and self sabotaging – for instance many extremely shy people cannot live to their full potential as they take unchallenging jobs that do not cause them discomfort by drawing any attention to them, that do not require actions from them they have convinced themselves they cannot do...



**The physiology of fear – FIGHT OR FLIGHT** - our bodies have a natural primal 'fight or flight' system that causes us to pump ourselves up to fight or run away when we perceive a hazard or danger. This dates back to early evolution, when a hunter-gatherer might be confronted by a predator (let's say a tiger) – to survive he had to launch an immediate attack or turn and run like mad! It was also very important that we 'fit in and stay in' with our tribe, as many of the prime needs of human beings are based around esteem and respect and belonging, and rejection meant death by lone exposure to the elements or the tiger, and of course no 'mating' and reproduction (survival of our DNA)... so, when we perceive every social interaction is putting us in danger of absolute rejection, our bodies automatically

rev up into fight or flight, pumping up the heart and lungs, fueling the bloodstream with sugar –reacting to the situation as if it were a physical danger like the tiger coming to tear us apart, rather than the psychological danger of perception that it is. Basically, we are hardwired for fear in order to survive - thought stop, and remind yourself 'there is no tiger, I'm okay, this is okay, breathe, breathe'.

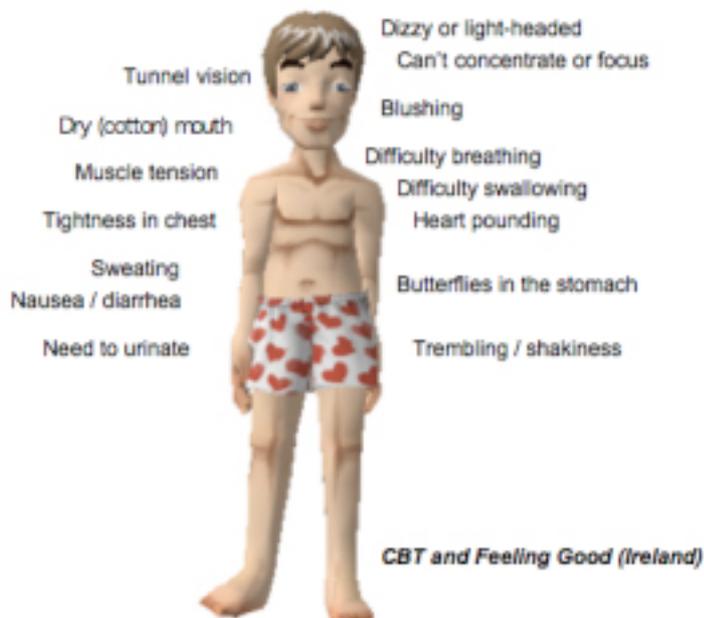
**Fight or flight was designed to help us**, but it is desperately uncomfortable when it is triggered because a *false perception* has occurred, and you're just sitting on a chair in a non-hazardous situation, so your body cannot exert itself for extreme action as it has prepared to do – and the bigger the fear and anxiety, the more extreme the physiological reaction – often resulting in **blushing/sweating**, and even **panic attacks** where you cannot breath, or shake uncontrollably, or feel you will collapse... Human beings will do anything to avoid fight or flight discomfort, so with social anxiety we tend to use avoidant behaviour - avoiding 'small talk', avoiding social interactions, avoiding fun and stimulation and a full life.

A common result of fight or flight responses with extremely shy people is that sufferers will often say their problem is actually the response of blushing or sweating – and will often end up more afraid of the

symptoms of their anxiety than the original 'danger' that brought them on... and the fear of it happening is enough to actually trigger it! It's a vicious circle.

## The Physiology of Fight or Flight

What we know is happening...



So... people start to think the blushing or sweating is to blame for their 'bad social performance', and think if only they could fix that *physical defect* life would be wonderful.

Even going so far as googling for surgeries that promise to eliminate these awful life limiting 'disabilities'. But in fact, these happenings are brought on by our thinking and mis-perceptions; for instance you will have facial blushing because your body is reacting to a perceived danger or hazard (judgement/rejection etc) with the fight or flight response, (getting ready to run from or kill the tiger), and during this the adrenaline release causes your blood vessels to dilate in order to improve blood flow and oxygen delivery.. as a result, the veins in your face dilate, allowing more blood to flow through them than usual, so reddening and heating the face – voila, blushing!

And sweating is simply the bodies way of regulating it's temperature as it heats up during fight or flight - of course, the more anxious you are, the more you are likely to sweat. All of the symptoms have a science behind them.

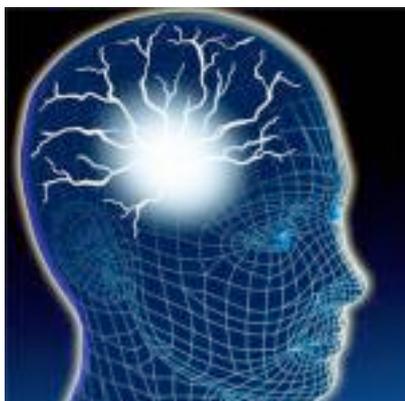
Understanding the science of fight or flight and exactly what happens to your body will help you to manage the physical anxiety, and to manage the situation in a better way.

**We can address the cause of inappropriate fight or flight by learning to challenge our distorted perception of events with new ways of thinking** – since it only occurs when we perceive danger and an inability to cope, it can be avoided or minimised if we can accept that there is actually very little to fear and that we can in fact cope. **Rational evidence based thinking skills** help us to stop seeing hazards and dangers everywhere - invisible tigers become visible and are rendered toothless - thus physical responses will become manageable and occur less often and with less ferocity. Changing our thinking and the way we look at situations, and gradually tolerating discomfort and bit by bit exposing ourselves to interaction and realising it's doable and rewarding, will help to 'rewire' our brains and behaviours over time. You don't learn to ride a bike by reading a book about it, theory is great, but application is everything - apply apply apply.

**Extreme fight or flight (panic attack symptoms) may also be helped with medication:** If you recognise yourself here, and think you may have a moderate to high anxiety disorder (including full on panic attacks), you might consider a visit to your GP to discuss a care plan.

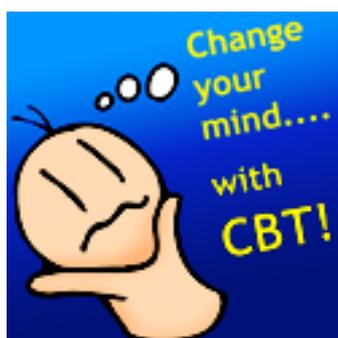
It's a real condition. It's not made up. It's not a character flaw. You deserve every chance at a fuller life and less discomfort. In some cases a doctor will refer you to a recommended therapy, in others the condition is treated with medication if appropriate - this can be an aid at the start of therapy, or for use on emergency occasions. The medication could be beta blockers (commonly used for high blood pressure, these dampen the nervous system so that the fight or flight panic attack symptoms are lessened, and you will have less discomfort), or one of various anti-anxiety medications (valium, xanax etc). Such treatment could be prescribed for occasional use, for situations that you might generally avoid but would rather face up to with help, (a speech, a date, an interview, a presentation etc). Professionals are there to advise and help - I suggest taking the view that you are a paying customer and they are providing a

service, and that you want information and education and a happy life - prepare what you want to say and any questions you might have on paper before your visit. And take long deep breaths to control the overload of oxygen that might occur if you have fight or flight in the doctors office. It will be okay. The doctor has seen it all, it's their job.



**Brain Plasticity:** Neuroscientific evidence tells us that our automatic auto pilot 'thinking' has, quite literally, burned neural pathways in our brain – but that the brain is not hardwired with fixed circuits, and that it can and does hardwire new neural pathways over old ones as the brain is 'plastic' and can be reshaped and reformed through 'learning and doing and reward' – which suggests that that, with work, it is possible to 're-hardwire', to change our old 'negative automatic thinking' into calm and considered evidence based automatic thinking instead ... no matter what age you are or what variant of shyness or anxiety you have. But note, you really do need to put in the work (there is written work in the form of journals and worksheets, as well as mental tasks) – you must be capable of self critique, and willing to challenge everything you think you know. This includes addressing those ego defence mechanisms and

avoidant behaviours that seem to have been developed to help you, but actually limit and sabotage you and stop you living the life you dream of.



**USE CBT AND HELP YOURSELF TO CONQUER SELF-DEFEATING AND SELF-SABOTAGING BEHAVIOURS - either with this self help blog, or by attending CBT sessions with a therapist...**

Summary of theory: CBT explains why and what is happening around your particular anxiety – and gives you practical methods and techniques to change your thinking and behaviours... it will give you a mental toolbox to effectively become your own therapist. It will help you to develop new smart coping skills to deal with life stress and anxiety. It really is a fascinating science, and improves overall emotional health & well being.

### How You Benefit

- \* Change how you think & what you do
- \* Decrease/manage incidences of stress/anxiety
- \* Decrease self-limiting/sabotaging behaviours
- \* Understand/manage the physiology of stress
- \* Improve self-image & confidence
- \* Improve social skills & interactions...

You can ease your discomfort and learn skills to improve your life. Work your way through my guided self help blog at [www.iVeronicaWalsh.wordpress.com](http://www.iVeronicaWalsh.wordpress.com) and do the homework - apply apply apply, then apply again. Change how you think, how you feel and how you behave.... and... check out my website: [www.CBTandFeelingGood.com](http://www.CBTandFeelingGood.com)

and... google the '[Social Anxiety Thing](#)' tumblr, it's a collection of thoughts and issues for sufferers of social anxiety - if you identify with them, well that's great, you'll know you're not alone, and you now know that you can get help. Good luck!

*(tumblr is a blogging platform that allows users to post text, images, videos, links, quotes and audio to their 'tumblelog').*