

Building Social Confidence!
By Maria Oh, Ph.D.
Counseling Center

Do you often feel uncomfortable or awkward in social situations? Do you feel nervous starting a conversation or approaching people you don't know? Perhaps you're afraid that you might say the wrong things, run out of things to say, or have nothing to say at all! Maybe you fear that others can see how nervous and uncomfortable you are and form negative judgments about you. In fact, you may have struggled in social situations all your life and developed high anxiety about your ability to interact and relate to people. And while you may never transform into a social butterfly, you can certainly improve your communication and social skills and raise the probability of developing stronger friendships and having a more fulfilling social life.

So what do I need to do to improve my social skills? How do I manage my fears and anxiety? Exposure, Exposure, Exposure! The more you expose yourself to what you fear, the lower your anxiety will be. By taking manageable risks and exposing yourself to social situations, you will gradually increase your comfort level and ability to tolerate the anxiety that comes with it. What else can I do to reduce my fear and anxiety? Practice, Practice, Practice! As the saying goes, practice really does make perfect. And while perfection is not our goal, gaining greater social competence and confidence through exposure and practice is. Here are some examples of how you can improve your skills and raise your confidence:

- ***Observe:*** Perhaps you know someone who has great conversational skills, someone who seems to relate to others with ease and confidence. Pay attention to their body language, how they talk, their facial expressions, the way they communicate and connect with others. What are some verbal and nonverbal skills they engage in that seem to attract others? People who are socially anxious tend to hyper focus on *themselves* and miss important social cues and signals. Try making an effort being around more people, pay close attention to social interactions and see what you can learn from them.

- ***Body Language:*** One of the most important social skills comes not from what we say but from our non-verbal gestures. Our body language tends to have a significant impact on people's perceptions of us, even before we speak! Adopt an inviting and open body language by smiling more often, leaning towards the person, nodding to show your interest and maintaining comfortable eye contact. And remember that you don't have to look directly in their eyes if you feel uncomfortable, and it's perfectly ok to focus intermittently in areas near the eyes (e.g. forehead, nose or mouth). These non-verbal skills communicate that you are listening and interested in others and what is being said.

- **Active listening:** Don't shoulder all the responsibility of carrying the conversation! The other person is also responsible for keeping the conversation going. Don't be so concerned about what to say next that you forget to pay attention to what others are saying. Generally, people are drawn to those who pay attention and take interest in them. Ask questions about their interests, their hobbies, what they enjoy doing, any significant events in their lives. Remember to smile and nod and make interjections (e.g. "really?" "uh-huh" "wow!" "how interesting!") to help keep the conversation going. Also, try to remember something interesting that was said to initiate a conversation the next time you see them (e.g. "You mentioned you were joining the fencing team, how is it going?")
- **Reframe your thinking:** Changing negative patterns of thinking can be very helpful in building your interpersonal confidence. People who are socially anxious tend to have constant stream of negative inner self-talk that perpetuate their fear or avoidance. While fearful predictions and interpretations are at times accurate, they are more often exaggerated or inaccurate (e.g. "I am going to say something really stupid and make a complete fool of myself at the party.") Try to reframe or think more logically about the situation (e.g. "Feeling nervous doesn't mean that I will make a fool of myself. I may feel uncomfortable but others may not even notice.") Break the habit of making negative assumptions and ask yourself if there are other ways of looking at the situation.

The point is to be able to think more realistically, rather than simply thinking positively. In general, people tend to seek out and pay attention to information that confirms their beliefs. And those who are socially anxious often pay more attention and give more weight to evidence that they are being negatively judged than to evidence that contradict their anxious beliefs and thoughts. You want to consider all the evidence and other possibilities before making any assumptions.

New Social Confidence Group

The suggestions above are just a few examples of kinds of things you can do to improve your social confidence and skills. It's important that you combine both skills building and exposure to maximize your growth and learning. Keep in mind that the more you practice, the more natural it's going to feel. Be proactive and look for opportunities to enhance your skills! If you want hands on experience learning and practicing these skills in a safe and supportive environment, come join our social confidence group at the Counseling Center! We will be teaching various social techniques and encouraging participants to have positive social encounters through gradual and supportive exposures. The group will begin on Monday, April 3 from 4p.m.-5:15pm and meet for 8 sessions. If you are interested please call X8331 to set up a time to speak with one of the group leaders to be sure this group will meet your needs.