



Beyond the Blush

A CBT Approach to Overcoming Social Anxiety

About the Author



Dr. Laura Berssenbrugge is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist and Registered Yoga Teacher in private practice, who specializes in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). She is the founder of [TheEmotionWheel.com](https://www.theemotionswheel.com), [TheThoughtsWheel.com](https://www.thethoughtswheel.com), and [TheBehaviorsWheel.com](https://www.thebehaviorswheel.com), providing free CBT tools in an easy-to-use wheel format. With over fifteen years of training and experience, she is an expert in the treatment of anxiety, depression, stress-related disorders, and OCD. Raised in Hawaii, she moved to New York City for college, where the cold climate and fast pace of life were challenging. Motivated by her personal journey, Dr. Laura embarked on a career in psychology.

A passionate supporter of integrating self-soothing skills into daily habits for emotional regulation, Dr. Laura partnered with Madison + Green, an aromatherapy brand, to create "Dr. Laura B's Release, Regulate, & Relax." This set of aromatherapy stress-relief tools is crafted to effectively reduce emotional intensity quickly. Dr. Laura provides free emotion regulation tools, worksheets, and ebooks on her website at www.drlaurab.com, and on Instagram [@the.college.therapist](https://www.instagram.com/the.college.therapist). In her free time, she enjoys doing yoga and pilates, hiking, and dreaming up her next travel adventures.



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Thank you for understanding!

Warmly,

Dr. Laura

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Chapter 1: Your Social Anxiety Story

Chapter 1

Your Social Anxiety Story

Welcome to "Beyond the Blush: A CBT Approach to Overcoming Social Anxiety", your evidence-based guide to beating social anxiety.

You're here. You've taken the first step – the big step – to finally standing up to your social anxiety. To stop allowing it to control your life. *Congratulations!*

I'm Dr. Laura. I'm a licensed psychologist, and I've worked with so many people, just like you, with social anxiety. And I know how you feel.

You're not alone. Up to **fifteen million** people live with social anxiety in the United States alone.

But I'm here to tell you that you don't need to live this way forever. There is so much more to life. Until now, you've lived in fear. In hiding. Your social anxiety has probably held you back from so much you've wanted to do.





Social anxiety is **not your fault**. Anyone can get social anxiety, something I'll discuss in detail in this book. You didn't do anything wrong. And I'm so sorry you're dealing with this.

But there is something you can do about it. Social anxiety doesn't need to run your life forever.

It might be scary. What would make it worth it for you?
Again; you're not alone. There are 15 million people – more than the entire population of Illinois, and twice the population of Costa Rica! – standing with you.

But at the same time, every person with social anxiety is unique. And I want to know *your* story.

In this book, you'll find journal prompts that invite you to reflect and write about the different aspects of social anxiety and how it's impacted your life.

You can answer these prompts in your favorite notebook or in the pages below.

Answer these prompts to share
your own social anxiety story

- What is your first memory of social anxiety impacting your life? How old were you; what do you remember about this memory?

- How would your past life have been different if you didn't have social anxiety?

- Who are you (apart from your social anxiety)? Who is the "real you"?

- How does social anxiety keep others from seeing the "real you"?

- Why did you purchase this book? What are you hoping to gain from it?



"Beyond the Blush: A CBT Approach to Overcoming Social Anxiety" is for people who have lived with social anxiety for a long time. You know that social anxiety impacts you. And you've tried *everything*. You've practiced your social skills. You've tried every "coping technique" out there, including unhealthy ones. You've read all about social anxiety, and recognize all the symptoms in yourself.

But you *still can't do the thing*. You know, the scary social thing – go on a first date. Join a hobby club. Go to a party. Speak in front of your colleagues. You're at your wit's end.

Don't give up. The reason you haven't found the solution may be that social anxiety is a tricky thing. The only way to *truly* beat it is to *face it*. Awareness and coping skills are good first steps, but we need to take that awareness further. We need to use awareness to actually stand up to social anxiety.

What you might not know is that "coping skills" can actually become counterproductive. These skills can be helpful. But if you use too many of these skills to avoid feeling anxious in social situations, then you're never actually facing your fear completely.

And the only way to defeat monsters is by facing them.





In this book, I take you through evidence-based exposure exercises so you can finally break free of social anxiety. We're going to go further than challenging your thoughts. We're going to stand up to social anxiety *in real life*. We're going to go to parties, and stand up for ourselves, and do lots of other things that probably make you cringe now.

You'll set realistic goals, and make measurable, sustainable progress.

Is it going to be scary sometimes? I won't lie to you – it's usually at least a little bit scary. But you'll be safe. (If you ever feel unsafe, *stop* and talk to your therapist!) And I'll be here, the whole time, to guide you through it.

Not only that, but I believe in you. I *know* you can do this, because I've done it. And if I can do it, then you can absolutely do it too.

I want to leave you with a quote from one of my favorite spiritual teachers, Pema Chodron.

*“So the next time you encounter fear, consider yourself lucky. This is where the courage comes in. Usually we think that brave people have no fear. **The truth is that they are intimate with fear.**”*

Are you ready to become intimate with fear?

Dr. Laura



Chapter 2:
What *is* Social Anxiety?

Chapter 2

What *is* Social Anxiety?

So, to begin with, what *is* social anxiety, anyway? And how can you tell if you have it?

When people talk about social anxiety, they're usually referring to a clinical mental health condition called *social anxiety disorder*. This is an official diagnosis, and its symptoms (according to the DSM-V-TR, which is basically holy scripture for mental health professionals) include:

- Intense fear or anxiety in one or more social situations
- Fear of being judged or scrutinized by others
- These social situations are either avoided or endured with intense anxiety
- Fear that other people can see how anxious you are (like noticing that you're blushing)
- You experience fear and anxiety every time you're in these situations
- Symptoms have lasted 6 months or more, and causes significant impairment in your functioning



But for most people, reading a list of diagnostic criteria isn't all that helpful in understanding what social anxiety *is*. Yes, we know what the officially recognized symptoms are – but what *is* social anxiety? How does it feel to live with it?

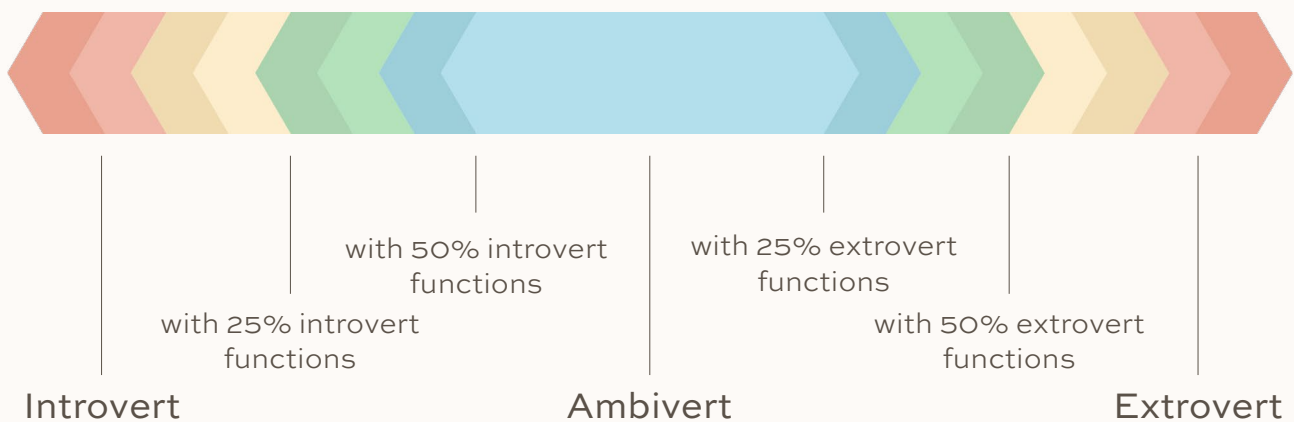
I like to explain it to my clients this way:

There's social anxiety *disorder*, but even if you don't qualify for this diagnosis, you could still have anxiety in social situations. Lots of us do, and this type of anxiety usually comes on a spectrum.

Shyness – Social Anxiety – Social Anxiety Disorder

Some people confuse being an introvert with shyness or social anxiety. But in reality, **introversion** isn't necessarily about anxiety at all. It's just a personality trait that means that being social, especially around large groups of people, tends to drain you rather than energize you. After socializing, you need to have some alone time to recharge.

Personality Continuum Scale



Introversion vs. extroversion also comes on a scale, and almost everybody falls somewhere in the middle. For example, you might enjoy being with people on some days, but also have a need to recharge on your own.

There are many introverts who don't have any social anxiety. Many people who have social anxiety are actually extroverts – if it weren't for their anxiety, they would love being around people.

Shyness is a temperament or personality trait that many people say develops when we're kids. We're getting more similar to social anxiety here – shy people are uncomfortable in social situations. They usually don't like being the center of attention, and they may feel embarrassed when they're meeting new people. Shyness is similar to social anxiety in that shy people are afraid of being negatively judged by others.

If you have **social anxiety**, then you have symptoms of anxiety in social situations. You might be able to work through it; to put on a happy face and get through the night. But inside, you're struggling. Your thoughts could be racing, and you could feel physical symptoms of anxiety like sweating or blushing.

And then we come to **social anxiety disorder**, which we already listed the symptoms of. The main difference between social anxiety disorder and the other things on the social anxiety spectrum is that it's a *disorder*. It significantly impacts your day-to-day functioning. You're no longer at the point where you're able to work through it on your own.



Journal Prompt:

- Where do you fall on the introversion/extraversion continuum?
Introvert – Ambivert – Extrovert

- Put an 'X' where you fall on the social anxiety spectrum.
Shyness – Social Anxiety – Social Anxiety Disorder

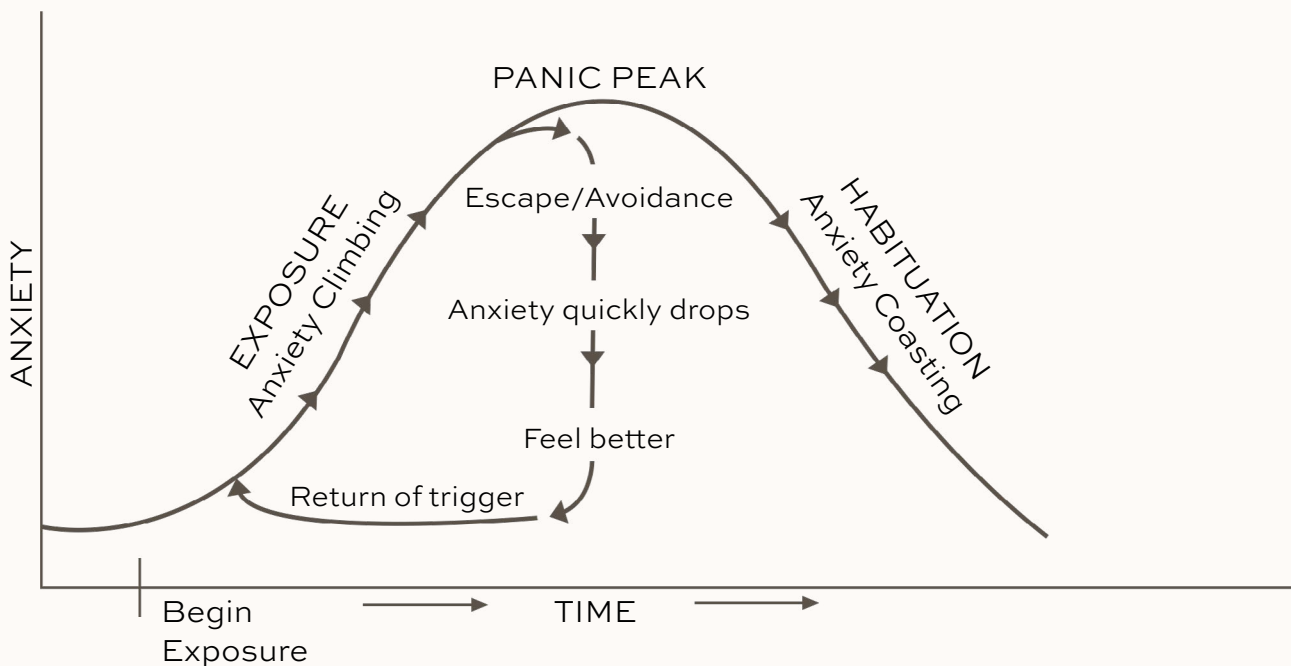
- How does social anxiety affect your daily functioning?



The cycle of social anxiety

One other very important thing to understand about social anxiety – and this will be very important for us later – is that it involves a cycle.

The Vicious Cycle of Escape & Avoidance



Here's what usually happens. We feel super anxious about a social situation. We're at a party or a job interview. The anxiety is intensely uncomfortable.

So we escape it. We could literally leave the situation. Or we could do something else to make the anxiety go away, like drink alcohol or vape.

We feel better almost immediately. Phew! The anxiety is gone, because we're no longer in the scary situation anymore. We're okay for a while – until the next time the trigger pops again. The next party. The next interview.

And the anxiety ambushes again, full force. Why does that continue to happen? Because we've only escaped the anxiety. We haven't done anything to deal with it and we get locked into the cycle.

This will be important later, when we talk about exposures. The important thing to understand now is that social anxiety doesn't go away on its own. We have to *take action* and confront the fear for it to start getting better.

Meet Andie. Andie experiences social anxiety, just like you.

Andie longs to have a solid group of friends – have fun and meet new people. She gets invited to social gatherings often. But even the idea of going to a party fills her with dread. Her mind is filled with thoughts like:

“What if everyone thinks I’m a loser?”

“What will I even talk about?”

“What if they only invited me to be polite, and no one even wants me to be there?”

But tonight, Andie challenges herself to go to an event at an art gallery. A friend from work invited her, but there’ll also be a lot of people she doesn’t know.

She gets to the event. As she makes her way through the crowds, her hands start shaking. She’s feeling flushed, her face feels hot, and it feels hard to breathe. She looks around and doesn’t see anyone she knows, which makes it worse. She just wants to crawl into a hole and hide. It feels like everyone is staring at her and wondering what she’s even doing there.

Andie feels like she’s going to *lose it*. She can’t handle this feeling. So she gets a beer to try to calm her nerves. She might get a little messy when she drinks, but anything better is feeling like *this*.

Soon after, a guy named Danny comes up to Andie and introduces himself. Andie feels her anxiety spike – *what should she say? Will he notice she’s sweating? Is she being boring or weird?*

She finishes her beer and takes a couple more shots – this will make her feel less anxious, right? It does, for a little bit – but she can feel herself getting tipsy and starts to worry about making a fool of herself.

Andie panics, and excuses herself to the bathroom to avoid having to talk to Danny. He was really nice, but she just can’t handle it. When she comes out, Danny’s moved onto another conversation. Andie doesn’t talk to anyone new. She stands in group circles, but doesn’t say anything because she’s worried about what people will think.

She drinks more and more to try to feel more calm. But at the same time, she doesn’t want to draw attention to herself and is worried about embarrassing herself. So she leaves the party early.

Does Andie’s story sound familiar to you?



Chapter 3:
Why Do I Have
Social Anxiety?

Chapter 3

Why do I have social anxiety?

There's a question that many of my clients ask me when they've had it up to here with social anxiety.

And that's: **“Why me?”**

It's a valid question. Why you? Why do you have to live with social anxiety when others don't? Why do social situations feel a lot harder for you and seem easier for everyone else?

I can tell you that having social anxiety *isn't your fault*. The truth is that scientists don't know yet exactly what causes social anxiety. Like most other mental health conditions, there are several things that can make some people more vulnerable to social anxiety than others.

Risk factors for social anxiety disorder include:

- A family history of anxiety disorders
- A shy temperament, even as a baby
- Watching your parents engage in socially anxious behaviors
- Having a traumatic or embarrassing social experience
- Brain differences like having an overactive amygdala

It's the old “nature vs. nurture” argument. But it's not nature vs. nurture; it's nature *and* nurture. Both nature (genetics and brain chemistry) *and* nurture (environment and life events) play a part.



There might also be things you're unconsciously doing that are keeping you locked in the cycle of social anxiety. Does this mean that you're to blame? Absolutely not. But it does mean that there's something you can do – something that's within *your control* – to get out of this cycle.

Part of how you could be keeping yourself locked in is by *avoiding* social situations altogether, which we talked about in the last chapter. But even when you make the effort to enter into social situations, you might still unknowingly be locking yourself in the cycle by using *safety behaviors*.

Safety behaviors are subtle behaviors that you use to avoid anxiety in social situations. It's a way to avoid the anxiety of a social situation without avoiding the situation altogether. But avoiding the monster of social anxiety can make it bigger and scarier over time.

When you use safety behaviors, you're not truly facing your fears. And remember, *facing your fears* is the only way to truly beat social anxiety.





Here are some common examples of safety behaviors that people with social anxiety use:

- Getting really drunk or high to feel more comfortable
- Going to an event but not talking to anyone
- Leaving early, or dipping out before anyone notices
- Hanging out with the dog instead of other people
- Hanging out by the snack table to avoid talking to anyone
- Not wearing the outfit you really wanted to wear to avoid calling attention to yourself
- Using sex or going home with someone as an escape
- Running away to the bathroom
- Not responding to texts
- Lying or exaggerating to make yourself look cooler
- Using exhaustion as an excuse to get out of things
- Being on your phone to avoid eye contact
- Putting in earbuds and pretending not to hear anyone

Sound familiar?

These behaviors don't *cause* social anxiety – again, there's no single “cause” of social anxiety. But they *do* keep the cycle of social anxiety going. And as long as you rely on them, you can't break free from social anxiety. You're not giving yourself a chance to face your fears.

Journal prompts:

- What are some safety behaviors that you tend to rely on?

- How do they make you feel when you use them?

- How does using these safety behaviors impact the way you behave in the current social situations? (For example, you might act more outgoing when drunk.) How does it impact the way you behave in future social situations?

- How might these behaviors make your social anxiety worse over time?



Chapter 4:
Taking Inventory

Chapter 4

Taking Inventory

Just a refresher: social anxiety disorder is a diagnosable health condition but social anxiety itself comes on a spectrum. Some people are shy, but are able to overcome this shyness to do what they need to do. Others are totally debilitated by social anxiety – they might not even be able to run errands or do other life tasks.

It's important to take inventory – and be aware of which situations are difficult for us. Does your social anxiety affect you across all areas of your life? Or is it worse in certain situations?



Read the scenarios below and place a checkmark in the box that best fits you

Social Skill	Piece-of-cake	I can do this sometimes	No way in hell
Say hi to colleagues or acquaintances			
Introduce myself to people I don't know			
Say hi to friends when I see them unexpectedly			
Start a conversation with someone I've met before			
Join a group conversation			
Go to a party (sober)			
Go on a first date			
Ask a question in class or a work meeting			
Make an unimportant call, like ordering a pizza			
Make an important call, like for work			
End a relationship instead of ghosting			
Go to the store (without using the self-checkout lane)			
Advocate for myself and say "no"			
Give a presentation in front of my class or company			
Go to a networking event			
Eat in front of strangers			
Ask a stranger for help			
Stay sober during a party			
Go to a job interview			
Start a new job			



Journal prompts:

- What are some other social situations that cause you anxiety that weren't on the list?

- Which of these situations impacts you the most?

- Which of your answers surprised you?

- Are there any areas where you don't feel social anxiety? What do you think makes this situation different?



Chapter 5:
All About Exposures

Chapter 5

All About Exposures

Now that you have a deeper understanding of what social anxiety is and how it impacts you, the rest of this book is dedicated to helping you take steps to overcome it.

Remember what I told you at the beginning of the book? The only way to defeat a monster is to face it. We won't beat social anxiety by running away.

Believe me – I wish that social anxiety would go away if you just ignored it for long enough. But we know it just doesn't work that way.

If you've done another Cognitive Behavioral Therapy program for social anxiety before, you might have been taught how to use coping skills to survive social situations or to challenge anxious thoughts when they come up.

Using these skills is fine to an extent. But it's not going to make social anxiety go away for good. And in some cases, it can even make your anxiety worse.

Coping skills can bring temporary relief from social anxiety. But you know what? **I think you deserve more than temporary relief.** You deserve to recover from social anxiety – for good.



What's exposure therapy?

That's why I use an evidence-based practice called *exposure therapy* with my clients. Exposure therapy, or exposures for short, invite you to face your fears head-on. It can be scary at first. But little by little, the fear starts to go away.

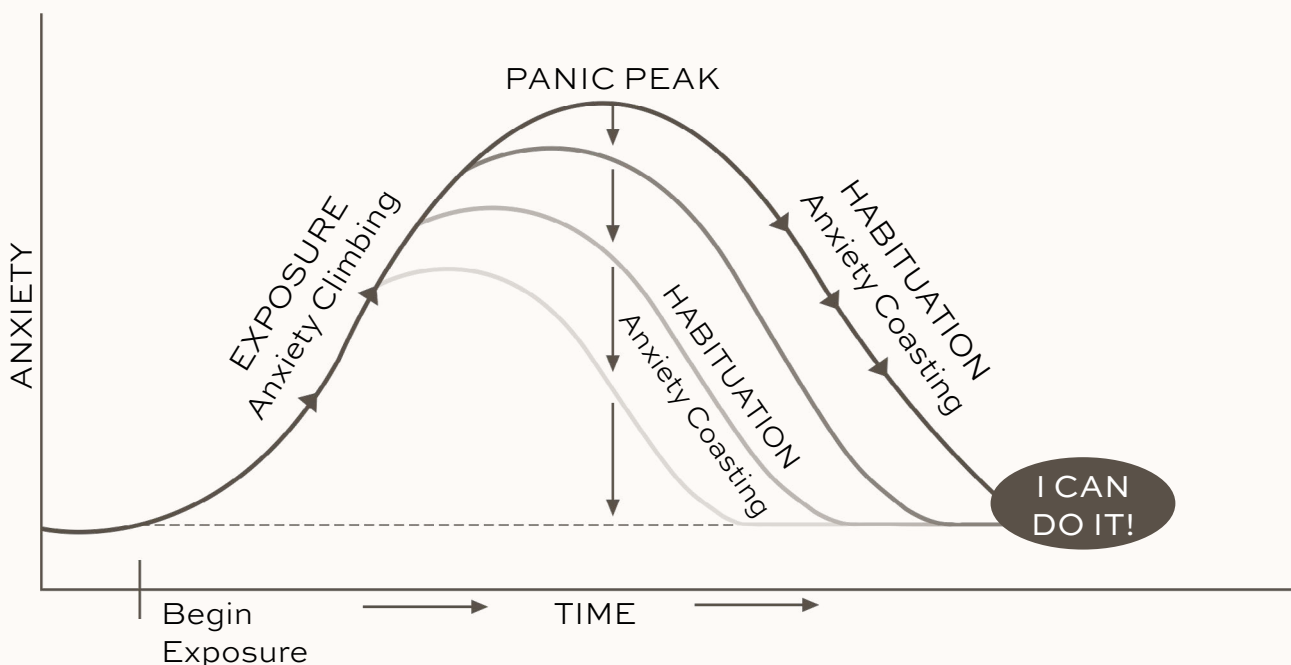
Exposures create real and *lasting* change. When you do an exposure, you purposely go into a scary situation you'd typically avoid. Your distress level can go way up. You may feel anxious and feel physical changes sweating, blushing, or a racing heart.

You learn to tolerate it. And by tolerating it, you teach your body that you're actually safe. As it turns out, tolerating small amounts of distress is good for you. Your body gets used to the distress, and, over time, what was so scary starts to not feel so bad.

This process is called *habituation*, and it's based in science.

If you jump into a cold pool on a hot summer day, it may feel ice cold at first. It's a shock to your system. But slowly, your body acclimates. It's no longer freezing – in fact, the cool water might even start to feel nice.

Practice Makes it Easier



When you avoid ever becoming distressed – if you run away from the social anxiety monster every time, whether it's through straight-up avoidance or safety behaviors – then you never experience the easy, downhill slide of habituation. You never give yourself an opportunity to even get there.

You stay locked in the social anxiety cycle we talked about earlier.

So is doing an exposure scary? Honestly, it can be, especially at first. But with social anxiety, the only way out is through.



Chapter 6:
Keep Going!

Chapter 6

Keep Going!

This is the point in the book where people might start to feel a little worried.

You might feel like you want to back out. You might be thinking, “Dr. Laura, this is sus. There’s no way I’m going to intentionally put myself in scary social situations.”

I completely understand. It’s scary! And it can be tempting to back out at this stage.

I think, right now, it’s most important to remind yourself why you’re here. Why you bought this book – what you were hoping for when you started it.

Journaling has never been more important than it is in this chapter. Even if you’ve skipped the journal prompts until now, I really encourage you to give some thought to these questions.

You’re at a critical juncture, and you have a decision to make. Are you going to keep going on this journey? Or will you stay here?



On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is it to you to find a way to beat social anxiety?

*Why did you choose this number, and **not a lower one**?*

Imagine you wake up tomorrow, and you've traveled into the future. You discover that you've worked through this book, and you've conquered social anxiety. How is your life different now? How is it better? Be as specific as possible. How are you spending your time?

You're still in the future. You've conquered social anxiety. It was hard to get through the exposures, but you did it. You look back over the past few months. How were you able to get through this book's exercises? What helped you through it when it was hard?

Now, you're in a different future. In this alternate dimension, you never finished the book. You chose not to move forward with exposures. You still have social anxiety. What is your life like?

My hope is for your answers to these questions to serve as your own pep talk. Let your answers be a reminder of why this is so important. Come back and revisit them whenever you need some inspiration to keep moving forward.



Chapter 7: Creating Your Hierarchy

Chapter 7

Creating Your Hierarchy

I'm so glad you're still with me! You've reminded yourself of why this is important to you, and what life without social anxiety might be like. That takes a lot of guts, introspection, and wisdom – and I admire that so much.

So, if you're ready, let's get started!

The first step to doing an exposure is to create a *fear ladder* or an *exposure hierarchy*. This is a way of ranking social situations based on how much anxiety it causes for you.

Why do we do this? In short, so that you don't jump into the deep end right away without knowing how to swim.

Exposures work because you expose yourself to small amounts of distress, little by little. If you started with the scariest possible situation that you can imagine, then that exposure could easily backfire. You could be so terrified that you're never willing to do another exposure again!

That's why we start small. The perfect exposure is challenging enough, but not so scary that it doesn't feel doable or makes you feel unsafe.

A disclaimer here is that you might also need the support of a therapist to safely challenge situations that are higher up on your hierarchy. Ideally, as you start your exposures on the lower rungs of the ladder, the things that used to be extremely scary start to feel more manageable. If they don't – if they still cause a level "10" of anxiety for you – then it's best you don't try to take them on by yourself.



Example Exposure Hierarchy

Goal: Go on a first date without excessively drinking alcohol

Intensity (1-10)	Exposure
10	Go on the date
9	Schedule a first date
8	Start a conversation first
7	Match with someone and reply when they start a conversation
6	Use the dating app 10 minutes a day and swipe right
5	Make a profile
4	Sign up for a dating app
3	Write down and repeat the worst case scenario out loud
2	Say your trigger words out loud at least 20 times
1	Identify trigger words: date, dating

Everyone's exposure hierarchy looks different, so it's important to create your own. Rank the social situations that cause you anxiety from 1 (never or very rarely cause you any anxiety) to 10 (terrify you; you can't think of a scarier scenario).





You can use the situations we used in our inventory, but I also want to encourage you to add some that are specific to you and your life.

- Say hi to friends when I see them unexpectedly
- Say hi to colleagues or acquaintances
- Introduce myself to people I don't know
- Go to an event or class without knowing anyone
- Start a conversation with someone I've met before
- Join a group conversation
- Go to a party (sober)
- Go out on a first date
- Ask a question in class or a work meeting
- Make an unimportant call, like ordering a pizza
- Making an important call, like for work
- End a relationship instead of ghosting
- Go to the store (without using the self-checkout lane)
- Advocate for myself and say "no"
- Give a presentation or pitch in front of my class or company
- Go to a networking event
- Eat in front of strangers
- Ask a stranger for help
- Walk in front of people
- Go to a job interview
- Start a new job



Chapter 8: Facing Roadblocks

Chapter 8

Facing Roadblocks

You've made it through creating your hierarchy, and maybe you've even done an exposure or two! That's wonderful! Congratulations. It will get easier with time.

In an ideal world, we would all just keep moving up our exposure hierarchy, one step at a time, until we feel we've conquered social anxiety. But often, things don't go so smoothly – and that's perfectly okay, too.

Remember what I said about how important it is to *start small* with exposures? If you take on something that's too scary right away, then you risk scaring yourself off of exposures altogether. Remember: “The perfect exposure is challenging enough, but *not so scary that it doesn't feel doable or makes you feel unsafe.*”

This is why it's important to check in with yourself as you're doing exposures. If an exposure is too scary, then it could be healthier to back off. The key is to challenge yourself *just the right amount.*

Sometimes, creating your hierarchy takes a bit of trial-and-error. You might start an exposure that you'd placed at “level one,” only to find that it's harder than you expected it to be. This is a 100% *normal* part of doing exposures. When you're creating a hierarchy, you're taking educated guesses about how anxiety-provoking you think an exposure might be. But you can't truly *know* how hard it'll be until you actually go and do it.

If you get to an exposure and it's harder than you thought it would be, you might be wondering: “So what do I do? Do I keep going with this exposure, or do I find an easier one?”

It's tricky, for sure. Doing exposures is a bit of a balancing act. Because – again – they're *supposed* to be a bit uncomfortable. But how uncomfortable is *too* uncomfortable?

It might be helpful to remember that the ultimate goal of exposure therapy – and taking this gradual approach to conquering your fears – is to *feel successful*. I want you to come out of exposures feeling like: “Yes! I got this! I can do it, even when it's scary and hard.” This gives you the confidence and momentum to stop avoiding social situations and get out of the social anxiety loop.



Here's what I recommend: Take your temperature.

Take a step back and ask yourself, “On a scale of 1 to 10 – with 1 being that I’m mildly uncomfortable, and 10 is the most terrified I’ve ever felt – how stressed am I feeling?”

Now here’s my cheat sheet of what to do with this number, and what I recommend to all of my clients.

If your “temperature” falls anywhere between a 1 and an 8, this is a healthy level of distress – and you should continue with the exposure without changing it. The more times you repeat the exposure, the easier it’ll feel. Your body will get used to the distress (habituation) and you’ll coast down the other side of that hill. It might be hard, but you got this.



If you’re at a 9 or 10, then consider making the exposure a little easier. At these levels, you’re likely overwhelmed with distress. Your body may be in a state of fight-or-flight. At this intensity, your body becomes flooded with adrenaline and the exposure might be too much. Some signs you’re in this state include:

- Feeling shaky or trembling
- Having a hard time breathing
- A racing heart that won’t slow down
- Feeling like you want to cry, yell, or curl up into a ball and hide

If you feel this way, then you might have jumped up a few too many steps in the hierarchy. Instead of climbing the ladder one rung at a time, you might have jumped up to a higher rung – and now you’re holding on for dear life.

Exposures aren’t helpful when you feel this terrified (remember, the goal is to leave feeling successful and motivated!), so if you’re at a 9 or a 10, then you may want to do a lower-level exposure instead.

One idea is to drop down your hierarchy. Keep doing exposures on lower rungs until the thought of doing this exposure isn’t as scary.

If your lowest-rung exposure on your hierarchy is already too terrifying, then here are 3 ideas for even lower-level exposures that you can try to start with.



What's in a word?

Are there any words related to your exposure that make you feel anxious?

For example, if your goal is to become comfortable giving a presentation in front of an audience, words like “stage,” “laughter,” “silence,” or “blinking out” may make you squirm. These are your “trigger words.” Becoming comfortable with these trigger words could be your first exposure step. Just like you repeat exposures, you can repeat the trigger word, out loud, until it loses all meaning and you're habituated.

All words tend to lose their meaning when they're repeated enough times. For example, say the word “cup” out loud. What came to mind, if anything? Maybe you imagined a red plastic cup, or a glass of water, or a favorite cup you had as a child.

Now, say the word “cup” out loud 20 more times. A lot of people will find that by the end of this, the word “cup” will lose all meaning. It's just some sounds put together. One syllable that only holds the meaning that we give it.

The same can happen for your trigger words, too. Say them out loud 20, 30, 40 times. Do they still have the same meaning and power they did in the beginning?

Activity:

1. List trigger words associated with your exposure.

2. Choose one trigger word. What feelings come up when you think about it?

3. Now, say the trigger word 20 to 50 times.

4. What feelings are associated with the word now?



Worst case scenarios: What am I really afraid of?

Another idea for a lower-level exposure is to think about the worst-case scenario.

Have you ever asked yourself what's driving your fear? What's truly behind it? In other words, *what would be the worst-case scenario if your fear came true?*

You're not afraid of these social situations "just because." There is probably a hypothetical situation that you've imagined over and over again. And the thought of that hypothetical coming true is *terrifying*. I hear you.

But often, when we actually say our worst case scenarios out loud, they sound a little bit... well, ridiculous. To be clear, *you* are not ridiculous for being afraid of this. But you might realize that what you fear as the worst-case scenario is highly unlikely to actually happen.

So, for this exposure, imagine you're a sportscaster going through the play-by-play of a game. Only here, the "game" is your worst-case scenario. Say, out loud, exactly what happens in this worst-case scenario.

For example: "I've decided to go to Sarah's party, where I don't know anyone. I'm walking toward the door... as I walk in, no one recognizes me. They laugh and ask me, 'What are you doing here?'. I try to talk to someone, but they aren't interested. I ask them a question about themselves – they smirk and walk away, turning their back to me. Someone else laughs at me for trying to mingle. Everyone ignores me, and I spend the entire party alone."

It's the same idea as the trigger words – the more you repeat this scenario, the less meaning and power it will hold over you. If you repeat it enough times, it may even start to feel silly to you. This is a way to do a visual exposure by imagining a hypothetical.





Trouble-shooting

One last lower-level exposure you can do is to problem-solve an idea that works for you in the moment. Let's say that you're in the middle of doing an exposure and you feel stuck.

Ask yourself, "What is the next easy step?"

For example, say you're in the middle of making a phone call to order a pizza. As the phone is ringing, you might feel suddenly terrified. Rather than focusing on getting through the whole phone call, simply focus on the next step as an exposure. In this scenario, it might simply be to stay on the line until someone picks up.

It's completely fine to adjust expectations, and change the exposure from "ordering a pizza" to "staying on the line until someone picks up." Once you've done that exposure – staying on the line – you can reassess and figure out if you want to keep going or if you've done enough for today.

The goal isn't to make the anxiety go away. Remember, that would be a safety behavior or avoidance – and avoidance keeps us locked into social anxiety.

Instead, it's about learning how to *tolerate* the anxiety. It's about getting to the point where you understand:

"Okay, this is scary. But it's not going to kill me. I can sit with this discomfort."

But if something really *is* too scary – a 9 or a 10 – then it's completely okay to climb down the ladder one rung and start with something that feels easier. Don't be too hard on yourself. All you have to do is walk forward, one step at a time.

Chapter 9: Taking Steps

Chapter 9

Time for Practice

This might be the most important chapter in the entire book. Yes, it's important to learn about what social anxiety is and where it comes from. Yes, it's important to understand the rationale behind doing exposures.

But *none* of this is as important as *actually doing the exposures*.

This is where you start fighting the monster of social anxiety. Where you start breaking the cycle.

I think you're ready, but it matters more what you think. Do **you** feel ready?

I encourage you to challenge yourself – but if you really don't feel ready, or if you feel unsafe in any way, I can't stress enough how important it is that you talk to your therapist. This is especially important if you feel so scared that you're having thoughts of hurting yourself.



I'll walk you through your first exposure. The idea, though, isn't to stop at the first one; it's to keep going, to keep moving up your hierarchy, until you've challenged and defeated your biggest social anxiety trigger.

I know I asked you to include scenarios that were a "1" on your anxiety scale in your hierarchy. But scenarios that are a "1," that never or almost never cause any anxiety, don't make good exposures.

That's because for an exposure to be effective, it needs to cause you a small and tolerable amount of distress. If a scenario doesn't make you feel anxious at all, then there's nothing to tolerate.

But, again, it's not healthy or realistic to start with something that's a "10," either. They say to aim for the stars – and I'm all for that, but I'm also a realist. Before making the stars our goal, let's try to jump a couple of feet into the air first.

So instead of starting with the "10"s, let's start with situations that you listed for a "2" level of social anxiety on your hierarchy.

Plan a date to do this exposure.

In the tracking tool, write down your "temperature" both before and after you do the exposure. How anxious do you feel before you do it? How do you feel after? Was it as scary as you thought it would be?

Remember, if the "2" activity ends up making you feel "10" anxious, then stop and do a lower exposure. You can do the exposure that you listed as a "1" on your hierarchy, or you can use one of the ideas that I've given you in Chapter 8.



If you feel frightened or stuck before doing an exposure, read through your answers to the journal prompts in Chapter 6. Remind yourself of why this matters to you.

1. Plan a date and what exposure you'll do.
2. Remind yourself of why it's important to you to do this.
3. On the tracking page, write down the thoughts you're having about doing this exposure. Take your temperature.
4. Do the exposure – without using safety behaviors.
5. On the tracking page, write down how it went. Take your temperature now.

Journal prompts:

- What did you learn about yourself by doing this exposure?

- What surprised you? Did it go how you thought it would go?

- Looking back on this experience, what helped you to get through it? How can you use this lesson next time you do an exposure?



Chapter 10: Afterword

Chapter 10

Afterword

Congratulations! You've made it through the book. That took a *lot* of dedication, bravery, perseverance, self-love, and more. I hope you feel proud of yourself. Take a moment to celebrate this huge win!

Let's do some journaling to reflect.

- How do you feel in this moment, now that you've made it to the end of this book?

- What are the 3 most important lessons you gained from reading this book?

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident do you feel about putting those lessons into practice?



But wait! Before you close the book and put it away, I hope you can stick around for some final words. Because even though the book is over, your journey with social anxiety is just beginning.

All of the lessons you've learned while reading this book are things that you'll need to keep practicing and practicing, over and over again – even when (maybe *especially when*) it feels hard.

Think about it this way: It's almost like you've just finished reading a book on how to play the violin. You know the basics of music theory now, which is wonderful. You know how to hold the violin, and you know how to read music. But to really become a master violinist, you need to actually *go out there and start playing violin*. Practice and practice.

Beating social anxiety is the same thing. To truly conquer it, you need to *practice* conquering it. There are opportunities all around you if you look for them. Take those opportunities to practice, again and again.

Maybe you're at a restaurant and you feel anxious about asking the server for a refill. You're tempted to ask your friends to ask for you, but you remember – hey, this is an opportunity to practice what Dr. Laura was talking about! And you take on the challenge to ask them yourself.

Or maybe you're at a party, and you're tempted to get really high to feel a bit calmer. But you remember something from this book: “Hey, getting high is one of my safety behaviors. And what I really need to do is practice confronting this fear.” So you hang out at the party for 5 minutes without getting high. 10 more minutes. Challenging yourself more and more each time.

Little by little, it'll get easier. Because that's what happens when you confront monsters. They start to seem way less scary. And you start to realize: hey, maybe I can do this.

And you know what? You *can* do this. I believe in you – wholeheartedly.

Dr. Laura

