**TOOL #4: Facing fears**

It’s normal to want to avoid situations that cause you anxiety. Avoiding feared social situations is a very effective strategy because it reduces anxiety in the short-term. However, avoiding social situations increases your fear in the long-term because it prevents you from learning that your feared expectations are either unlikely to actually happen or aren’t as bad as you think. Therefore, an important step in managing your social anxiety is to face the situations that you have been avoiding because of social fears. Repeatedly facing those situations reduces distress in the long-term and helps build up confidence.

First, make a list of the social situations that you fear (e.g., saying “hi” to a co-worker,

asking a stranger for directions, making a phone call, etc.). Refer back to the list you

made when you spent some time observing your social anxiety and identifying the

situations that cause you anxiety (see Tool #1). Common types of feared social

situations include public speaking, informal socializing, being assertive, dealing with

conflict, being the center of attention, eating and drinking in front of others, speaking to authority figures, and interacting with unfamiliar people. Once you have a list, try and arrange them from the least scary to the scariest. Starting with the least scary situation, repeat that activity or enter that social situation (for example, saying “hi” to a co-worker every morning) until you start to feel less anxious doing it. Once you can enter that situation without experiencing much anxiety (on numerous occasions), move on to the next situation on the list.

**TIP:** If you haven’t already, spend a couple of weeks keeping track of the

types of social situations that make you anxious. This can help you

compile your list of feared situations.

**Eliminating Subtle Avoidance and Safety Behaviours**

Rather than completely avoiding social situations, some people engage in subtle

avoidance strategies or do things to feel safer or prevent their feared expectations from coming true. For example, if you’re worried about saying something stupid, you might try to say as little as possible. Examples of subtle avoidance strategies or common safety behaviours include:

* Removing oneself from the situation (e.g., sitting on the outside of the group,

frequently going to the bathroom, finding a task to look busy)

* Hiding visible signs of anxiety (e.g., wearing turtlenecks or lots of make-up to hide blushing)
* Using alcohol or drugs (e.g., drinking while in social situations)
* Distracting oneself (e.g., trying to think about other things, “zoning” out)
* Avoiding sharing personal information (e.g., keeping the conversation on

superficial topics, asking the other person lots of questions so the focus is on

them, changing the subject)

* Avoiding drawing attention to oneself (e.g., avoiding eye contact or smiling,

wearing sun glasses, speaking quietly, saying very little)

* Overcompensating (e.g., over-preparing for presentations, rehearsing what you are going to say ahead of time).
* **TIP:** We are often unaware of the things we do in social situations to feel

safer. So, for the next few weeks pay close attention to the things you do

to protect yourself in social situations.

These strategies prevent you from realizing that the situation is not dangerous, and that these behaviours may not be necessary to keep you safe. Thus, part of exposure involves reducing some of these subtle avoidance strategies or safety behaviours. Try to identify the things you do in social situations to feel safer (and make a list). Then try to reduce engaging in some of these behaviours when facing feared situations.

* **TIP:** People with social anxiety tend to focus on themselves during social

situations, which tends to make them feel even more anxious. When

socializing with others, try to pay attention to what other people are doing

or saying.