Social Anxiety

Why Talking Feels Hard and What Helps | Level B2 | EnglishBridges.com

Before You Read

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. How do you usually feel just before you start talking to someone you do not know well? What do you notice in your body?
2. What helps you feel calm before a presentation, an interview, or a first meeting?
3. How might feelings about talking to strangers differ by country, age, or personality?

Reading: Social Anxiety

Imagine a party where someone asks what you do for a living. For a person with social anxiety, the mind can **go blank**. Even a short chat can feel **nerve-racking**, and the hours afterward are often worse than the moment itself.

Social anxiety is not simply shyness. It is a long-lasting fear of being judged or embarrassed. Large international surveys suggest that about one person in twenty-five will meet the medical definition at some point. It often begins in the teenage years. Reported rates are higher in wealthier countries, though the reasons are not fully understood. Culture shapes the fear too. In Japan, a form called taijin kyofusho describes people who **dread** upsetting others more than embarrassing themselves.

Anxious people often turn their attention inward. They **dwell on** every small mistake and feel painfully **self-conscious**. Busy with this inner commentary, they follow the conversation less well. The belief that everyone is watching closely is called the spotlight effect. In one experiment, people in an embarrassing T-shirt tended to **overestimate** how many others noticed it. From the inside, it feels like constant **scrutiny**. From the outside, most people are busy thinking about themselves.

Common ways of protecting yourself can backfire. Some people **rehearse** every sentence or **monitor** their own voice and face. Others skip the event. This **avoidance** brings quick relief, but it teaches the brain that the situation really was dangerous. In one small experiment, teenagers who focused on themselves felt more anxious than teenagers who focused on the other person.

So what can you do? You should start by turning your attention outward. A **genuine** question works better than a clever one. If your hands shake or your voice wobbles, it helps to remember that most people will not notice. Silences are normal, and you can **cope** with them by breathing slowly and waiting. Change is usually **gradual**, so begin with low-risk situations such as greeting a neighbor. Expect a **setback** now and then. If the fear **persists** for months, you should talk to a doctor or counselor.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the box. Use each one once.

overestimate	**setback**	**nerve-racking**	**scrutiny**	**rehearse**	**dwell on**	**persists**	**go blank**
self-conscious	**gradual**	**dread**	**avoidance**	**cope**	**genuine**		

1. When the interviewer asked a surprise question, my mind started to _____ and I could not answer.
2. Waiting alone in the hospital corridor was a _____ experience.
3. Many students _____ the first day at a new school.
4. You should not _____ your mistakes all evening. Everyone makes them.
5. He felt _____ about his old clothes when he walked into the smart restaurant.
6. Many people _____ how easy a new language will be before they begin.
7. The company's accounts came under close _____ after the news report.
8. The band will _____ the new songs for two weeks before the concert.
9. His _____ of the dentist meant that a small problem became a big one.
10. I wanted a _____ answer, not a polite one.
11. It took a long time to _____ with the noise from the building site.
12. Learning a language is a _____ process, not a sudden one.
13. Losing his job was a serious _____, but he found a new one within a year.
14. If the pain _____ for more than a week, see a doctor.

Word Partners: Collocations and Word Families

Part A. Collocations

Match the two halves to make common phrases. Write the letter on the line.

1. a nerve-racking	_____	**a.** scrutiny
2. dread	_____	**b.** the past
3. dwell on	_____	**c.** with stress
4. under close	_____	**d.** your lines
5. rehearse	_____	**e.** wait
6. closely monitor	_____	**f.** going to the dentist
7. a genuine	_____	**g.** your heart rate
8. cope	_____	**h.** interest

Now choose three of the phrases and write your own sentences.

Part B. Word families

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.

1. The old house looked _____ in the dark, so we did not go inside. (*dread*)
2. Her confidence grew _____ over several months of practice. (*gradual*)
3. Her _____ disappeared after a few weeks of practice. (*self-conscious*)
4. Regular _____ of your heart rate can show how well you are resting. (*monitor*)
5. Try not to _____ situations that make you nervous. (*avoidance*)
6. I was _____ interested in her story, so I asked a lot of questions. (*genuine*)

Comprehension Questions

Answer in full sentences.

1. What happens to the person at the party, and why might the hours afterward be worse?

2. How is social anxiety different from shyness, according to the reading?
3. How common is social anxiety, according to the reading, and when does it often begin?
4. How is taijin kyofusho different from the fear that many people think of as social anxiety?
5. Why does turning attention inward make conversation harder?
6. What is the spotlight effect, and what did the T-shirt experiment show?
7. Why can avoiding situations, rehearsing every sentence, or monitoring yourself make the problem worse?
8. Which practical suggestion in the reading do you think is easiest to try? Why?
9. What does the writer mean by saying that, from the outside, most people are busy thinking about themselves? How could this idea help a nervous person?
10. **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Social anxiety usually begins after the age of fifty."* Explain your answer using the reading.
11. **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that people with social anxiety should avoid difficult situations until the fear disappears."* Explain your answer using the reading.
12. **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer begin with a scene at a party? Is it (a) to show a situation that many readers can picture, (b) to prove that parties cause social anxiety, or (c) to explain how the T-shirt experiment was done?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false). Be ready to correct the false sentences.

1. At the party, someone asks the person what they do for a living. **T / F**
2. Social anxiety is the same thing as shyness. **T / F**
3. Social anxiety often begins in the teenage years. **T / F**
4. Taijin kyofusho is mainly a fear of embarrassing yourself. **T / F**
5. Anxious people often watch themselves instead of listening. **T / F**
6. In the T-shirt experiment, people guessed that fewer people noticed the shirt than really did. **T / F**
7. The reading says most people are busy thinking about themselves. **T / F**
8. Avoidance helps the brain learn that a situation is safe. **T / F**
9. A genuine question can take pressure off the speaker. **T / F**
10. The writer says people should begin with the hardest situations first. **T / F**

Language Focus: Giving Advice with Should, Could, and It Helps To

English has several ways to give advice. The choice changes the tone.

should + base verb: a strong, direct suggestion. *You should drink more water.*

could + base verb: a gentler option. *You could try a short walk.*

it helps to + base verb: a useful habit or idea. *It helps to sleep well before an exam.*

From the reading:

"You **should start** by turning your attention outward."

"If your hands shake or your voice wobbles, **it helps to remember** that most people will not notice."

Tip: You can also begin with an imperative (*Begin with low-risk situations.*) or use *try* + -ing to suggest an experiment (*try listening*).

Part A. Sentence starters

Finish each sentence with a piece of advice.

1. If a friend feels nervous before a job interview, they should _____
2. To meet new people at a party, a person could _____
3. When a conversation goes quiet, it helps to _____

4. If you want to speak English with more confidence, you should _____
5. Before an important presentation, it is a good idea to _____

Part B. Questions

Answer each question in a full sentence. Try to give advice using should, could, or it helps to. Then ask a partner.

6. What advice would you give a friend who is nervous about speaking in class?
7. What could someone do to feel calmer before a phone call?
8. What should a new student do on the first day at a school?
9. How could a person make friends in a new city?
10. What should you do if you forget what to say in the middle of a talk?

Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or in a small group. Give reasons and examples.

1. When was the last time you felt nervous before talking to someone? What was the situation?
2. Do you prefer to have an important conversation face to face, by phone, or by message? Why?
3. Which situations make people most nervous: meeting strangers, speaking in class, phone calls, or job interviews? Why?
4. How can friends or colleagues help someone who seems nervous in a group?
5. Looking back on an embarrassing moment, how much do you think other people noticed or remembered?
6. Which of the writer's suggestions do you think would be hardest to follow in a real conversation? Why?
7. Is it easier to talk to strangers or to people you know well? Why might that be?
8. How might speaking in a second language change how nervous a person feels in a conversation?
9. The reading says that social anxiety is reported more often in wealthier countries and that the reasons are not fully understood. What might explain this?
10. In Japan, some people fear upsetting others more than embarrassing themselves. How might different cultures teach people to worry about different things in social situations?
11. How do social media and messaging apps change the way people feel about talking face to face?
12. Where is the line between normal nerves and a problem that needs professional help?
13. Should schools teach conversation skills and ways to deal with nervousness? What would a good lesson include?
14. Is it fair to expect quiet people to speak up in meetings and classes? How can leaders make conversation easier for everyone?

Online Practice

Scan the code or visit **englishbridges.com/lessons/social-anxiety** for the full reading, vocabulary activities, the Speed Challenge, typing practice, and AI conversation prompts.