



Diagonally-Parked in a Parallel Universe : Working Through Social Anxiety

Signe A. Dayhoff

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"Dear Social Anxiety Sufferers (Your Friends and Family),

Everyone has experienced fleeting anxiety in social situations. But perhaps your self-consciousness intensely insinuates itself into one or more important aspects of your everyday life. If so, you likely suffer from the agonizing pangs of social fear. Perhaps you dread meeting people, giving a speech, using a public restroom, eating in public, talking to your boss, or having your social skills or work observed or your competence assessed. Or perhaps you feel threatened in new social situations where you don't know the rules, avoid such situations altogether, or just want to escape. We all experience social anxiety a little differently yet we're all riding the same skittish horse.

When our social fears are intense and persistent, we have social anxiety disorder/social phobia (SA/SP - "sasp" for short). This means every day we're forced to confront the pain of being in the spotlight, evaluated, or being embarrassed by the very social situations we long to embrace. Socially we find ourselves on the periphery of life's dance, trying to follow the choreographed patterns and rhythm, but usually seeming to be one beat out of synch, zigging when we should zag. Often feeling like the butt of a cosmic joke, we see ourselves as the ball in a pinball machine, bouncing from bumper to bumper, missing targets, and always on the verge of "tilt." This is being diagonally-parked in a parallel universe.

Clinically too, having SA/SP puts us in another dimension. Even though SA/SP is the most common anxiety disorder and the third most common psychiatric disorder after depression and alcoholism, it's the least-diagnosed, least-widely understood, and most under-treated. Few mental health professionals are well-versed in the condition or its treatment even as the number of sufferers continues to increase.

Making our situation worse, most of us with SA/SP don't know we have a treatable disorder, that we're not "just shy," and that we can and need to get help. But even when we understand this, we're often reluctant to seek professional help because we're ashamed of the fear and worried that our complaints won't be taken seriously. Then, when we finally do muster the courage to do it, we're often hobbled by the very anxiety for which we seek help: Talking with and being evaluated by others. Together, these factors help keep this major health problem nearly invisible.

This comprehensive book was written to show you how you can:

- *Significantly and effectively alleviate your SA/SP pain;
- *Significantly improve your daily functioning; and
- * Effectively work toward your potential.

You benefit from the uniqueness of my perspective. I'm both a social psychologist working in the areas of social and personal effectiveness, interpersonal and presentation skills, and anxiety management and someone who has struggled for 22 years to successfully overcome SA/SP. (I used to worry endlessly about what others might think about me and my not meeting their expectations.) As a result, I understand how it feels to be living- and working through this often-incapacitating disorder and where we SA/SPers need to specifically concentrate our efforts to improve our lives.

You benefit from my knowledge of SA/SPers' concerns, issues, and desires - the result of my two years of talking with and listening to SA/SPers online via lists, news groups, and chats. You benefit from my research, teaching, consulting, training, and coaching experience, as well as my association with professionals in the SA/SP trenches.

To make your SA/SP more understandable and amenable to change, this book provides you with not only the theories and salient research on its origin, triggers, and maintaining mechanisms, but also a broad range of standard and alternative clinical approaches, life strategies, motivational exercises, and empathy. And because I know from extensive experience that your having exercises just thrown at you isn't likely to help you empower yourself and succeed, this book takes you back to square-one. It gives you the psychological preparation you need to jump-start, enable, and maintain your recovery process.

Because we SA/SPers tend to have difficulties with clinicians, this book takes the mystery and risk out of locating and talking to them and guides you through the process: From initiating your search to surviving your first appointment. It tells you what to expect and how to prepare for it. Because we SA/SPers struggle with presenting ourselves socially (whether communicating, socializing, dating, or finding a job), this book addresses each significant life activity, breaks it down into sequential, digestible chunks so you can absorb, assimilate, and achieve it. And, because the Internet has great importance and value for SA/SPers as one of the few means of establishing relationships and comfortable communication we have, the book pinpoints the services and resources available for those with SA/SP.

Since how you think, feel, and behave determines how you interact with your environment (and conversely), this book focuses on your perceptions, emotions, beliefs, and self-presentation. Using real-life stories, typical problems, and their solutions, the user-friendly format takes you logically, incrementally, step-by-baby-step through the multiple-level processes of your recovery. Through concise explanations, thought questions, self-quizzes, and exercises, you systematically develop and apply your cognitive and behavioral strategies to achieve your recovery goals.

In this process you'll assess your social anxiety, determine where you're headed, how to get there, and how you'll know when you've arrived. You'll act as a scientist doing experiments. You'll learn, practice, and apply new skills that will constructively change the way you think about and cope with not only your SA/SP but also the world outside yourself. You'll see yourself make positive changes.

Using this book's clinically-proven methods, you can reduce your:

- * anxiety and fear
- * depression
- * negative thinking
- * anger
- * loneliness
- * procrastination
- * shame and embarrassment

and increase your:

- * motivation to make change
- * confidence and self-esteem
- * ability to handle stress
- * initiating and maintaining conversations
- * problem solving
- * decision making

- * expressing yourself appropriately
- * patience
- * listening to others
- * social effectiveness
- * dealing with criticism
- * dating
- * networking
- * creating your own job and career opportunities
- * understanding of social anxiety, yourself, and others.

However, just reading this book isn't likely to ameliorate your SA/SP any more than just watching others exercise will cause you to lose weight and tone your body (although awareness may provide important identification, hints, and hope).

The book's recovery program is action-oriented, requiring your active, committed, persistent participation in order for you to alter all those factors contributing to your SA/SP: Your automatic fear arousal, negative thoughts, mistaken beliefs and assumptions, unrealistic expectations, and counter-productive behaviors.

Note: As much as we all may wish it to be true, there is no finger-snapping, lamp-rubbing, "Shazaam!" magical solution to SA/SP. It took many factors interacting over many years to bring you to your present state. So recovery will not be instantaneous. But if you take the time to make the necessary structured effort toward recovery (whether that includes therapy, medication, or both), you will quickly begin to experience small but significant changes in your thoughts, feelings, and behavior - glimpsing what it'll be like "without SA/SP."

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