

Everyone who comes to my office hears my onion ring story. As an older woman who lives alone, I often eat out at restaurants by myself. If I am eating my onion rings and I look up and recognize people are looking at me, I have two options. One: I can think they think I am a pathetic old woman for having to eat by myself, which is going to make me uncomfortable. I would pack up my onion rings and go home. My second option is if I look up and someone is looking at me I can think, "Oh...They are admiring my naturally white hair". This would not make me uncomfortable, and I would finish my onion rings. So, the question then is: If we have a choice between thinking negative or thinking positive why would you choose the negative? Also, why would we assume people are judging us without any evidence?

Social anxiety can arise from a random experience. Some point in time where you felt judged or ridiculed or insecure or just uncomfortable in a situation. It can begin in childhood with a social experience that affected you in an adverse way. It could be you tripped while walking down the hallway in middle school and your peers laughed at you. You may then take that uncomfortable feeling of embarrassment, tell yourself what you thought they must be thinking, and decide that you never want to feel that way again. You then adjust your level of social interaction to avoid any possibility of embarrassment. You were a kid. You cemented that thought in your memory and never looked back.

Fast forward fifteen years. You are an adult, and you get anxious in social situations, and you may not recognize why you are uncomfortable. You don't know how to stop the feeling as it has followed you around since that day you tripped in the hallway. I often hear from my clients that it is just the way they are. Or they tell me they have always been socially uncomfortable. As a therapist I challenge that perception. I challenge you to start asking yourself: What is it about this situation that makes me so uncomfortable? What happens if you take the cemented memory of "I am just that way" and find out why you are that way.

Cognitive distortions. Most of us use cognitive distortions but for people with anxiety they can be a pattern of maladaptive thinking which often becomes automatic. In my onion ring story, I am assuming to know what other people think. Am I a mind reader? Are you thinking about turtles right now? No? Okay then I am not a mind reader, and the chances are pretty good that you are not either. Thinking you know what people are thinking is just one way to feel discomfort which affects your ability to function in society. That is just one example of how cognitive distortions can affect your thought process and is just one of the many cognitive distortions you may use against yourself, which may create or contribute to your social anxiety.

Be introspective. In therapy I am going to ask you about the memories that stand out from childhood. Can you find the cemented memory's origin? I have given one potential reason behind your social anxiety, but this is not the only potential reason. Your social anxiety could also come from a variety of different experiences or thought processes or perceptions. Regardless of how you started down the road to being socially anxious, find a therapist to help you figure it out and change your life. -Kim