

# Shyness and Social Anxiety

a self help guide

Shining a light on the future





**“I dread going to places where I may have to talk to people. Before I set off I just think I’m going to do or say something stupid, and that people will think I’m an idiot. No one else seems to be like this and I really feel there is something wrong with me. The only way I can face people is if my girlfriend is with me. It’s not fair, she is full of confidence ...”**

**“If I have to talk in a meeting I just can’t cope. My legs go wobbly, I flush up and I feel quite sick. I feel everyone is watching me closely. I know it is silly and other people don’t seem to have the same difficulty. I keep thinking afterwards that they must feel I’m not really up to the job ...”**

These are the thoughts of two people who have a problem with shyness and social anxiety. This is a surprisingly common problem though people may not often talk about it. This booklet aims to help you to:

- recognise whether you may have a problem with shyness or social anxiety;
- understand what it is, what can cause it, and what can help keep it going;
- looking at ways you can help yourself to overcome shyness or social anxiety.

Shyness and social anxiety are common problems that affect both men and women. Most of us feel shy or anxious in social situations at some point in our lives. This can be a much more serious problem for some people however, who find that their lives are made very difficult by their problem.

## **Do I suffer from social anxiety?**

In order to check whether you may be suffering from social anxiety place a tick next to those symptoms you experience regularly.

- You feel a strong feeling of fear in social situations that won’t go away.
- You think you may act in a way that will be embarrassing in front of others.

## **What happens to your body**

When you go into a situation with others you feel anxious and may have some of the following feelings in your body:

- Heart racing and pounding.
- Chest feels tight or painful.
- Tingling or numbness in toes and fingers.
- Stomach churning or butterflies.

- Having to go to the toilet.
- Feeling jumpy or restless.
- Tense muscles.
- Sweating.
- Breathing changes.
- Dizziness and feeling light headed.
- Blushing.

### **What you think**

- You know that the fear is too much or unreasonable.
- You feel that others are thinking badly of you.
- You think others are judging you.
- Before you go into social situations you think that things will go badly.
- You think “I will make a fool of myself” or “I will look stupid”.
- You may think “I’m boring” or “I’m strange”.
- You may believe “If I get it wrong people won’t like me” or “If I show I’m nervous people will think I’m stupid” or “I must not look anxious”.
- You have a negative picture of yourself in your mind, which is how you fear other people see you, this may be flustered, foolish, uninteresting, weak, timid etc ...
- After you’ve been in a social situation you think “that was awful”, “I looked so stupid”, etc.

### **What you do**

- Sometimes you go into social situations that you find difficult but find this very distressing and become very anxious.
- You avoid going into social situations that you find difficult, even if this is inconvenient to yourself. For example, going out to buy sandwiches rather than having to go into the busy staff canteen.
- Avoid talking on the telephone.
- Do things to help yourself in difficult social situations, such as rehearsing what you are going to say, offering to help in social situations so that you can keep busy, talking for a short time but then moving on to another location.
- Cannot relax in social situations, drink more, smoke more, talk quickly, keep on the move ....

If you have ticked many of the boxes then you may be experiencing social anxiety or shyness.

## What is shyness or social anxiety?

People who suffer from shyness or social anxiety often believe that **other people will think badly of them** or that people will be judging them. They think that they are being closely observed by other people and they would like to give a good impression. At the same time they may fear that they are **not as good as other people** and can't 'come up to the mark'.

They suffer **symptoms** of anxiety such as tension, rapid heart beat and light-headedness when they are in social situations. They may blush or stammer or be unable to speak.

Certain situations may seem to be more difficult than others. People may feel quite at ease speaking to people they know but feel very anxious with strangers. Eating or speaking in front of others can be very difficult, as can crowded places such as canteens, pubs, shops or queues.

Some people will begin to avoid difficult situations, often leading to great inconvenience, loss of social life or even career prospects. Other people will find ways of avoiding making a fool of themselves by carrying out 'safety behaviours'. This can include not looking people in the eye so as not to draw attention to themselves, sitting down, holding on to something, staying close to someone they know, talking slowly and deliberately, keeping busy, moving quickly from conversation to conversation.

In summary – People who experience social anxiety fear that other people will think badly of them and believe that they are not as good as others. This makes social situations very difficult or impossible for them.

## What causes social anxiety?

Social anxiety is something that very many people experience in a mild form but some people find themselves more seriously affected by it. It is not a sign of any more serious physical or mental illness, but can be extremely distressing.

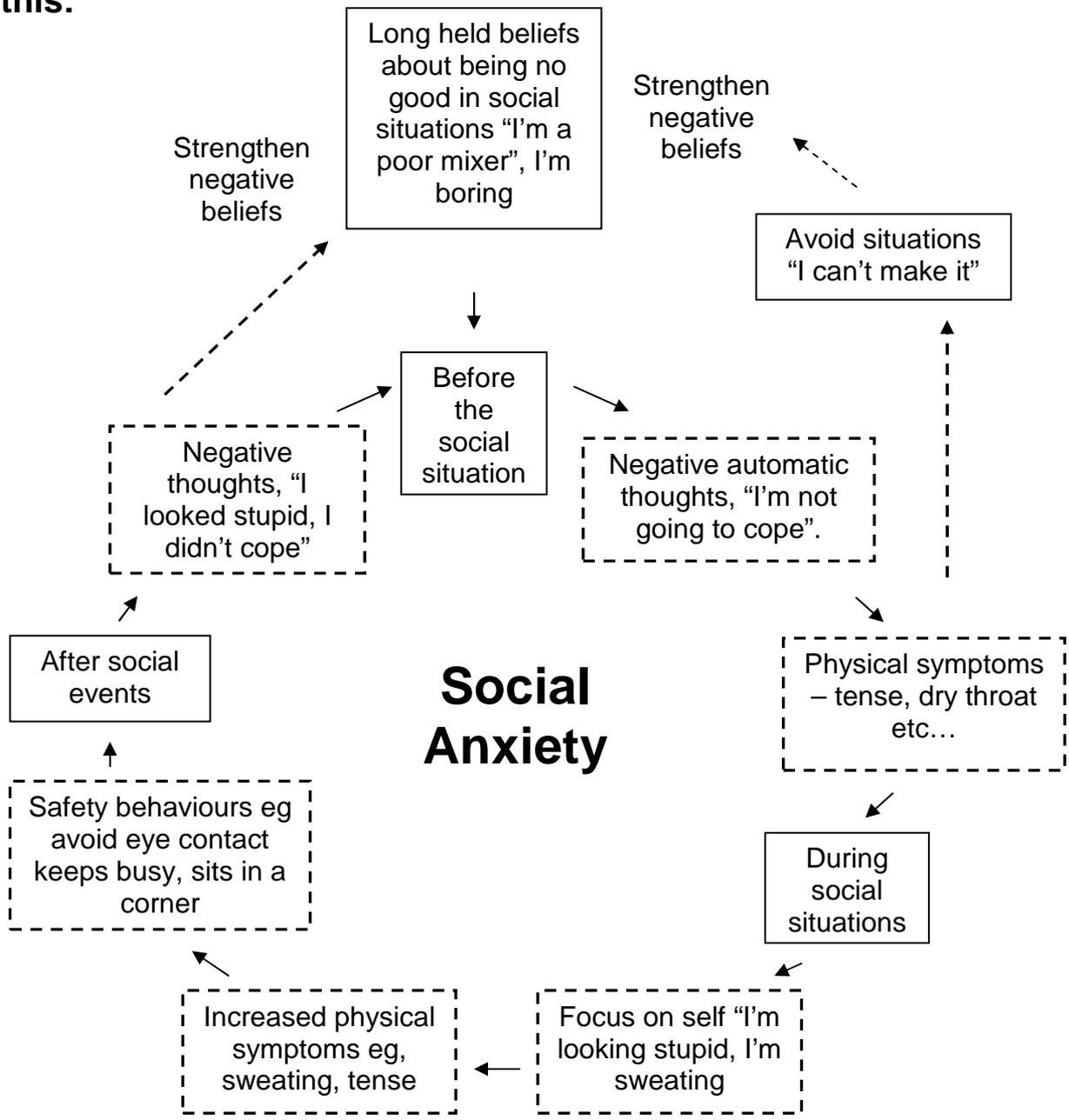
It is often related to 'low self esteem' or a poor opinion of yourself, which may have begun in childhood. Some people seem to be naturally more anxious and have learned to worry. Others may have had stressful life events that have led them to feel like this.

## What keeps social anxiety going?

Sometimes people feel socially anxious when they are young but become more confident as they get older. For other people it can just go on and on and become a life-long problem. There can be a number of reasons for this:

1. If someone has an **anxious personality** they will be in the habit of feeling anxious and will have **long term beliefs** that they are **'no good in social situations'**.
2. **Avoidance** of social situations keeps the person from becoming more used to social occasions. This stops them from learning that they can cope and feel fine. If a situation is avoided it feels even more difficult the next time they try and go into it. Sometimes people have **safety behaviours** that don't let them learn that they can cope. For example always sticking with a friend.
3. The person with social anxiety often holds an **unpleasant image of how they look** to others, in their mind. When mixing with others the anxiety tends to make them focus on themselves more. They think of this image, feel anxious and believe that they look terrible to others. **They rarely look to see how the other person is really responding to them.** They make negative guesses about what the other person is thinking and therefore **never challenge** their negative, unpleasant image of themselves.
4. **'Fear of fear'** will sometimes take over so that the person will predict that they will be anxious in certain situations and expect certain symptoms, "I know I will go bright red when I speak", "I won't be able to get my words out" or "what if people notice my hands shaking?". These thoughts increase anxiety even before they go into the feared situation.

**4. A vicious circle of social anxiety can begin which will look like this:**



**In summary** - social anxiety is linked to low self esteem and continues because people hold long term beliefs that they are 'no good in social situations'. These beliefs are never challenged because of avoidance safety behaviours and self focusing when faced with social situations.

**How can I help myself to overcome social anxiety?**

There are a number of ways that you can begin to help yourself to overcome anxiety. The approaches we will be using will be under the following headings:

- **Understanding** social anxiety;
- **Negative beliefs and images** in social anxiety;
- **'Self processing'** reducing your focus on yourself;
- **Tackling avoidance** and safety behaviours.
- Tackling the **physical symptoms** of social anxiety;

## Understanding social anxiety

i. You may already by now have some ideas about what is causing your social anxiety. In order to understand it even better it may help you to try the following exercises:

Think back to number of actual occasions that you found difficult over the last month then try and understand in more detail what was happening.

It may help to try and draw out your own vicious cycle of social anxiety - think of a recent social situation you found difficult.

After a social event my negative thoughts are:	My long held beliefs are: ..... ..... ..... .....	My negative automatic thoughts before a social situation are:
..... ..... ..... .....		..... ..... ..... .....
My avoidance or safety behaviours are:	Self focus The negative picture of myself which I hold in my mind is:	My physical symptoms are:
..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... .....

ii. If you can't get a clear picture of your difficulties by thinking back, then it may help to keep a **social anxiety diary**. For one or two weeks keep a diary of when you feel anxious and what was going on at the time. Keep a note each time of **thoughts, physical symptoms, avoidance or safety behaviours**, what you did and what your **thoughts were afterwards**.

Once you have a much clearer view of your own problems then you can begin to tackle the various parts of it and break the vicious circle of anxiety.

## How can I reduce my negative thoughts, beliefs and images?

We have seen the role that thoughts have in keeping going the vicious circle of social anxiety. Thoughts can be words or they can be pictures in your mind. The following examples may help you to identify your own thoughts and pictures.

Examples:

### Negative Automatic Thoughts

- "I don't know what to say - people will think that I'm stupid."
- Everyone will look at me when I walk in and I will shake."
- "I will stammer and not find my words."
- "I sounded really pathetic when I asked a question."

### Picture

- Image of self as small mousy creature
- "Image of self looking wobbly and others smirking."
- Image of self flushed and sweating look of pity on faces of others.
- Image of self with high squeaky voice, others looking strong and calm.

It may help to write down your own negative thoughts and images:

Thoughts	Images

Once you know what they are you can begin to fight back and break the vicious circle.

In particular ask yourself if you are making the following **thinking errors**?

1. Am I **mind-reading**? eg “he/she thinks I’m boring”  
In this case you don’t tend to find out or look to see what the other person really thinks. You believe your own negative views and blame it on them! eg “he doesn’t like me”. This is a very common problem for socially anxious people who assume their own negative view of themselves, is also held by others.
2. Am I **fortune-telling or catastrophising**? eg, “it’s going to be a disaster, everyone will be laughing at me”.
3. Am I **personalising** this? eg, “they are all laughing, they must be talking about **me**” or “he looks tense it’s probably because he thinks he’s got to sit with **me**”.
4. Am I **focusing only on the bad things** eg, “I really clammed up when I tried to speak to Jane” (ignoring that you had been able to speak easily to other people that day).

These thinking errors mean that you don’t view yourself in social situations in a fair way. It may help to begin to try and answer back to find a fairer picture of what is happening. A good way of doing this is to write two columns - one for your thoughts that make you anxious and the other for a fairer more balanced thought, eg:

### **Anxious Thought**

“If I hadn’t kept quiet I would have said something stupid and people would have thought I was odd”.

### **Balanced thought**

“People would not have thought I was odd, friends have said I always sound so sensible, I just expect people to be negative about me”.

### **Anxious Thought**

“I just gabbled away all the time, I must look like an idiot”.

### **Balanced Thoughts**

“No one seemed bothered by this. People come over to talk, I can’t be that bad”.

Write down some of your thoughts now and write as many answers or balanced thoughts as you can. Look out for thinking errors. This question might also help, “what would you say to a friend who was thinking that way?”

The aim is to get faster at catching these anxious thoughts and answering back almost instantly. It takes a lot of practice, but really does work.

<b>Anxious Thoughts</b>	<b>Balanced Thought</b>

## **How can I stop thinking that everyone is looking at me?**

Research has shown that people with social anxiety tend to show an increase in ‘self processing’ in situations where they feel anxious. This means that:

- They **concentrate a lot on their own body** especially looking for the symptoms of anxiety, eg shaking, sweating, red face, difficulties in speaking.
- They **focus on their own thoughts** with the negative images and views of themselves mentioned in the previous section.

- They have a strong **negative image of how they look to others**.
- The **image** is not the way they appear to others.
- They feel that they are the **centre of attention** and all this attention is critical and negative.

Ways of reducing self focus are:

- Do not '**monitor**' **yourself** in social situations, pay attention to what is happening around you:
  - **look** at other people and the surroundings;
  - really **listen** to what is being said (not to your own negative thoughts);
  - don't take **all the responsibility** for keeping conversations going - silence is OK, other people will contribute.
- Begin to recognise that **your physical symptoms** of anxiety are not as noticeable as you think. Focus on your own body less and you'll stop noticing these symptoms.
- Begin to look at other people to see if they show symptoms of anxiety.
- Begin to believe that **people will not dislike you** because you are anxious
  - would you dislike someone just because they were anxious?
- Begin to note that you are **not the central focus** of everyone's attention.

Try out some of these ideas and see if they work for you. Begin to challenge some of your long term beliefs that you are no good in social situations.

## How can I change my own behaviour?

Changing what you do is probably the most helpful way to overcome social anxiety. We have already talked of how avoidance and safety behaviours keep social anxiety going. It will help to be clear which behaviours you need to tackle. The following example may help you to pinpoint your own avoidance and safety behaviours.

<p><b>Avoidance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Not going to places where you will meet people.</li> <li>● Asking other people to do things for you when you would have to meet people.</li> <li>● Not talking to someone you</li> </ul>	<p><b>(write your own list here)</b></p>
<p><b>Safety Behaviours</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Avoiding looking people in the eye.</li> <li>● Say little or let someone else do the talking.</li> <li>● Plan what to say or rehearse words.</li> <li>● Grip objects tightly.</li> <li>● Go to a safe place/corners.</li> <li>● Look away.</li> <li>● Keeping very busy.</li> <li>● Speak quickly.</li> <li>● Don't speak about self.</li> <li>● Look for a safe person to stick with.</li> </ul>	<p><b>(write your own list here)</b></p>

All of these types of avoidance and safety behaviours keep the problem going. It is important to:

- gradually reduce the avoidance and begin to face the things you fear.
- Begin by making a list of all the avoidance and safety behaviours that you aim to prevent. Next make an 'anxiety ladder' where those targets easiest to achieve are at the bottom and your most difficult situations are at the top. It may help to look at this example.

**Fear of talking in front of a group of people**

John is fearful of talking in front of a group of people. In the past he has avoided this by using safety behaviours such as not looking at others, keeping busy, speaking very quickly and staying next to a close friend who talks a lot. Recently he has stopped going to the club, because of his fear. He really misses this. He has made up the following anxiety ladder.

### Most Feared

- 6. Say more and speak slower in a group
- 5. Mix with people other than close friends
- 4. Look at people when in a group.  
Don't monitor own symptoms and thoughts.
- 3. Stay with other people instead of keeping busy with jobs the whole time.
- 2. Go to club on my own and meet friends inside
- 1. Meet friend and go into club

### Least Feared

John will begin with step 1 and gradually work towards step 6. He will gradually reduce his safety behaviours and make sure not to take on new ones!

**Try this for yourself, make up an anxiety ladder.**

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....
- 6.....
- 7.....
- 8.....
- 9.....
- 10.....

### **Take things one step at a time.**

You will need to practise regularly to manage thoughts and physical symptoms of anxiety using the skills you have learned in the other sections. You will gradually learn that you can cope and feel comfortable in social situations. It is worth remembering that many other people feel anxious in social situations too, it just doesn't show. You are not the only one.

## **How can I reduce my physical symptoms?**

### **Reducing Physical Symptoms**

#### **Relaxation**

In order to reduce the severity of physical symptoms it is useful to 'nip them in the bud', by recognising the early signs of tension.

Once you have noticed early signs of tension you can prevent anxiety becoming too severe by using **relaxation techniques**". Some people can relax through exercise, listening to music, watching TV, or reading a book.

For others it is more helpful to have a set of exercises to follow. Some people might find relaxation or yoga classes most helpful, others find tapes useful. You can obtain a relaxation tape from your GP, and there are also a wide number of relaxation tapes available in the shops.

Relaxation is a skill like any other which needs to be learned, and takes time. The following exercise teaches deep muscle relaxation, and many people find it very helpful in reducing overall levels of tension and anxiety.

#### **Deep muscle relaxation**

It is helpful to read the instructions first and to learn them eventually. Start by selecting quite a warm, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. Choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed to begin with. Lie down, get comfortable, close your eyes. Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly: in two-three and out two-three. Say the words "calm" or "relax" to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax. You should breathe in when tensing and breathe out when you relax. Starting with your hands, clench one first tightly. Think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm.

Study the tension for a few seconds and then relax your hand. Notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling. This is the relaxation beginning to develop.

Do the same with the other hand.

Each time you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they're relaxed. Don't try to relax, just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they're relaxed and when they're tense. Now do the same for the other muscles of your body. Each time tense them for a few seconds and then relax. Study the way they feel and then let go of the tension in them.

It is useful to stick to the same order as you work through the muscle groups:

- Hands - clench first, then relax.
- Arms - bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.
- Neck - press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly.
- Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.
- Face - there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.
- Chest - take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.
- Stomach - tense your stomach muscles as tight as you can and relax.
- Buttocks - squeeze your buttocks together, and relax.
- Legs - straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face. Finish by wiggling your toes.

You may find it helpful to get a friend to read the instructions to you. Don't try too hard, just let it happen.

To make best use of relaxation you need to:

- Practise daily.
- Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- Learn to relax without having to tense muscles.
- Use parts of the relaxation to help in difficult situations, eg breathing slowly.
- Develop a more relaxed lifestyle.

This relaxation exercise is available on tape from your GP.

Remember relaxation is a skill like any other and takes time to learn. Keep a note of how anxious you feel before and after relaxation, rating your anxiety 1-10.

### **Controlled Breathing**

**Over-breathing:** it is very common when someone becomes anxious for changes to occur in their breathing. They can begin to gulp air, thinking that they are going to suffocate, or can begin to breathe really quickly. This has the effect of making them feel dizzy and therefore more anxious.

Try to recognise if you are doing this and **slow your breathing down**. Getting into a regular rhythm of in two-three and out two-three will soon return your breathing to normal. Some people find it helpful to use the second hand of a watch to time their breathing.

It takes at least **three minutes** of slow breathing for your breathing to return to normal.

### **Distraction**

If you take your mind off your symptoms you will find that the symptoms often disappear. Try to look around you. Study things in detail, registration numbers, what sort of shoes people are wearing, conversations. Again, you need to distract yourself for **at least three minutes** before symptoms will begin to reduce.

Whilst relaxation, breathing exercises and distraction techniques can help reduce anxiety it is vitally important to realise that anxiety is not harmful or dangerous. Even if we did not use these techniques, nothing awful would happen. Anxiety cannot harm us, but it can be uncomfortable. These techniques can help reduce this discomfort.

### **Summary - coping with social anxiety**

**Understand** all the parts of your anxiety the physical symptoms, the thoughts and beliefs and your safety and avoidance behaviours.

**Reduce negative thoughts** by looking for and challenging thinking errors. Use balanced thoughts to get a fairer picture of yourself.

**Reduce self processing** try not to monitor your own physical symptoms and thoughts. Look to what is going on around you.

**Reduce avoidance and safety behaviours** by gradually facing situations you fear whilst reducing safety behaviours.

Tackle the **physical symptoms** of social anxiety using **relaxation** and other methods described.

## Where can I get further help?

We hope you will use the exercises suggested in this booklet. They may help you overcome social anxiety and return to normal life.

If you feel you are making little progress or the problem is getting worse then seek help in overcoming your problem.

Your G.P. is the best person to talk to first. Your GP may suggest a talking treatment or tablets or both. He or she may suggest you see a mental health worker who can offer expert help with your problems.

If you feel so distressed that you have thoughts of harming yourself then visit your doctor as soon as possible and explain to him or her how you are feeling.

## The following organisations and help lines may also be useful:

- **Mind InfoLine**  
Mon - Fri 9.15am to 5.15pm  
Tel: 0845 766 0163
- **National Debt Line.**  
Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.  
Tel: 0808 808 4000
- **Relate** - Help with marital or relationship problems. Relate, Herbert Grey College, Little Church Street, rugby, Warwickshire Cv21 5AP  
Helpline: 0845 456 1310
- **Samaritans**  
Linkline (local rate) - confidential support for anyone in a crisis.  
Tel: 08457 909 090
- **Family Link** – a befriending scheme offering support and a practical approach to families with young children in the north east of England.  
Tel: 0191 256 2448
- **NHS Direct**  
Telephone Helpline/Health Information Service.  
Talk confidentially to a nurse or information officer.  
Calls charged at local rate:  
Tel: 0845 4647

## Some useful books you may like to buy or borrow from the library:

- **Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy.** David Burns. New American library, New York. (1980)
- **Feel The Fear and Do it Anyway.** Susan Jeffers. (2002)
- **Managing Anxiety.** Helen Kennerley. Oxford University Press (1995).
- **Living with fear.** Isaac Marks. McGraw Hill (1978).

Written by Lesley Maunder and Lorna Cameron with contributions from healthcare staff and service users in Northumberland

**This leaflet can be made available in a range of formats on request (eg Braille, audio, large print). Please contact the Patient Information Centre on Tel: 0191 223 2545**

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