

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) for Social Anxiety and Shyness

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Abstract—Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) is a psychotherapy developed by the author, which can be applied to a number of mental health conditions, including social anxiety and shyness.

Index Terms—social anxiety, shyness, communication-focused therapy, CFT, communication, psychotherapy, treatment

I. INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL ANXIETY is very common. 90% will have experienced an episode of social anxiety in their lives. However, if it occurs early and over a prolonged period of time, it can interfere with a person's mate selection, school work, education and the job he or she chooses. This form of anxiety may be one of the most problematic ones, because of its potential to interfere with a person's life. In several cases, social anxiety can be self-limiting, as people grow out of it, while in many others it can lead to social withdrawal and the constant feeling that one is missing out on life.

Social anxiety is a form of anxiety, and as such it is a feeling of uncertainty and a fear of the unknown. The feeling of uncertainty and a sense that something 'bad' could happen are closely related. A bad outcome is usually related to the sense of self, the integrity as a person in all its attributes. For example, in the case of social anxiety, a feared outcome could be rejection and the sense of not being good enough as a person. This is a hurt that goes right to the core of one's self. Individuals with social anxiety often see their communication patterns as a direct expression of themselves rather than as a skill which can be experimented with to find ways of interacting with others that ultimately fit one's personality and sense of self. Communication patterns with oneself and others are not rigid, but evolve over time. Unhelpful ones are discarded, while helpful ones are promoted. Since communication is the instrument by which people get their needs met, pursue what is valuable and meaningful to them, and fulfill their aspirations, having functional and adaptive communication patterns vis-à-vis oneself and vis-à-vis others

is important to lead a happy and successful life. Unfortunately, those suffering from social anxiety interferes with the development of helpful communication patterns, and so, directly interferes with life itself.

A. A Vicious Cycle

Patients with social anxiety usually have a desire to communicate with other people and are interested in communication, but they often have a higher expectation of themselves to 'get it right'. Whether it is that they feel they have more to lose from a social interaction or they have an elevated definition of what social success needs to be or what constitutes a failure, not engaging in communication with others decreases one's communication skills and sense of success even further.

B. Autoregulation Fails

One of the reasons why often there is no self-correction is that communication is such a central, and powerful, element of living organisms. It is necessary for survival and thus lacks the constraints of other parts of life. If it does not work, the organism withdraws to avoid feeling worse. What should now take place is reflection and learning to make communication with oneself and others work. Unfortunately, for various reasons, this often does not happen.

C. Wishes, Needs, Aspirations, Values

Communication is only an instrument, but its purpose is to maintain and ensure the survival of the individual, where survival does not only cover basic biological needs, but also the survival of a person with a sense of self. Thereby, communication ensures the survival of communication.

Having a purpose for communicating with oneself can facilitate the communication process. If there is a sense of purpose, the individual usually has enough motivation to get in contact with oneself and others again. This, however, usually requires having a clearer sense of what is relevant and meaningful to oneself.

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II. SOCIAL ANXIETY AND SHYNESS

Social anxiety can be defined as nervousness in social situations. What is meant by ‘social situations’ is a situation where communication takes place among a number of people or in front of people. It is rarer that it affects people in one-on-one interactions. Some of it may be related to not having a sense of control or seeing the other person as judging and making this judgment personal and very important. Having a clearer sense of what is relevant and meaningful, a sense of purpose in interacting with oneself and others, usually facilitates communication.

A. Symptoms

Individuals higher in social anxiety avert their gazes, show fewer facial expressions, and show difficulty with initiating and maintaining conversation. Trait social anxiety, the stable tendency to experience this nervousness, can be distinguished from state anxiety, the momentary response to a particular social stimulus. Nearly 90% of individuals report feeling a form of social anxiety (i.e., shyness) at some point in their lives. Half of the individuals with any social fears meet criteria for social anxiety disorder. The function of social anxiety is to increase arousal and attention to social interactions, inhibit unwanted social behavior, and motivate preparation for social situations such as performance situations.

B. Projection

Projecting one’s own thought into the other is a common mechanism which contributes to social anxiety. It means that one is, for example, critical of oneself and then sees this in the audience or other people. Everyone is then as critical of the own person as oneself. The brain is usually not good at tolerating the unknown, especially if the anxiety level is elevated anyhow. So, it develops theories about another’s thinking, motivations, intentions and feelings. However, the information it has about people who are strangers is very limited, so the own patterns of thoughts and feelings are used to make up for the unknown. Unfortunately, this leads to a situation where one is essentially communicating with a mirror image of oneself. If one has good thoughts about oneself, other people will also have positive thoughts about oneself. If one is very critical of oneself, other people are seen as no less critical of oneself.

Projection usually becomes much less of a problem, once one realizes that one is engaging in projection. However, it does take practice to prevent oneself from automatically engaging in projection.

C. Co-Morbidity

Some disorders associated with the social anxiety spectrum include anxiety disorders, mood disorders, autism, eating disorders, and substance use disorders. Many of these conditions are caused by interference with communication with oneself and others, and cause interference with communication processes. Often, it is therefore possible to resolve the underlying issues of multiple conditions if one works at improving the patient’s understanding and use of communication processes.

III. COMMUNICATION-FOCUSED THERAPY (CFT)

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) was developed by the author to focus more specifically on the communication process between patient and therapist. The central piece is that the sending and receiving of meaningful messages is at the heart of any change process. CBT, psychodynamic psychotherapy and IPT help because they define a format in which communication processes take place that can bring about change. [1] However, they do not work directly with the communication processes. CFT attempts to do so. CFT has been described for depression [2], OCD [3], psychosis [4], ADHD [5], bipolar disorder [6] and other conditions.

A. Communication is Life

We engage constantly in communication. The cells in our bodies do so with each other using electrical current, molecules, vibrations or even electromagnetic waves. People communicate with each other also through a multitude of channels, which may on several technologies and intermediaries. It does not have to be an email. Spoken communication requires multiple signal translations from electrical and chemical transmission in the nervous system to mechanical transmission as the muscles and the air stream determine the motions of the vocal chords and then as sound waves travelling through the air, followed by various translations on the receiving end. At each end, in the sender and in the receiver, there is also a processing of information which relies on the highly complex networks of the nervous system. Communication, in short, happens everywhere all the time. It is an integral part of life.

B. Communication as Autoregulation

Communication is an autoregulatory mechanism. It ensures that living organisms, including people, can adapt to their environment and live a life according to their interests, desires, values, and aspirations. This does not only require communicating with a salesperson, writing an exam paper or watching a movie, but also finding out more about oneself, psychologically and physically. Whether measuring one’s

strength at the gym or engaging in self-talk, this self-exploration requires flows of relevant and meaningful information. Communication allows us to have a sense of self and a grasp of who we are and what we need and want in the world, but it has to be learned similar to our communication with other people.

If one suffers from social anxiety, this autoregulation seems to fail. One reason why it fails is because communication is such an important and basic process that there is nothing that could hierarchically control it, and put a problem in it right. Only changes in communication can put a communication failure right. This is why a therapy that focuses on communication by identifying communication patterns and reflecting on them is in a good position to treat social anxiety.

C. *Communication to Participate in Life*

Communication is important to be connected into the web of life. The exchange of meaningful messages helps one to get what one needs, wants and aspires to. This applies to communication with oneself and others. Finding out what one needs, wants and aspires to happens through communication with oneself. It requires openness and insight.

The feeling of being a part of 'the whole thing' is important to an individual, not just because the individual is part of a chain of generations. When one exchanges meaningful messages with others, oneself and the world around become meaningful to oneself. Losing a part of oneself or a loss of meaning, however, represents an existential threat, which can induce anxiety. This is how social anxiety and a loss in meaningful connectedness with others can lead to more anxiety. To an extent, this can be compensated for with meaningful communication with oneself, but for most this is not enough.

IV. UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL ANXIETY AND SHYNESS

Social anxiety is often present from childhood. The fears already interfere with one's development early on. Since some of the most experiences in a human life are the interpersonal ones, this can interfere with one's personal development. As already mentioned, shyness is not a disorder, and a person may be happy about it. However, the potential loss to quality of life of social anxiety and shyness can be similar. Shy people often develop adaptive communication pathways, such as relying more heavily on the Internet and may be content with it. However, interpersonal communication is an important piece of change and of bringing about in the world, and without it some of this dynamic may be missed out on.

Given the many possible channels of communicating with the world, it does not matter so much which one is used. The important factor is that it allows the exchange of meaningful

messages, which aid the individual in becoming better connected with oneself and the world.

A. *Internal Communication*

Often, there are already maladaptive communication patterns before, that cause the problems in the relationship or interpersonal interactions. These patterns can be analyzed and changed. Another important element is that communication can also take place on the inside of the individual. Individuals with social anxiety are often very critical of themselves, and this is what is then projected into others, who then appear critical of oneself. An important, and often helpful, step is to become aware of this.

The internal and external communication go hand in hand. Thought patterns that are used in one's communication with oneself are usually also used in the communication with others. If there are doubts and fears in the communication with oneself, they often will also be present in one's communication with others.

B. *Uncertainty*

In life, one has to live with uncertainty. Uncertainty just means that there is no manual in the beginning and there are still unknowns which leave room for excitement and exploration. Life is a learning experience. An individual suffering from anxiety may have areas in life where she thrives on excitement, and other areas where images of worst case scenarios cause her to freeze when she just considers a change in action or any action at all. Uncertainty to someone suffering from anxiety seems to be bearable in some areas and avoided in others. Often, the areas where it is not tolerated feel meaningful only to the person suffering from anxiety.

C. *Communication Deficits*

Areas which people often feel anxious about are where there has been an issue with their interpersonal interactions in the past. Early traumata, like a disappearing or abusive parent, stay unresolved. For example, if a parent feels fearful and angry with himself and this is picked up by a child, the latter may decode these messages correctly in that the parent is angry, but since the parent may not be conscious about it, the child does not pick up on the second important half of the message, that the parent has a problem with himself and his issue is unrelated to the child. Of course, one can learn to pick up on the self-blame and frustration of the parent, and therapists should become experts at reading between the lines in this fashion, but it requires experience, reflection and insight into transference and counter-transference phenomena, for example, to use the psychoanalytic terms.

D. Avoidance

Anxiety can lead to avoidance, which in turn can attach even more anxiety to the situations or behaviors which are being avoided. In social situations, not interacting with others deprives the person of continuously updating and honing the skills and confidence of interacting with others. Avoidance can thus lead to an increase rather than a decrease in anxiety in the long-run.

V. MEANING

Individuals suffering from social anxiety do not see less relevance in social interactions, but often even more. It is not necessarily seeing more meaning, though, but a different kind. In therapy an important part is to rediscover meaning, and find it in the things that are relevant to the patient. Relevant is anything that is close to his or her values, basic interests, aspirations, wants, wishes and desires.

However, someone with social anxiety may see the meaning in things differently from someone who does not suffer from it. Approaching someone of the opposite sex may be seen differently because of life experiences. Also, if different meaning is seen in it, the expectations can be different. Expectations that are so high that they are self-defeating can be a problem. However, to set expectations that are not too high and not too low mean having a view of reality that works for oneself.

A. Awareness of Thought Patterns

An important step in therapy thus to make the person aware of how anxiety affects one's thinking. Individuals from anxiety often focus differently from other individuals. There is often a focus on worst outcomes and strong fears which are caused by it. Underlying this are often strong emotions or conflicts which need to be defended against. The danger and uncertainty is quite frequently inside oneself, rather than on the outside. An individual with a fear of flying may be more afraid of not containing oneself and not being able to leave the plane than anything else. Anxiety is the fear of crashing psychologically and the feelings of a dreaded uncertainty about oneself and one's emotional states.

Awareness means observing the own thought patterns and gaining insight into them. This requires being receptive to this information from oneself and the ability to reflect on it. Important is being able to perceive the flow of information between the parts of oneself, and the ability to let the information flow freely.

B. Flow of Information

A free flow of information within oneself and with the environment is important to reduce the anxiety and physical

symptoms associated with social anxiety. Often, such an openness has become difficult for people because of inadequate interaction patterns and a fear to change anything. In a therapeutic session, this can be changed in two ways. Interaction patterns can be experimented with in a therapeutic session and reflected upon. One objective should be to help the patient develop greater efficacy and confidence in his or her interactions with the environment.

C. Emotional Reconnection

If there have been adverse life experiences as a significant factor in the social anxiety, there can still be unresolved emotions underlying the anxiety. To resolve them means answering the hypothetical question, what one may have felt in the difficult situation, but then also seeing the strength that allowed one to pull through, which only becomes visible now. The goal is not necessarily to reconnect with only negative emotions from the past, but also the good ones, and emotions as a whole today.

If there is a disconnect, and emotional reconnection would be helpful, one should approach one's feelings gradually. Especially in cases of social anxiety, it could be problematic trying this too fast. In any case, as internal and external communication go hand in hand, so do internal and external emotional connection. Someone who is disconnected from oneself will have a more difficult time to emotionally communicate with others or stay reflected and calm in situations where there is a potential for greater emotional communication, such as in romantic situations.

VI. EXPERIENCING THE WORLD

Social anxiety means potentially experiencing less of the world, although the higher sensitivity can at the same time let someone experience more. High sensitivity is not a bad, but the capability to perceive and experience more about oneself and the world. The important part is to make it work for one, rather than feeling constrained by it.

A. Communication Techniques

Various communication techniques can be helpful, not as an end in themselves, but to help the person have more confidence in oneself and to see communication not as something dangerous one needs to be guarded against, but as something that can help one meet one's needs, wishes and expectations. Thus, the reason for communication techniques should be not an end in itself, but to increase one's repertoire, ease and confidence in communicating with oneself and others.

Openness to others, a positive and welcoming attitude towards the messages of others, and engaging in reflection on

the interaction are some helpful approaches towards communication, but there are many others as well. Important is not to be deterred from the interaction when something unsuspected or disappointing happens, but to reflect on what it could mean, whether it is a message from outside or inside oneself. Genuinely new information is never meaningless, and reflecting on it helps to gain more insight into the world. Social anxiety, on the other hand, is often a result of engaging with messages only superficially, rather than letting them resonate with oneself and determining what they might mean.

B. Breaking the Cycle of Anxiety

To break through the vicious cycle of anxiety, in which emotions like fear and anxiety cause safety thoughts and behaviors, which in turn reinforce feelings of fear, loneliness, sadness, and so forth, it is helpful to focus on identifying what is meaningful and having more of it in life. Communication helps in identifying and finding meaning, either communication with oneself or with others. The exchange of messages is like a learning process in which meaning can be identified, found and accumulated. Through meaningful interactions one accumulates more meaning, more connectedness with oneself and the world and reduces the need for thoughts and behaviors which are triggered by fears, guilt, self-blame and other negative emotions. This also helps against depression and anxiety.

Insight and connectedness reduces anxiety. Openness and receptiveness to information and messages can lead there. This can be practiced in therapy, and brought from there into everyday life. The sense of competence helps build confidence in dealing with oneself and the environment. Important is to connect with oneself to a level that there is greater insight into what is truly important to oneself.

C. The Reward of Seeing More

Perceiving more meaning also makes interacting with others and oneself more meaningful. This has a positive effect on one's interaction patterns, how and in which one ways one relates to one's environment and exchanges messages with it. People with social anxiety often see less in an interaction, although they often have a greater sensitivity and perceptiveness to see more. This has to do with a different focus on where to find a relevant and meaningful message in the interaction. For example, in an interaction with a romantic love interest, the socially anxious person may be too focused on signals and own thoughts about a possible rejection rather than on information from the other person that could help in getting to know that person.

VII. VALUES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS

Beyond food, drink, a roof over one's head and basic safety, humans have values, needs and aspirations that drive much of what they are doing throughout their lives. We are not born to be Robinson Crusoes, and just like the fictional character, interpersonal interactions and communication in general is usually a core component of these needs, values and aspirations, and required to have them met. Communication keeps the engine running that brings about positive and lasting change in oneself and in the environment.

One of the most painful elements of social anxiety is that a person finds it more difficult to find the own needs met. It interferes with dating, in workplace situations or in academia. People suffering from this condition, do so in silence, which tends to make it even worse. To escape this vicious cycle, a new orientation towards the own values, needs and aspirations is needed. What helps to achieve this is through a better connectedness with oneself and others.

A. The Need for Communication

Living organisms have a need for communicating with themselves and others. This is needed to grow, innovate and propagate. Most of the human accomplishments in the arts, sciences and professions are based on the exchange of meaningful messages, communication. But communication is also to have one's needs met and to survive in general. Even a hermit in the mountains needs to interact with his or her living mountain environment. People who enjoy nature usually do not want to shun communication, but focus on an exchange with a nonhuman environment. Communication is fundamental to life itself.

It often helps people with social anxiety and shyness to connect with and appreciate their need and joy in communicating. Once communication is seen as a potential source of joy rather than a necessary task, it can become much easier, as 'I want' replaces 'I should'.

VIII. MEANINGFUL MESSAGES AS THE INSTRUMENT OF CHANGE

Communication is the vehicle of change. The instruments are meaningful messages which are generated and received by the people who take part in these interactions. In a therapeutic setting, keeping the mutual flow of information relevant and meaningful brings change in both people who take part in this process. The learning curve for the patient may be steeper in certain respects because he or she spends less time in this interaction style than a therapist.

A. *Embracing Change*

In social anxiety, embracing change can be associated with anxiety, but it can also be liberating, because it means that there are no rigid rules one needs to adhere to other than those linked to the communication process itself, which has clear laws. Understanding these laws of communication, on the other hand, which humans subconsciously operate on and use as they accumulate experience in their interactions with others is important to be more confident in tolerating and working towards change. Basic communication concepts, such as what constitutes communication, how meaning is created, how information flows, and how communication processes are influenced, is usually not conscious, but reflecting on it and beginning to use it can be especially helpful to sensitive people, who quite frequently have experienced social at some point in their lives. One might say, that only those who do not care about people and themselves are entirely free from social anxiety.

B. *Living*

It is not the number of social contacts which is relevant. Having a few good friends is often worth more than thousands of contacts in an online social network. However, this does not mean friends have to be always physically present. Meeting friends online also allows for communication, while close physical contact in an intimate relationship is to most people important on a regular basis.

Important is that the communication patterns, the frequency and the interaction style fit the needs, values and aspirations of the individual. People who are shy can be quite happy with the intensity and frequency of their interactions, those with social anxiety are usually not. It is thus important to help individuals with social anxiety discover what is important to them and how they want to live their lives.

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