

The Double-Bind Challenge: Using Kindness to Heal Your Social Anxiety

Social phobia, essentially defined as a debilitating fear of negative scrutiny, can be one of the most devastating anxiety disorders. We are social animals living in a social world, and people are all around us. If you suffer from social phobia (also referred to as social anxiety disorder) – every moment or future moment contains a potential “threat” of a dreaded interaction that feels completely unsurvivable.

For those who don’t suffer, interpersonal dynamics are merciful – they simply transpire without too much awareness. Much like the body, which is taken for granted until a specific pain makes us aware, social interactions don’t usually claw at our attention. Fluid and natural, these events usually require only our moderate attention before they disappear into the landscape of everyday life.

But for the socially anxious, these dynamics are painstaking. In a world of opposites, light conversations are heavy and burdensome; happenstance meetings are a jolt and a shock; brief encounters feel like an endless eternity; and pleasantries are anything but pleasant. Tragically, social anxiety tramples the hearts of the most genuine and deeply kind, stepping on self-confidence before shattering the sufferer’s remaining self-worth. “What are they thinking?” is perhaps the most repetitious thought in the person’s mind, second only to, “How can I get out of this?” In anticipation of social or performance situations, these are the mind’s unanswerable loops, playing over and over as painful obsessions that can’t truly be solved.

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave...when first we practice to deceive.”— Walter Scott. Perhaps the biggest cost has to do with the sufferer’s self-worth, because the deception that avoidance requires wears on the conscience of this otherwise honest person. Unattendance, excuses, even white lies are person’s primary means of warding off anticipated discomfort. But these control strategies can fail or even backfire, in the sense of raising some red flags. Commitments or plans become derailed by escape tactics, ultimately producing confusion and disappointment in *other people*. Where negative judgment didn’t appear before, now it actually seems likely. One avoidance begets another, and now there is even *more* to worry about!

Shaking the Hand of Social Anxiety.

Social anxiety offers false promises to “solve” emotional pain – through avoidance, mind-reading, and obsessional worry. In this way, the disorder convinces sufferers that distress can be assuaged through certain acts of “mental control.” Taking over each present moment, it replaces authenticity with painful self-consciousness. Tainting the future, it marks new interactions with anticipatory dread. Corrupting the past, it stains memories with a negative review. Social anxiety is a predator and a thief, stalking the spontaneous.

Calculating the odds of unending scenarios, social phobia baits the person to produce guestimates about what others might think. And while the person is busy worrying, it creates side bets on shame and embarrassment, making deals in dark corners. It robs authentic interactions, producing a “counterfeit currency” of forced smiles and compulsory exchanges. “How can I get out of this?” leaves the person stuck between a rock and a hard place. There is no place to go, and planning to escape from future scenarios seems just as impossible as leaving a life of organized crime. The handshake was made, and the linchpin of social anxiety just won’t let them leave.

Shaking it Off.

I know how you got here, dear anxious person. You got into some trouble because you trusted the wrong ally. You shook the wrong hand and fell in with the wrong crowd. But it’s time you got out – and I’m not talking about your next social engagement! It’s time you got out of your contract with social phobia. It’s time to shake it off, and to shake things up.

The first order of business is to draw a line between truth and deception, recognizing that excuses and control strategies – the methods you have been using – are essentially manipulative. Wishful thinking, mental rehearsals, avoidance – all of these are covert acts that involve too much scheming. Beside the fact that these tactics are unworkable (you trade short-term relief for a long-term problem) – this approach doesn’t fit you *as a person*. Being ingenuine doesn’t work for you, in the sense that it doesn’t reflect your integrity.

Deception isn’t going to get you out of your social anxiety, but your kindness just might. Your integrity and your goodness are so much more workable, and besides, they more accurately represent who you are. From now on, we’re going to put kindness in charge. But before we go any further, let’s break you out of some other traps. These have to do with some faulty reasoning, and the miscalculations of mental control.

Incorrect Reasoning.

While the socially anxious can be their own worst *critic*, in the sense of being extremely hard on themselves – they can also be their own *worst* critic, in the sense of assessing interactions incorrectly. This distortion – of *overestimating* dangerousness while *underestimating* social competence – is at the very core of social phobia. Socially anxious persons incorrectly **use their anxiety as a measuring stick** that tells them how well they are functioning. Rather than considering objective criteria, they make the mistake of evaluating their performance based on how anxious they are – but this turns out to be an unreliable measure.

I once had a client attempt to persuade me that she performed poorly in public speaking situations. To offer evidence, she brought me two audio recordings containing separate interviews where she spoke in her area of expertise. In the first tape, she asserted, “It was a disaster. I sucked.” But in the second, she admitted, “this one wasn’t so bad; I guess I did okay.” I was intrigued.

As a researcher, I listened intently to the two recordings, searching for objective patterns in her speech – such as “um,” “like,” “you know” – as well as any pauses, tangents, or stutters. But to my ears, both interviews were nearly flawless, and, for all intents and purposes, essentially the same. When I gave my client this feedback, each of us had our own revelations. As for my client, she was astounded to hear how these two interviews were actually so similar. Once she considered the more objective criteria, her face lit up with a sense of genuine discovery. Amazingly, she was able to admit that these two recordings were fairly identical, and that she gave strong performances in both situations.

As for my own insight, I was able to glean just how and why she had inferred such drastically different interpretations. It turned out that in the first setting, she had been sitting face-to-face with the interviewer in a recording studio – very stressful indeed! But in the second situation, she had given the interview over the phone. Relaxed and at her home, the interview was recorded while she sat in bed, in her pajamas, with her cat! What did these different contexts have to do to her self-assessment? They gave her the feeling that one was terrible and the other was ok. But this distinction was only in her head, not in reality. Her misappraisal was a fitting example of how people use their levels of anxiety to determine social performance, referencing their own internal states and using their distress as an unreliable barometer.

The Role of Congruence.

In order to appreciate how undependable this internal reference can be, it is important to understand the mind’s drive towards *congruence*. All humans have a very powerful motivation to achieve a state of “internal consistency,” a feeling of correctness where everything matches up and makes sense. Our thoughts seek to find interpretations that mirror our feelings, and will produce explanations, however faulty. Emotions take the lead, and the mind follows, filling in gaps of uncertainty with what *feels* like accurate knowledge. In the end, this “matching” process will take precedence over truth, governing our interpretations even when they are grossly incorrect.

Just as the person suffering from panic attacks believes “I must be dying,” so does the socially anxious person believe “this person hates me.” On the one hand, these are perfectly “good” explanations, because they seamlessly mirror their internal experiences. In a state of panic, where there is a huge, unexplained spike in the nervous system, “dying” does seem like a correct interpretation. And, in a state of profound insecurity, where the person feels overwhelmingly ill at ease, rejection seems completely plausible. Yes, these explanations are congruent, and yes, they are the most convincing. Indeed, they do match up with anxiety. Only . . . they’re wrong.

Separating Empathy from Mental Control.

Another blind spot has to do with “overvaluing” intuitive abilities. Many of my clients have the genuine ability to sense other people’s moods, and they will often report that they are extremely empathic. This becomes problematic when they “perceive” judgmental thoughts in others that often do not exist. Emotional attunement leads to a slippery slope when it gives way to

hypervigilance and “mind-reading.” Sure, the person may have *started* with a deep sensitivity and ability to read others, but when social anxiety took over, it distorted this ability. If you are suffering from the grips of social phobia, please consider how happy you will be to discover that your thoughts might be wrong – especially if you think others are judging you. In order to convince you that your perspective can’t be trusted, please let me present. . . “Doll Face.”

“Doll Face?” or “Dull Face?”

I have a friend who is a very adoring husband, although his wife repeatedly accuses him of judging her. One day, my friend was venting about endless conversations they have, where he is unable to reassure her of how wonderful he thinks she is. He mentioned an ongoing fight for over 25 years, where he was accused of insulting his wife on their very first date. According to my friend, he gazed at her from across the room, and melted. “Hi Doll Face,” he murmured, before going to embrace her. But what she heard was, “Dull Face!” To this day, she insists that he said, “Dull Face,” and there’s nothing he can do to change her mind. “Doll Face” or “Dull Face?” – you decide! I’m going with “Doll face” – not because I am friends with the husband, but because I am using objective criteria. “Doll Face” is a charming, old-school term of endearment that was commonly used in their day. To my knowledge, “Dull Face” has never been an expression!

The moral of this story is that we should not use anxiety as a gauge, or reference point. We should look to see if the other person is leaning forward, smiling, nodding, and continuing to engage. We should note whether we are asked for a personal opinion, a second date, a follow up interview, or a marriage proposal. While it might be tempting to look inwardly for interpretations, the task is to look outward – both to remain engaged *and* to find objective criteria. There *is* a more reliable yard stick, and it doesn’t include anxiety.

“I’m Too Nice” and Anxious Chickens.

I once saw a beautiful 12-year-old that came to her first session sitting very still next to her mother: back perfectly straight, a serious expression on her delicate face, and a thoughtful, pensive way of speaking. “What brings you to therapy?” I asked her. “How can I help?” “*I’m too nice,*” she said simply, her words conveying a grave sadness that suggested a life sentence of emotional pain.

This precious soul could have been any one of my clients, of any gender, of any age. Many of my clients *are* too nice, and for whatever reason, this attribute tends to go with the socially anxious person. Socially anxious people can become way too accommodating – going “above and beyond” in order to create insurance that others will like them. However, this people-pleasing strategy can often fail in its attempts. All too often generosity leads to exhaustion; compassion leads to co-dependence; agreeableness leads to poor self-esteem. As any one of my clients will tell you, I’m a huge fan of the anxious/sensitive person, but I can also see the downsides. As this lovely young person was trying to convey, being too nice comes with a cost.

While it's laudable to put others' needs first at times, continuously adapting to others' wishes can comprise a second "layer" of suffering that goes beyond the social anxiety itself. People-pleasing becomes a burden when it is at odds with the person's available time, resources, values, or wishes. Without keeping the right balance between self and other, being "too nice" eventually compromises the person's self-care and quality of life.

The relationship between people-pleasing and social anxiety might be difficult to unravel, especially when we try to distinguish a survival strategy from a character trait. Long ago, when human survival was at stake on a more imminent basis, rejection by one's tribe could mean desertion and possibly death. To that end, there is an interesting evolutionary perspective which holds that we may be programmed with certain "hard-wiring" that drives us to remain in others' good graces. Being "too nice" might be an evolutionary relic as much as a character trait, derived from this primitive fear of exile. In thinking about this connection between social anxiety and niceness, we can then contemplate: which came first – the anxious chicken or the people-pleasing egg?

It's not so hard, therefore, to imagine why socially anxious people have catastrophic feelings about being rejected – why they would regard social situations as if they truly have a "life-or-death" quality. But this scenario of annihilation is surely obsolete. Because nowadays, if someone doesn't like us, it really *shouldn't* wreck us. No matter how catastrophic things seem, the opinions of others – even if they are negative – will not destroy us. The truth is, we *can* exist alongside the perceptions of others, and it *is* wholly survivable.

Like me, you may be wondering when the IT person going to show up and fix the bug in our computer-brains. We aren't currently faced with many survival situations, and this is outdated software that clearly needs an update. There are too many "apps" running in the background, and people-pleasing is taking up too much mental space – draining the battery of emotional reserve. But we'll just have to do some reprogramming ourselves. We need to outsmart this malware by taking an unexpected approach. But how?

First, we're going to foster a condition of authentic change, by using something called, "*creative hopelessness*." We'll explore what it means to *grieve* over unsatisfied longings as well as our limited influence over others, and we'll use *self-kindness* to make it easier. Once we have made these changes from a heartfelt place, we're going to give anxiety a run for its money. We're going to use kindness to *double-bind* social phobia – taking "I'm too nice" and putting it to work!

Creative Hopelessness.

There is a Buddhist saying: "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional," and this can apply to social anxiety as well. We have all experienced the inescapable pain that happens when we feel a certain discord between others and ourselves. We respond with uneasiness when we learn of someone's rejection or disapproval, and we feel its impact, sharp as an arrow. But suffering has to do with a *second* arrow, the part we *can* control – and this is the piece that is "optional."

Suffering takes place when we *struggle* with our pain. The attempts we make to manage distress – worry, rumination, avoidance – only make suffering worse.

Conversely, many people make a heartfelt change from a perspective called, “*creative hopelessness*.” (This is a term that is used in *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*). Creative hopelessness is when we hit bottom, so to speak, recognizing that all the control strategies we used didn’t provide the relief we were hoping for. Creative hopelessness happens when we finally acknowledge the futility of our efforts to control. It’s like taking a big breath and saying, “I have no idea anymore. I’m at a complete loss, even though I tried like crazy to figure this thing out. I so wanted to fix this, but nothing has worked. So . . . where am I now? What happens next?” This act of meeting the unknown by letting down one’s guard is the very best place to be. At last, unshackled from our defenses, we can begin to create change.

Using Grief as an Instrument of Kindness.

Do you think it’s weak or stupid that you suffer so much? Think again, and have mercy. You have been living in fear and self-loathing, and it’s time to be kind to yourself. You have an authentic desire for *connection*, and this is a beautiful aspect of being human. It is not “weak” to have intense longing for others; in fact it is quite precious. It is not “stupid” to become wounded in relationships; it speaks to the value you place on other human beings.

Your longing for acceptance is so understandable, and it has the deepest of origins. Imagine, if you will, your very first hunger; your first reaction to cold; your first experience of being left alone — and the shock of this happening **the very first time**. Developmental psychologists describe this original trauma – this *lack of fit* of nurturing responses – as nothing short of emotionally devastating.

The memory of this primary wound recedes over time, although powerful needs do not. In this way, the trauma becomes “re-triggered,” echoing throughout the course of a life. Later, when other longings emerge – such as the need to be loved, understood, and accepted – these, too, feel essential to our existence. But when they go unsatisfied, the trauma reverberates, threatening to devastate us. Each time our desires and others’ fail to coincide, the shockwave ripples, reawakening this original wound.

There are numerous moments when we are confronted with this lack of fit. Sadly, our needs and others’ do not always mesh, and the same goes for our thoughts. There is an inevitable clash of perspectives that will remain between people, in spite of our deepest longings. But our psyches are more mature now, and we can handle the disappointment. Rather than using forms of mental control, we can stretch ourselves to tolerate the discordance, letting go the hope that other people’s approval should match with our expectations. This is a softer, kinder outlook, one that accepts Reality on its terms. Doesn’t it make sense that you would suffer so much? This is an area of deeply-rooted pain, that continues to surface. Consider this younger part of you, as well as the part that gets triggered, and try to be kind to yourself.

Recovering from our lowest ebb requires an authentic process from which to emerge, and such transformation can be attained through the experience of grief. “Why grief?!” you may ask reluctantly. “I was just trying to heal my social anxiety. Don’t give me any more pain!” I understand this response, but please be patient. If you gave me a choice between grief or anxiety, I would choose grief any day. Anxiety stays “stuck,” and therefore, “disordered.” But grief, on the other hand, is a deep and heartfelt emotion. It is universally shared by all human beings, and can be transformed into healing. Grief feels hard, but it doesn’t feel crazy. And the best part is, it *moves*. Grief doesn’t stay stuck, so it doesn’t become “disordered.”

Let’s take a moment to consider what it is you might be grieving. You longed for a world where you would never be judged. You longed to ensure the approval of other people. You longed to never fall short. You longed to always be perfect, or, at times, invisible. You longed to avoid situations that exposed your flaws. You longed to never have conflict. But you are no match for Reality, and Reality has moments where these difficulties exist. We are always confronted with our common humanity, including its imperfections, conflicts, and misunderstandings.

To grieve is to understand the truth that we are completely powerless when it comes to other people’s thoughts. Cutting through the second layer of suffering, grief puts us back in touch with inescapable pain. Grief speaks to “meaningful suffering,” not “meaningless suffering,” fostering healing as it elicits kindness. It helps us to become more open, more receptive, more able to make a significant shift. Grief dissolves; transforming first into tenderness, and ultimately, release.

Double-Binding your Social Anxiety.

Now that we are creative and open, we are ready for new strategy, so let’s move on. You have a defining characteristic of kindness, and it can be harnessed to serve *you* instead of your social anxiety. Instead of the strategies that operate “behind the scenes,” let’s keep *kindness* front and center. This is your ally, your advantage, and we’re going to use it.

To have a better sense of this, consider the following exercise. Imagine that I pointed to someone and asked you to dislike that person. Or, even the opposite, that I wanted you to really like somebody that I liked. “Come on,” I might say. “It means a whole lot to me. Just try. I really want you to feel the way I do. Please. Can’t you change your mind for me?” My guess is that you would not only find it quite difficult to do, you might also think I was being intrusive. And you’re right – I would be way too controlling to even suggest such a thing. The whole idea might seem absurd to you as well: “What makes her think she can influence how I really feel?”

Being persuaded to “change our feelings” has probably happened to each and every one of us, and it can feel pretty slimy. When I was young, my uncle married a “gentile,” – to use my family’s language – meaning, “a non-Jew.” My siblings and I really loved my aunt; she was pretty, she was nice, she was interesting, and she made my uncle very happy. But we were told not to like her, because, apparently, she didn’t jump up right away to clear the dinner dishes and . . . well, she was Catholic. I remember looking at my parents and thinking, “Your request

makes no sense. I like her. My feelings can't be changed. I can't feel differently just because you want me to."

Consider in the same way how intrusive it would be for *you* to insist that others have a positive opinion of you. It's invasive, it isn't possible, and it isn't fair. Yes, I understand that this is just your hope and that there is no outright attempt to control others. But the wishful thinking, the mental rehearsals, the mind-reading, the people-pleasing – these are all manipulations of sorts. Each person has their own unique tastes, their likes and dislikes, and they don't need to defend or change any of it – not even to make us comfortable. Other people are entitled to have their feelings about us, and we need to allow this to happen. We shouldn't interfere. While it's natural to hope that others will like us, socially desired outcomes cannot – should not – be controlled from inside our heads.

As a kind person, you would never want to see yourself as intrusive or controlling, and if you suddenly realized it was happening, I think you would try to change. This is the purpose of the double-bind – to confront your thinking; to give you pause to reconsider. I'm sorry to take such an aggressive approach, and I don't mean to shame you. But your social anxiety gets really stuck, and we have to release its grip on you. Recognizing this internal conflict can loosen your perspective around what is making you suffer, while intentionally throwing your social anxiety for a loop. This demand on your integrity relaxes the grip of social anxiety, allowing you to think, to unshake its hand. All you have to do is align with your kindness, while committing to stay out of other people's thoughts.

Stop Messing with Other People's Thoughts.

Do you want to see yourself as respectful of others? Do you want to be nice? Then focus on your respect for the other person, so that you can practice staying out of their business. Do you see yourself as a giving person? Then go deep inside and find the most generous place in your heart. Allow the other to have their entire experience of you – whatever that is. See if you can go into a place of reverence and respect, recognizing that they have free will and get to decide whatever they want, whatever they think, whatever they feel – *and you will not interfere.*

When you start to become afraid of other people's judgments, this approach will feel counter-intuitive. We are still working against your evolutionary hardwiring – the "trigger" that tells you that rejection is unsurvivable. For this reason, it is important to immediately consider how ***survivable*** the situation actually is. When the alarm bell goes off, make a decision to survive the *possibility* that someone might judge you. You don't have to *like* this possibility, you just have to *handle* it.

Practice being brave in the face of other people's opinions, like you are doing some training around it, and becoming stronger. Picture yourself tolerating the other person's thoughts, wholly and completely, without defense. Imagine that you are still here, that you have worth, that you are still intact, and that other people's perspectives will not change who you are. Just as you will not interfere with their feeling, others' feelings will not change the essence of you.

Surviving other people's opinions doesn't require you to suddenly have overwhelming confidence or high self-esteem. Instead, it requires that you develop a little more resilience while learning to tolerate ambiguity. To help you step into that mindset, you will want to try using these phrases:

- *Maybe they like me, maybe they don't – I'm not quite sure.*
- *Maybe they think _____ about me, maybe not – I may never know.*
- *Whatever their opinion is, I'll be ok.*

Notice that we aren't pumping you up with statements about how others probably like you, or how acceptable you are. These coping statements purposely don't address the question of whether or not you are being judged. Positive statements are not always effective, nor are they totally believable. For that reason, we won't try to solve the question of what others might think. The words I am suggesting pull for you to be strong, to embrace ambiguity, to use your kindness as an ally. If you can't remember anything else, just remember this: "**I can tolerate other people's feelings. What other people think of me is none of my business.**"

Special Note to the Reader.

Your beautiful trait of kindness should never be left out of treatment. I realized this in my own practice, when something unexpected occurred. It happened one day, when a client turned to me and said, "**I hate my anxious self.**" I was completely astounded, and the shock of these words became a turning point in my work. Part of my dismay had to do with the timing, since we were right at the very end of our sessions, and treatment had gone really well. And it has happened a few times since. Inserted discretely in their goodbye, walking towards the door, shaking my hand, and surveying the therapy office for the very last time, the client dropped the bombshell: "I hate my anxious self."

"It's so weak. I can't stand when it shows up."

"It just ruins my life. I want it to just leave me alone."

"I wish it would just die. I wish I could just kill it."

Now I am ready for these words, and I won't let this happen any longer. But more importantly, I hope you won't either. You may feel too gentle for this world, but isn't gentleness what this world needs? When you turn away from kindness, it is deeply tragic. And when you hide, the world suffers from your absence. I see your true worth, and will continue to honor you, *including your anxiety*, until you can do the same. You are every bit worth knowing, and worth having. You are the kindest of souls, with a rich interior and gifted intelligence. The things you share make me certain that you are adding value to the world. And because you bring kindness with you, you make this a better place. **You are the very best version of what it means to be human.** Heal your social anxiety with kindness, because, as you do this, you also heal the world.

