

Uncover both anxious predictions *and* perfectionistic expectations to get to the root of your client's social perfectionism.

QUICK TIPS for Therapists

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Exposure techniques for treating social perfectionism

By Jennifer Shannon, LMFT

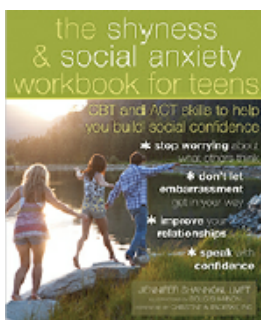
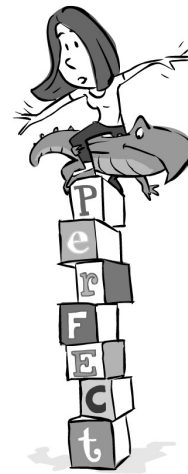
I find social perfectionism to be the most common culprit in causing and sustaining social anxiety. Before conducting exposures with clients it is essential to identify not only their anxious predictions, but their perfectionistic expectations of how they should perform during the exposure.

For example, let's say that the exposure is to do a two-minute oral presentation in front of you. First, ask your client what he or she fears will happen. Clients will often say something like, "I will turn bright red, forget what I was going to say, and stand there saying nothing at all."

Next, find out what the perfectionistic goal is by asking how the client should act and appear in this situation. You will often get a response like, "I think I should appear relaxed, feel confident, and sound intelligent."

I will point out to clients that since they are sure to be anxious during the presentation, they have set the bar much too high! Ask, "What is something you can accomplish even though you will feel anxious?" Together, you can come up with a realistic goal. For example, your client can aim to stand for the full two minutes, look at you at least six times, and make three points about the topic.

If you skip these important steps, your clients will likely do the exposure but end up evaluating themselves by their old perfectionistic standards. This will result in feelings of failure and continued anxiety.



Jennifer Shannon, LMFT, is the mother of three grown children and is in private practice in Santa Rosa, California. A therapist since 1985, she works with teens and adults specializing in Anxiety Disorders—including Social Anxiety or extreme shyness, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Separation Anxiety, Panic Disorder, Phobias, Generalized Anxiety Disorder and some types of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. In addition, Shannon is a Certified Diplomat of the Academy of Cognitive Therapy.