



## 6 Mind-Traps of Social Anxiety

Helping kids confidently navigate the social maze of life can be difficult.

Often, we don't know what to say to help because we don't understand what they are thinking.

Their thoughts are the number one thing that trips them up socially.

They aren't bad kids for having these thoughts. Adults have these thoughts too!

We can't simply tell our kids or ourselves to just stop thinking these thoughts.

Awareness of these mind-traps is the first step in supporting your kids socially.

Imagine you are looking at yourself in a funhouse mirror at a carnival or fair. Yes, that is you, but your face isn't that long, your stomach is not that fat, and your legs are not that skinny. The mirror is distorting the reality of what is there.

When we are anxious, our thoughts get reflected in a funhouse mirror. Worse still, we are unaware of the distortion and take those thoughts at face value, making us even more scared.

Following are six thinking mistakes, or distortions that people with social anxiety commonly make. When you recognize the distortion in your thoughts, it becomes easier to take them less seriously.





**Catastrophic Thinking.** You’ve probably heard people ask, “What’s the worst that can happen?” When a trigger situation occurs, and your mind jumps to the *worst possible outcome*—even though there are a hundred other possible outcomes—you are using catastrophic thinking.

**What this look like:**

When a teen is turned down for a date, he *assumes* it is so newsworthy that the whole school will soon know and be laughing at him. That might qualify as a catastrophe, but is it likely to happen?



**Discounting the Positive.** When something good happens to you, do you chalk it up to luck? When somebody praises you, do you assume the person was just trying to be nice? It is difficult to develop confidence when you ignore your successes, when you discount the positive.

People who see the good in everything are sometimes said to be wearing rose-colored glasses. A socially anxious person in a trigger situation could be said to be wearing gray-colored glasses. All her senses are working and she is taking everything in, but she discounts all the information that is positive, leaving only the negative.

**What this looks like:**

A teen gives a fantastic performance in choir and the choir director tells her “Your pitch was near perfect!” The teen thinks, “Sure, I can sing THAT song. It’s such an EASY song!”



**Labeling.** Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can really harm you. By calling someone else names, you are degrading that person. Calling yourself names degrades you. People who are socially anxious are often their own biggest bully. Sometimes they will even say this distorted thought out loud.

**What this looks like:**

A teen drops her books in the hall, and she tells herself, “I am lame.” But we have all made clumsy mistakes. Are we all lame? Losing a video game doesn’t make you a loser. Blurting out a silly idea doesn’t make you an idiot.



**Spotlighting.** When you turn the spotlight of attention onto yourself, you become self-conscious. You start overanalyzing your every move and assume everyone else is watching you as closely as you are watching yourself. This gets in the way of connecting with others when you are preoccupied with what is going on inside yourself. When you are self-conscious, you dial the spotlight up, increasing your self-awareness to the point where you are paralyzed.

**What this looks like:**

If you are sweating, shaking, or blushing, and you focus your attention on that, these normal signs of anxiety intensify. When speaking in class you notice your heart is beating fast. Then, as you focus your attention on your heartbeat, the pounding intensifies until it feels like your heart might jump right out of your chest. “Everyone around me can see what’s happening, “ you think to yourself. “They know I’m freaking out!” As you leave the room after class, the spotlight follows you, showing everybody how awkwardly you walk. And so it goes throughout the day when you are living in the spotlight.



**Mind Reading.** As a mind reader, you assume you know what people are thinking, especially when it is something bad about you. You don’t have any psychic powers, but somehow you just know. And because you are so certain, you don’t bother to check out what is actually happening.

**What this looks like:**

You are hanging out with a friend who suddenly becomes distracted. Since you are a mind reader you know that your friend was bored and looking for an excuse to get away from you.



**Social Perfectionism.** For the social perfectionist, there are only two categories: either you are brilliant, funny, smart, and popular or you are dull, boring, stupid, and an outcast. There is simply no such thing as being okay or good enough. When your idea of normal is *everyone’s* approving of you *all the time*, you’ve set the bar too high, and you’ll never clear it. Nobody is socially perfect, and thinking you can be will only lead to shame.

Social perfectionism allows no room for error. It’s a ruthless way to judge yourself, yet it is the most universal distortion and the most damaging for shy people.

**What this looks like:**

If you are not invited to a party, then *nobody* likes you. If people don’t listen with perfect attention every time you open your mouth to speak, you are boring. Because you told a bad joke, you are not funny.