



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Facial Palsy

MANAGING

ANXIETY



Oxford Facial
Palsy Service

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MANAGING ANXIETY

People with facial palsy can experience a wide range of different emotional reactions.

These can include anxiety, fear and worry related to:

- their appearance
- their diagnosis and prognosis
- meeting other people
- work
- looking in the mirror
- having a photograph taken or appearing in video
- people staring or making comments
- concerns about what other people may think
- eating and drinking difficulties
- speech difficulties
- a recurrence of facial palsy or a lack of recovery.

It is very common to feel worried or anxious about having facial palsy. Unfortunately, anxiety about facial palsy can sometimes have as big an impact on a person's life as the facial palsy itself.

Sometimes this worry and anxiety can improve on its own over time; however, **it can be helpful to have strategies and techniques for managing anxiety.**

This guide will:

- help you understand what anxiety is, and why we feel it
- help you identify the triggers for anxiety
- explain the role of thoughts and behaviours in maintaining anxiety
- help you to change your behaviour, in a way that will reduce anxiety
- introduce you to anxiety-management techniques.

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a normal human emotion, which has been essential for the survival of our species! Emotions like anxiety date back as far as the early humans, who were often faced with threatening or dangerous animals. Anxiety triggers a 'fight or flight (run away)' response, which helps protect us by preparing our bodies to run away from danger, or fight to survive.

For people with facial palsy, their perceived 'threat' is not usually a dangerous animal (as in the past), but the body's physiological response stays the same – it wants to 'fight' or 'run away'. For people with facial palsy, anxiety is often associated with the following physiological (body), cognitive (thought) and behavioural changes.

Changes in the body:

- breathing changes **(which gets oxygen to our muscles quickly, preparing us for a quick response)**
- heart rate increases **(to pump blood quickly to our muscles, so we can run away or fight back against the threat)**
- shaky, tense muscles, including in the face, and tingling in fingers and toes **(a consequence of our muscles having extra blood/oxygen)**
- butterflies in the stomach/needing to go to the toilet **(blood is re-directed from the digestive system towards the large muscle groups we need to run)**
- light-headed/dizzy **(a consequence of taking in more oxygen than you need)**
- sweaty **(the body is expecting to run and get hot, so our cooling system kicks in in anticipation).**

Changes to your thinking:

- worrying about social situations (which can also be a trigger for anxiety)
- difficulties concentrating when in busy/crowded places
- racing thoughts
- negative thoughts about the future/people's reactions.

Changes to your behaviour:

Avoidance:

- escaping from the situation (e.g. leaving or going home)
- avoiding feared situations (e.g. avoiding social situations)
- eating changes (e.g. not eating in front of people)
- not having photos/videos taken.

Checking:

- excessively checking facial appearance and function in the mirror
- seeking lots of reassurance from others about recovery

Longer term impact of anxiety:

- difficulty relaxing
- being restless or 'on the go'.

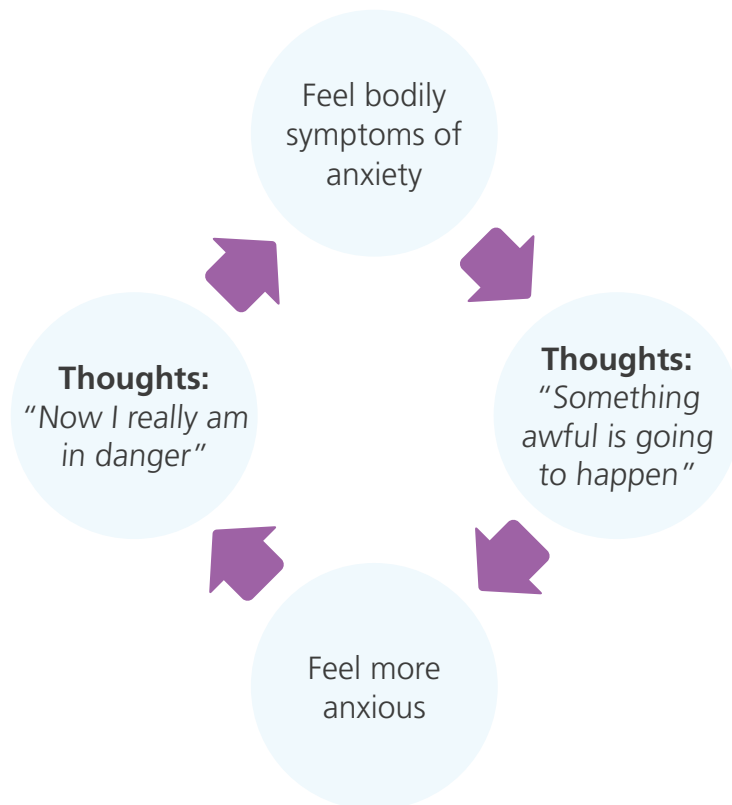
The changes people experience to their thoughts and behaviour when anxious are also designed to keep them safe. Until very recently, people's survival depended greatly on them being part of a group or tribe. As a result, **our brains tend to respond to the potential of being excluded or rejected from a group in a very similar way to an immediate threat**, such as a dangerous animal.

In today's society, social rejections are very rarely 'life or death' situations, but if you feel anxious about a social situation, your body will respond as if you are faced with an immediate threat to your life.

These physiological, cognitive and behavioural symptoms of anxiety helped our ancestors survive, but are less helpful in the face of modern day threats. We can find that our body's responses to threat become a source of anxiety in itself.

Anxious thought:

"Everyone will judge me"



APPEARANCE-RELATED ANXIETY

A common cause of anxiety for people with facial palsy relates to social situations and their appearance. **People describe worries including that others will stare, ask questions or judge them** for how they look, talk or eat/drink.

Lots of research shows that people who look different have difficult experiences when in certain social situations, such as feeling stared at and receiving unkind comments. These upsetting experiences can understandably cause someone to feel self-conscious about their appearance. Unfortunately, these difficult situations can then lead the person to predict that all future social experiences will be negative. **Furthermore, the more concerned someone is about their own appearance, the more likely they are to assume that people are responding negatively to their appearance.**

Interesting research by Professor Nichola Rumsey and colleagues can help us understand what is happening in these situations. Her research found that research volunteers who thought they were wearing prosthetic make-up to mimic visible difference (e.g. facial scars) reported more staring and difficult social experiences, when compared to people who were not wearing make-up. What makes this experiment really interesting is that half of the research volunteers who thought that they were wearing make-up, had actually had their make-up secretly removed without them realising, before they went to stand in a crowd. This shows that simply thinking that they looked different (even when they didn't) led people to rate their social experiences more negatively.

It is likely that someone feeling self-conscious about their appearance will behave more anxiously and less confidently in social situations. This can accidentally make them come across as unfriendly or distant and make other people reluctant to talk to them. As a result, they may feel people are avoiding them, making them feel even more anxious. **People with facial palsy (or any visible difference) often interpret this negative response of others as being directly due to their facial palsy, rather than their behaviour/body language.**

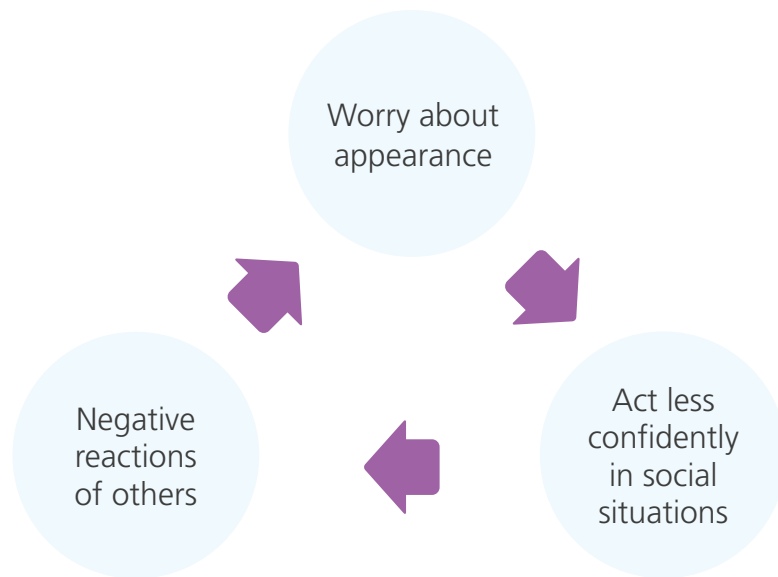
This is demonstrated by the example of Eloise below:

Eloise, aged 35

Eloise developed Bell's palsy during pregnancy 12 years ago. Although she has made a largely positive recovery, she is still self-conscious about laughing in front of people, as she thinks this makes her facial palsy more noticeable. As a result, she often avoids busy social situations and in particular tries to avoid laughing or smiling when socialising. Unfortunately, this makes people think she is overly serious and not the fun person that she really is.

As a result, people do not enjoy interacting with Eloise now as much as they did before she developed facial palsy and people tend to respond negatively to her. However, Eloise incorrectly attributes this to her appearance, rather than her behaviour/body language.

This common pattern is illustrated below:



People who believe that their symptoms of facial palsy are very noticeable to others tend to feel more upset about having facial palsy. How noticeable a person's facial palsy actually is will not always be a good predictor of how distressed they are by their condition. A better predictor is how noticeable the person *thinks* their facial palsy is.

REDUCING ANXIETY

We have now seen that anxiety is a normal human emotion which people with facial palsy often experience when talking to others or being in public. We have also seen that anxiety is associated with unhelpful bodily reactions, as well as thinking and behavioural changes, which in turn keep anxiety going.

Decades of psychological research has taught us that if we make helpful changes to our thoughts and behaviour in response to anxious feelings and anxiety-provoking situations, then this can help us to feel less anxious. However, before we look at ways of doing this, it will first be helpful to spend some time looking at the things that can trigger anxiety.

TRIGGERS

We have already seen how upsetting experiences of staring, questions and unkind comments can lead someone to be even more preoccupied by, or aware of, their symptoms of facial palsy. These experiences, or 'triggers', can lead them to pay even more attention to their facial palsy. Over time, triggers do not have to be actual negative experiences, but simply situations where a negative experience could occur.

For example, if somebody with facial palsy has the thought "If people notice my eating difficulties, then they will judge me.", then being in any situation where they have to eat in front of others is likely to be a trigger for their anxiety, even if nobody says or does anything negative towards them.

These triggers often lead us to feel anxious and as if we have had a negative experience/interaction, even if we haven't.

Common triggers

Below is a list of common triggers of anxiety for people with facial palsy:

- situations where attention is on you
- having photographs taken or appearing on video
- eating/drinking in front of others
- speaking in front of others
- meeting new people
- situations where your appearance might be evaluated by others (e.g. a job interview)
- negative comments from others
- seeing an unflattering photograph or reflection of yourself.

What are your main triggers for appearance-related anxiety/worry about facial palsy?

My main triggers for anxiety/worry about my facial palsy are:

1.
2.
3.
4.

Now you know what factors/situations lead you to feel anxious, it is helpful to look at how anxiety affects your thoughts, behaviours and body. The first area that we will look at is **thoughts** (cognitions).

As we have already seen, **the more anxious we are about how noticeable our facial palsy is, the more noticeable we think it is to others.** When we feel anxious, our brain tends to interpret unclear information as being negative. If we go into a social situation predicting a negative outcome, we tend to interpret interactions in a negative way. This **Interpretation Bias** is a normal result of anxiety.

It does not help that the media often portrays people with a visible difference in a negative way. For example, a significant proportion of villains in films have a visible physical difference. This can lead people with a visible difference, such as facial palsy, to even more strongly believe that people will respond to them in a negative way.

Negative predictions

When people are faced with the triggers that we discussed in the last section, their mind tends to produce a negative prediction about what will happen.

These negative predictions typically involve:

- ignoring evidence that things won't actually be that bad (e.g. that most of the time people do not say/do anything unkind)
- overestimating how bad things will be (e.g. predicting that things will be catastrophic, such as everybody staring at them)
- underestimating their ability to cope if things don't go well (e.g. forgetting that they have effective ways of answering peoples' questions about their face)

These negative predictions tend to make people feel even more anxious, resulting in them:

- being even more pre-occupied with their facial palsy
- avoiding situations/triggers
- engaging in 'safety behaviours', which are behaviours carried out to prevent something bad from happening (e.g. wearing excessive make-up, sitting in restaurants facing away from the room, covering their mouth with their hand).

These are all discussed later on in this guide. However, first of all we will look at **how to manage these negative thoughts/predictions**.

THOUGHT CHALLENGING

As we have seen, negative thoughts and predictions can have a significant effect on your levels of anxiety, even though they are **opinions rather than facts**. Anxiety can often lead us to fall into some of the thinking traps you may have also learnt about in the guides: **Facial palsy: Managing your mood** and **Facial palsy: Building your self-esteem**.

| Type of thought: | Description: | Example: |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Worries | Negative 'what if' predictions about the future. | <i>"What if things never improve?" "What if they laugh at me?"</i> |
| Negative comparisons | Focusing on the negative aspects of your own appearance and the positive aspects of others. | <i>"Their smile is so much better than mine."</i> |
| Black and white thinking | Not seeing the 'middle-ground' – things are either perfect or a total failure. | <i>"I can't ever eat in front of people, it's too embarrassing." "My appearance will only be acceptable to other people if I look perfect."</i> |
| Catastrophising | Jumping to the worst possible conclusion, rather than seeing things for how they really are. | <i>"Everyone will stare and I will cry in front of everyone."</i> |
| Over-generalising | Coming to a conclusion based on one small thing. | <i>"One person stared at me, so everyone must notice my smile."</i> |
| Mind-reading | Believing that we know what others are thinking. | <i>"Everyone thinks I've had a stroke."</i> |
| Fortune telling | Predicting that something negative will occur before it even happens. | <i>"I will cry uncontrollably if anyone asks me a question about my face."</i> |

Testing out negative thoughts and predictions can help you avoid falling into some of these thinking traps.

It can also be helpful to challenge some of your negative predictions by asking yourself:

- Is this my inner 'self-critic' speaking?
- What would I say to a friend who was thinking like this?
- Is there another way that I could view the situation?
- What alternative perspectives are there?
- Am I ignoring any positive information?
- Am I falling into a thinking trap?
- What are the best and worst things that could happen?
- What things could I do to cope if my worst fear did happen?

In order to come up with a more helpful, balanced thought, it can also be helpful to weigh up the evidence for and against your negative thoughts.

Use the following template to practice weighing up the evidence for and against your negative thoughts. Do this every time you find yourself having a negative thought or prediction. This may help to change how strongly you believe your negative thought or prediction. Pay attention to whether creating a more balanced thought changes how anxious you feel.

Remember Eloise from earlier? **She tried this approach, to help her challenge her worry that everyone will stare at her.**

| Situation: | Unhelpful thought: (strength of thought %) | Emotion: (strength of emotion %) | Evidence of my thought | Evidence against my thought: | More balanced thought: (strength %) | Emotion: (new strength %) |
|---------------------------------|---|---|--|--|--|----------------------------------|
| Being in a buy social situation | Everyone will stare at me because they are judging me. They are thinking bad things about me. (80%) | Anxious (85%) | Some people have been staring at me recently I would probably stare at somebody who looks like me – people tend to stare at people who look different | I didn't notice anyone staring at me the last time that I went out Even if people do stare, they are probably just curious My friends tell me that my change in appearance is not that noticeable I might be falling into the traps of fortune telling and mind reading | Some people might stare at me, but it is probably because they are curious. My friends don't seem to mind how I look (50%) | Anxious (65%) |

A MINDFUL RESPONSE TO THOUGHTS

Sometimes we can get caught up in our thoughts. If this happens, it can be helpful to separate or 'defuse' ourselves from our thoughts. This helps us to see that thoughts are **opinions, not facts** and are just mental events or stories that our mind is telling us.

"I notice that I am having the thought that..."

Sometimes we can create a sense of separation or distance from a thought by changing how we say it in our head.

For example:

Take the thought *"I'm ugly."*

Step 1 – Think about it for a while, try and believe it as much as you can.

Step 2 – Now, repeat the thought in your mind with *"I'm having the thought that..."* in front of it: *"I'm having the thought that I'm ugly."*

Step 3 – Now, repeat it again, but with *"I notice that I'm having the thought that..."* in front of it: *"I notice that I'm having the thought that I'm ugly"*.

What happened to the strength of your belief in the thought *"I'm ugly."* when you tried to create some space from it by saying to yourself *"I notice that I'm having the thought..."*? Most people find that this reduces the strength of their belief.

Similarly, the following techniques are also helpful for reducing the strength of a negative thought:

- saying it in a silly voice
- singing it
- saying it very slowly, or fast over and over
- thanking your mind for the thought (even if it is negative).

Leaves on a stream

Another way that you can learn to 'defuse' from your thoughts is to practice the following exercise (initially designed by psychologist Steven Hayes and his colleagues):

1. Find a comfortable position and close your eyes (or fix your gaze in front of you, if you prefer).
2. Imagine you are sitting by stream and there are leaves gently floating past on the surface of the water.
3. For the next few minutes, take any thought that pops into your head and place it on a leaf. Watch that leaf float on past you.
4. Do this for any thought, whether positive or negative. Just place them on the leaf and watch them go by.
5. Don't try to find thoughts; let the stream flow at its own rate – don't try to speed it up or slow it down.
6. If your mind says *"I can't do this."* or you feel bored or impatient, then place those thoughts/feelings on a leaf.
7. Don't try to force a leaf to float away, just watch what it does. Eventually it will float away.
8. If you notice that your mind wanders away from the stream, congratulate yourself for noticing where your mind has gone and gently bring your attention back to the stream.

Some people prefer to do this exercise by imagining thoughts as cars driving past on a road, birds flying in the sky, waves flowing on a beach or as words projected up on a cinema screen. There is no right or wrong way of doing it! The important thing is that you are creating some space or distance from your thoughts.

BEHAVIOUR

We have seen how negative thoughts and predictions can make you feel more anxious. We have also seen how they might lead you to behave in certain ways: avoiding situations/triggers; engaging in 'safety behaviours' and being even more pre-occupied with your facial palsy. These are **normal reactions to anxiety**, but each of them can actually keep you feeling even more anxious in the long run. We will now look at these reactions in greater detail.

Avoidance

Think back to the start of this guide, where we introduced the idea of 'fight or flight' as a normal reaction to anxiety. Well, avoidance is a great example of 'flight' behaviour. **It is our best attempt to get away from a perceived threat.**

When we make negative predictions about the future, we are likely to want to avoid any situation where that prediction could come true.

People with facial palsy often report avoiding, amongst other things:

- public transport
- crowded places
- looking in the mirror
- eating in front of people
- having photographs taken and appearing on video.

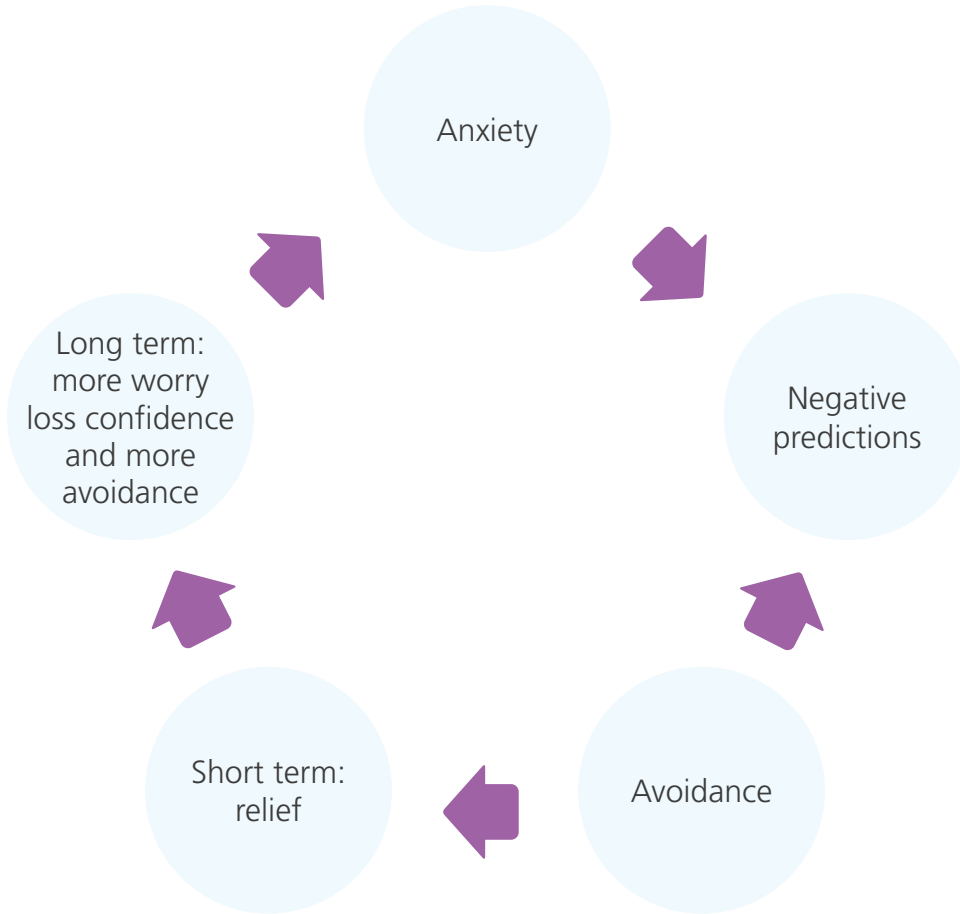
Unfortunately, although avoidance is great for preventing us from feeling anxious in the short time, it actually keeps us feeling anxious in the longer term. Let's look at the example of David:

David, aged 52

David has facial palsy, which mainly affects the closure of his left eye. As a result of this, his eye is often red and sore. David enjoyed going to the pub before he developed facial palsy. Now he worries that people will stare at him or say something unkind to him. This makes him feel anxious at the prospect of going to the pub, resulting in him often choosing to stay at home.

David's story is a common one. It is completely understandable that someone with facial palsy might want to avoid situations which may be negative or make them feel anxious.

Unfortunately for David, his avoidance meant that the next time that he had to go to a pub for a friend's birthday, he was even less confident that he would cope, making him feel even more anxious. David missed seeing his friends, which impacted on his mood. This also added to his worries about going to the pub the next time, because he worried about whether he would have people to talk to and whether people might ask him where he had been. This created a negative cycle that can go on and on.



Is there anything you have stopped doing which you used to enjoy? Are there any negative consequences of this avoidance?

Negative consequences of avoidance:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

SAFETY BEHAVIOURS

Like avoidance, 'safety behaviours' are behaviours which people use to help them feel safe, or because they think it will stop something bad from happening. People with facial palsy often use these safety behaviours as strategies to try to distract other people from noticing their facial palsy.

These can include:

- wearing a baseball cap to cover your eyes

This can be unhelpful, as it can make you look threatening.

- excessive make-up

This can draw people's attention to your face and make them more likely to notice your facial palsy.

- wearing sunglasses, even indoors

Again, this can actually draw more attention to you, especially if you are inside or it is not sunny.

- covering your mouth with your hand

This can actually draw people's attention to your mouth area.

These safety behaviours can lead to a very similar cycle to the one produced by avoidance. They can also lead you to feel even more anxious, especially in situations where you are not able to use a safety behaviour (e.g. not being able to wear a baseball cap while at work).

Safety behaviours can prevent you from learning that you are overestimating danger, because each 'safe' experience is put down to the safety behaviour being effective. For example, thinking, "Thank goodness I wore my sunglasses, otherwise people would have commented on my eye."

It can be helpful to carry out a 'cost-benefit analysis' of any safety behaviours that you engage in. Let's look at the example of Szymon.

Szymon, aged 41

Szymon has partial facial palsy, which affects his forehead and brow. He doesn't like people to see the upper half of his face, because he is worried that they will stare at him. He wears a baseball cap and sunglasses whenever possible. As a result, Szymon starts to think that the only reason that people do not stare at him is because he is wearing sunglasses and a hat. He has a job interview coming up and is now very anxious about not being able to wear these items of clothing.

Szymon realised that he might be becoming over-reliant on wearing his sunglasses and hat, so he did the following 'cost-benefit analysis':

| Advantages of sunglasses and baseball cap: | Disadvantages of sunglasses and baseball cap: |
|--|---|
| <p><i>People can't see my eyes or forehead.</i></p> <p><i>I can't see people staring at me.</i></p> <p><i>I feel less anxious.</i></p> | <p><i>People might think I look intimidating.</i></p> <p><i>I can't wear my cap in certain bars/clubs.</i></p> <p><i>People might be wondering why I am wearing them inside.</i></p> <p><i>It looks odd when I wear them with the suit that I wear to work.</i></p> <p><i>People can't tell how I am feeling, because they can't see my face.</i></p> |

Have a go yourself! Are there any safety behaviours that you use? What are the benefits of these? Are they unhelpful in any way?

| Advantages of: | Disadvantages of: |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

MAKING A CHANGE

When you have identified some of the unhelpful behaviours that could be maintaining your anxiety, it is time to think of ways to change them. When we stop engaging in avoidance or safety behaviours we can start to develop ways of coping with negative situations. You will see that most of the time the negative predictions do not come true!

One of the most common negative thoughts people with facial palsy have is the thought **"Everybody is staring at me."** or the negative prediction **"Everyone will stare at me."**

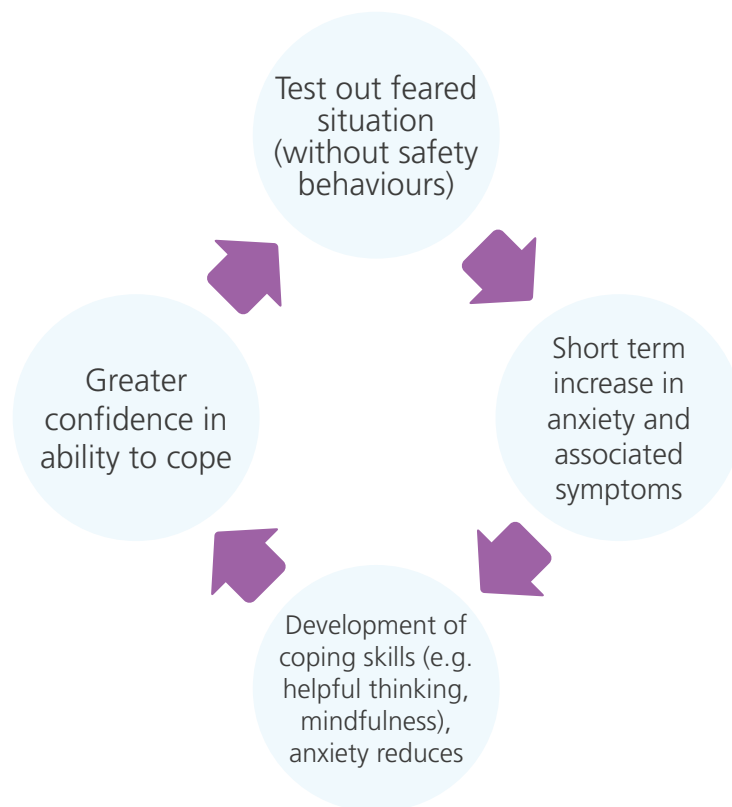
A really helpful way to challenge this thought/prediction is to test out how true it is. Use the following table during an upcoming social situation.

| Situation: | Prediction and how much do I believe it? (0-10) | What actually happened? | How much do I believe my prediction now? |
|---|--|--|--|
| <i>Going to the pub with my best friend on a quiet night. If anyone stares I will hold their gaze, smile and nod.</i> | <i>Everyone will stare at me. 9/10</i> | <i>Only a couple of people stared at me, but soon looked away when I looked back and smiled.</i> | <i>3/10 Not many people were interested in me!</i> |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

David, revisited

Over time, David was able to go to the pub. He started by going at times when it was really quiet, or with a close friend, but eventually he started going at busier and busier times. By doing this, he was able to learn that most people did not stare at him and even when they did, he learnt that he could hold their gaze and nod, and this would stop them from staring.

He would also remind himself that people normally stare because they are curious or want to help. Over time, he noticed that his anxiety reduced and he no longer worried about people staring at him.



Like David, it can be helpful to gradually reduce avoidance or safety behaviours. It might be helpful to think of this as climbing a ladder, with the easiest scenario being the bottom rung and the hardest scenario being the top rung.

David's example:



- 6) *Going to a busy pub on my own.*
- 5) *Going to a busy pub with a group of friends.*
- 4) *Going to a busy pub, with my best friend.*
- 3) *Going to the pub with a group of friends, when it is slightly busy.*
- 2) *Going to the pub when it is really quiet, on my own.*
- 1) *Going to the pub when it is really quiet, with my best friend.*

Now it is your turn:

What would your ladder look like for gradually reducing your avoidance or safety behaviours?

Situation:

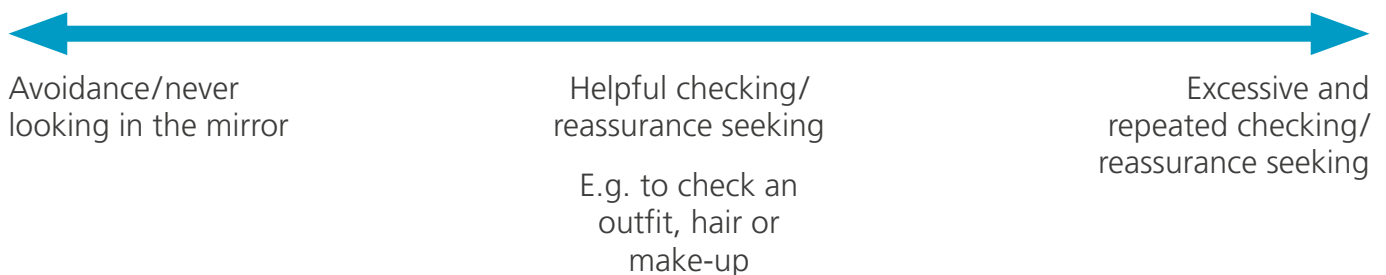


- 6)
- 5)
- 4)
- 3)
- 2)
- 1)

CHECKING

Like avoidance and safety behaviours, **'checking'** in response to anxiety is a very common and normal behaviour that people with facial palsy find themselves doing. 'Checking' describes when people frequently check how they look in the mirror, take 'selfies' or try to seek reassurance from others about their appearance.

While we have seen that on one hand avoidance can be very unhelpful (e.g. avoiding looking at yourself in the mirror or avoiding photographs won't help you to adjust to how you look), **excessive or repeated checking or reassurance seeking can also be very unhelpful**. It may be useful to think of avoidance and checking as being opposite ends of the same spectrum, with helpful checking and reassurance seeking in the middle.



The problem with checking is that **the more attention you give to your symptoms of facial palsy, the more anxious you are likely to feel about them**. Focusing your attention on a particular part of your body alerts you to things you would never normally notice or be bothered by.

Experiment

Focus all of your visual attention on the back of your right hand. Notice all of the ridges, freckles, spots or 'imperfections'.... notice the shape of your veins....notice any lines or creases... notice every tiny detail!

Have you noticed any of things before? Or did you find that you noticed things you weren't aware of? Did you find that these things became more noticeable, the more you focused on them?

This exercise shows that the more that we focus our attention on something, the more noticeable it seems. When it comes to facial palsy, this means that **the longer that you spend looking at your face in the mirror, the more noticeable your facial difference will be to you**. This is likely to make you feel even more anxious and preoccupied by your appearance, creating a negative cycle.

Just like with avoidance, it can be helpful to take a gradual approach to reducing the amount of time you spend checking.

You might do this by:

- gradually reducing the amount of time you spend checking your appearance (e.g. allowing yourself a set amount of time a day for checking):
- delaying checking until a later time (e.g. putting off checking for another 30 minutes/1 hour).

Paula, aged 37

Paula has facial palsy following the onset of Ramsay Hunt syndrome. Her symptoms started 6 months ago and she finds herself spending up to 2 hours a day checking her face for any improvements. The more time she spends looking in the mirror, the more she finds that she dislikes about her appearance.

Paula set herself the target of only looking in the mirror when brushing her teeth and applying her make-up (15 minutes a day). She rated her anxiety for each step of the ladder out of 10 and repeated each step until her anxiety dropped below 3/10. She then moved up to the next step of the ladder.

Paula's example:

Rating of anxiety (0-10)

9) Only looking in the mirror for make-up or brushing my teeth (15 minutes).

8) Allow 15 minutes of looking in the mirror (checking appearance the whole time).

7) Allow 30 minutes of checking a day.

6) Allow 60 minutes of checking a day.

4) Allow 90 minutes of checking a day.

3) Place a stop watch by the mirror – allow 2 hours of checking a day.

Now it is your turn.

How will you gradually reduce and/or delay checking? **Situation:**

Rating of anxiety (0-10)

6)

5)

4)

3)

2)

1)

Top tips for mirrors!

- Try to only use mirrors for a specific purpose (e.g. applying make-up, shaving, checking your hair or outfit, carrying out facial exercises).
- Don't look in the mirror too close-up, as doing this can draw your attention to things that nobody else would notice.
- Try to avoid focusing on specific areas, instead try to focus on the appearance of your face as a whole.

RELAXATION

As we have seen earlier in this guide, anxiety can be associated with lots of changes in our bodies. It can be helpful to reduce the severity of your symptoms by learning to relax. Relaxed breathing can be helpful for reducing the body's reactions to anxiety.

Breathing

The more anxious we feel, the faster our breathing becomes. If we learn to slow down our breathing, we can learn to 'switch off' our body's anxiety response.

Breathing exercise

You can do this exercise standing up, sitting in a chair that supports your back or lying on a bed.

If you are lying down, place your arms away from your sides, with the palms up. Your legs can either be straight, or bent at the knees so that your feet are flat on the floor. If you are sitting, place your hands on your lap or on the chair arms. If you are sitting or standing, have both feet flat on the floor.

Make yourself as comfortable as you can, then follow these instructions:

- Breathe in through your nose. Let your breath flow deep down into your belly, without forcing it. Imagine that you have a balloon in your belly which you are inflating.
- Breathe out gently through your mouth. Imagine the balloon in your belly deflating.
- Continue to breathe in and out in this way, steadily and gently.
- You might find it helpful to count as you breathe in and out. Most people find it helpful to count for 4-6 seconds as they breathe in and again when they breathe out. You may find you can breathe in and out for even longer, with more practice,
- Keep letting your breath flow in and out, each time counting up to 4-6 as you breathe in and then, without pausing or holding your breath, letting it flow out gently, counting up to 4-6.

To best learn how to relax, try to:

- You might find it helpful to practice this exercise for 5-10 minutes.
- Practice this breathing exercise every day.
- Use this exercise during everyday, anxiety-provoking situations.

SUMMARY

To help you manage your anxiety:

- Try to understand:
- What are your triggers?
- What are your body's symptoms of anxiety?
- What are your common unhelpful thoughts?
- Do you engage in any unhelpful behaviours, e.g. avoidance, safety behaviours or checking?
- Reduce unhelpful thoughts by learning to challenge them or responding to them in a mindful way.
- Reduce avoidance, safety behaviours and checking. Do this by gradually facing anxiety provoking situations, while reducing checking and safety behaviours,
- Use relaxation to reduce the physiological symptoms of anxiety.

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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