

Group or Individual CBT for Social Anxiety *Which is right for me?*

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is the most effective treatment for social anxiety according to a huge, recent meta-analysis of 101 individual studies involving some 13,000 participants. Individual CBT was demonstrated as more effective than: medications, self help, meditation, exercise, social skills training, exposure therapy, and talk therapy. That same meta-analysis revealed that individual CBT is a little more effective than group CBT for most people, but that group CBT is still more effective than other approaches.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that this meta-analysis contains a lot of individual variation: what is most effective for most people may not be what is most effective for you.

So what is the most effective option for you? Having provided both individual and group CBT for more than a 1,000 socially anxious individuals in the past 30 years, and having conducted nearly 100 social anxiety CBT groups during this time, here is what I have seen: ***how much progress you make in CBT depends on how much therapy homework you do and how regularly you do it, regardless of whether you are in group or individual CBT.***

You choose this homework for yourself based on suggestions from me, or ideas of your own. The homework includes: completing worksheets (eg. for cognitive restructuring and core belief change work); practicing skills (eg. mindful focus and free associating rather than scripting); and above all, behavioral experiments (doing anxiety-provoking activities of your choosing, in gradual small steps, in which you practice what you are learning in session in real life settings.) ***The group requires a commitment to doing about one hour of worksheets weekly, and at least two hours of experiments weekly (ideally a little every day, when possible).***

Homework is just as important in individual CBT as in group CBT. Nevertheless, I have observed that some people do more homework more consistently in individual CBT, while other people do more in group. Please consider how the following factors apply to you:

1. ***In group, you have far, far less individualized attention than you do in individual sessions.*** In individual, you get 60 minutes of individualized attention. A typical group has 8 or 9 members, meets for 3 hours, and includes lots of activities. So you only get 10-20 minutes of individualized attention in group, although you have 180 minutes of learning.
2. Are you a self-starter? Group may be for you! If you have a strong history of avoiding things you find challenging, you will probably find individual CBT more effective. ***If, in your heart of hearts, you know it as unlikely that you will do most of your therapy homework most of the time—ideally a little homework every day—you will probably make more progress in individual CBT than in group.*** Reporting back to other group members weekly about the homework you have done—or have avoided doing—motivates some group members to be better about doing their homework. Big avoiders, however, tend to avoid even more in group because they get much less individualized attention there. Your therapist can spend much, much more time in individual CBT than in group helping you identify and overcome your roadblocks to doing therapy homework.

3. **Individual is a better choice over group if you have some other serious problem that would get in the way of regularly doing therapy homework**, eg.: debilitating depression; heavy alcohol/drug use (homework experiments must be done sober); personal crises; etc. Individual therapy can focus on whatever needs attention that week. In group, the focus is overwhelmingly social anxiety and other problems get little or no attention.
4. Group requires a commitment to attend the entire 20-weekly-session program, and to not miss more than two sessions. If you leave group early, you will have to pay the remaining tuition for the weeks you don't attend because you are still taking up a slot that no one else can fill after the first session. So, **do not join the group if you are uncertain you can or want to fulfill these attendance commitments**. Individual therapy only requires that you give 24 hours notice for any cancellation. You can stop attending at any time, and can move to every-other week sessions when you feel ready. You cannot do this in group.
5. On the other hand, group has a number of advantages:
 - Group sessions are less expensive than individual sessions. (If you pay monthly, group is \$260 per month, averaging \$65 per 3-hour session with 8 or 9 members. Individual is \$120 per 60-minute session. But remember, group requires a financial commitment to all 20 weeks. Individual only requires at least 24 hours notice for cancellations.)
 - In group, you will be able to identify with others who share similar problems, which will help you feel less different and less alone.
 - In group, you can support each other which feels good, and is also empowering.
 - In group, you can do some of your homework experiments with other members.
 - There are a great many in-session experiments that we do in group: role plays; many conversational activities; assertion practice; and field trips in which we speak to strangers in stores, bars and on the sidewalk together with other group members. These in-session experiments are much more limited in individual therapy because there are only two of us.
 - In group, you will be encouraged to socialize and make friends with other group members which will help you continue making progress after group is over.
 - You will probably feel more anxious in group. This is actually an advantage because it is a safe setting in which to learn to overcome your anxiety with others who feel like you do.

What do I do next?

IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING GROUP CBT: send an email to me (larrycohen@socialanxietyhelp.com) in which you describe why you think group is a better choice for you. If you are unsure whether group or individual CBT is the better choice, include your reasons on both sides of this question. Refer to all of the five points above that are relevant to you.

If you are considering joining the social anxiety CBT group, **convince me in your email that you really will do your 2+ hours of self-chosen therapy homework weekly, and that you will usually resist the urge to avoid**. Tell me why any other problems you may have (eg. depression, alcohol & other drug use, situational stressors) won't get in the way of your attending regularly and doing group homework every week (and doing it sober).

I don't care about your writing quality at all, by the way; I just care about what you say! I suggest you write 100-300 words. **Make sure you send me your email statement at least a day before our individual assessment-orientation session**. Thank you!

--Larry Cohen, LICSW