

Go anyway

A short book about turning down invitations because of nerves, which makes the next invitation harder

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First edition

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. Someone invites you to something, such as drinks, a birthday or a dinner. Part of you would like to go. Then the nerves start, and they build, and at some point you send a message saying you can't make it after all. You feel better at once. By nine o'clock you feel worse. When the next invitation comes, the nerves are worse than they were this time.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that staying in makes sense from the inside. The nerves are unpleasant and real, and the message makes them stop. The second is that the relief of cancelling is what keeps the habit going and makes it grow. The dread you feel beforehand tells you very little about how the evening would go. Other people can see far less of your nervousness than you think. And the things you do to get through an evening mostly make it harder. The third is practical. When the only reason to say no is nerves, you say yes, you go, and you stay at least an hour. Chapters 15 to 18 cover how.

This book doesn't say you should accept everything. Some invitations deserve a no, and chapter 15 is about telling them apart. It doesn't say you should become the life and soul of anything. If you like a quiet life and you're content in it, you don't have this habit and you don't need this book.

Three cautions.

Social anxiety can be more than nerves. The NHS describes social anxiety disorder as a long-term and overwhelming fear of social situations, one that affects everyday activities, self-confidence, relationships and work. It says it's a good idea to see a GP if you think you have it, especially if it's having a big impact on your life. It also says that for many people it doesn't go away without treatment. If that description fits, read this book by all means, and see someone as well. Chapter 19 says more.

If you've lost interest in seeing people because you've lost interest in most things, and your mood has been low for a couple of weeks or more, that may be depression, and the first step is a GP.

And if you stay away from certain gatherings because someone there treats you badly, or because the evening revolves around drinking and you're trying not to, that isn't nerves. Staying away in those cases is sound judgement, and nothing here is meant to talk you out of it.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

Twenty to five on a Thursday

It's twenty to five on a Thursday, and you've been composing a message for ten minutes. Tomorrow at six there are leaving drinks for a colleague at the pub round the corner from work. You've sat opposite her for three years and you like her. When the email went round a fortnight ago you replied "Count me in" within a minute.

The dread started on Monday. It began as a small weight when you remembered Friday, and it's grown each day since. By now you've pictured the evening a dozen times. You see yourself walking in and not seeing anyone you know well. You're standing at the edge of a group with a drink, with nothing to say. Someone asks what you've been up to and your mind goes white. You can feel your face going red, as it does.

The message says, "So sorry, something's come up at home and I won't be able to make it tomorrow. Have a brilliant night, and I'll catch you before you go." You read it twice and send it.

The relief is immediate and physical. Your shoulders come down. The weight that's been there since Monday is gone, and the rest of the afternoon is easy.

Friday evening is less good. You're at home by six with nothing particular to do. Around eight you look at your phone and there's a photo in the work chat, eleven people round two tables pushed together, your colleague in the middle laughing. You feel a drop in your stomach, and it isn't relief. You should have been there. You tell yourself you'll go to the next one.

On the fridge is an invitation to a friend's fortieth, three weeks on Saturday. You haven't replied yet. When you look at it the weight starts up again.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **The dread** is the nervousness that builds in the days and hours before an event. **The excuse** is the message that gets you out of it. **The relief** is what you feel in the minutes after sending it. **The evening in** is what you get in exchange. **Props** are the things you do to get through an event when you do go, such as arriving late, keeping hold of your phone, or staying next to the one person you know. And **the going-over** is what happens afterwards, when you lie in bed replaying what you said.

The habit has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

You wanted to go, at least at first. This isn't the same as refusing things you've no interest in.

The dread arrives early and grows. It's often worse on the Wednesday than it would be at the door.

The excuse is usually false, and you feel bad about that too.

The relief is strong and short. The regret comes later and lasts longer.

And it gets harder each time. A year ago the leaving drinks would have been mildly uncomfortable. Now they seem close to impossible.

Try one thing before reading on. Write down the last ten things you were invited to, large or small. Next to each, put what you replied, and the real reason if you said no or cancelled. For the ones you missed, add a word for how the evening in felt. If most of your refusals had honest reasons and the evenings in were good, you may not need this book. If the real reason was mostly nerves and the evenings were mostly flat, read on.

Why staying in seems sensible

I don't want to start by telling you to pull yourself together. People have probably said something like it to you before, and if it worked you wouldn't be reading this. The reasons for staying in are real ones.

The nerves are unpleasant. Nobody who hasn't had them understands how physical they are. There's the weight in the stomach, the dry mouth, the heat in the face, the mind that empties at the moment you need it. Wanting to avoid that is as reasonable as wanting to avoid a headache.

You may be tired. After a week of work, an evening of conversation with people you half know is an effort, and home is restful. Plenty of people without this habit feel the same on a Friday.

Some events are dull. I won't pretend every leaving do is a delight. You can stand in a loud pub for two hours and come home having had four conversations about commuting.

And a single refusal does very little harm. There's good evidence on this. Julian Givi and Colleen Kirk ran a series of studies on declined invitations. They compared what the person declining expected with what the person who'd invited them felt.

People who declined consistently overestimated the damage. They thought the inviter would be more annoyed and more hurt than the inviter was, and less likely to ask again. Inviters, it turned out, give more weight to whatever was going on in the other person's

head, and less to the bare fact of the no, than invitees expect. So if you've been tormenting yourself over each excuse you've sent, you can ease off. One no is forgiven easily.

That finding cuts two ways for this book, and I'd rather be open about it. It means you don't need to go to things out of fear of giving offence. That's a different habit, and a different book. It also means the cost of this habit isn't in any one refusal. It's in the pattern, and in what the pattern does to you. That's what the next two chapters are about.

I think staying in is trying to meet four needs, and this list is mine. You want to stop feeling the dread. You want to avoid embarrassing yourself in front of people. You want to rest. And you want to spend your time somewhere you can be yourself.

All four are reasonable. My argument is that the habit doesn't deliver them. The dread stops for one evening and comes back heavier. The embarrassment you fear is mostly invisible to others. You don't get much rest on an evening spent feeling you should be elsewhere. As for being yourself, the person who wanted to say goodbye to a colleague of three years was you as well.

"I'll feel better if I don't go"

You will. That's the difficulty. If cancelling made you feel worse straight away, the habit would never have formed.

Look closely at the sequence on Thursday afternoon. For four days the dread had been building. You sent the message, and within seconds the dread was gone. Few things in ordinary life remove a bad feeling that fast or that completely.

Anything that reliably removes a bad feeling gets repeated. This is one of the oldest findings in psychology, and you don't need a study to believe it, because you can see it in your own behaviour. It doesn't work through reasoning. At twenty to five you weren't weighing the evening's merits. Some part of you had learned, from every previous occasion, that the message makes the weight go away, and it wanted the weight gone.

The relief teaches a second thing, which is worse. When you escape something and feel better, your mind concludes that the thing you escaped was dangerous. It wouldn't have felt so good to get away otherwise. So each excuse confirms that leaving drinks are a threat, and the next invitation arrives already marked as one. What I've described here is interpretation, though it's close to how therapists who treat social anxiety explain avoidance.

Then there's the part of the sequence the habit never takes into account, which is Friday night. The relief lasted perhaps an hour. After it came a flat evening, a twinge of guilt about the invented problem at home, and the photo at eight o'clock. The habit is

learned from the first hour, because that's when the feeling changes sharply. The cost comes in slowly over the following day. The cost is larger than the relief, but it's too spread out for the habit to learn from.

So "I'll feel better if I don't go" is true for about an hour, and it's false for the evening, the weekend, and the next invitation.

There's an honest objection here. Sometimes you cancel and the evening in is lovely, and you don't regret it at all. That happens. When it does, I'd guess the invitation was one you never wanted, and the refusal was an honest one that happened to arrive late. Chapter 15 is about those. The habit this book is about has a different pattern. You wanted to go, you didn't, and at eight o'clock you wished you had.

"It's getting harder, so I must be getting worse"

A year ago you went to most things, with some nerves. Now a drink round the corner feels like an ordeal. It's natural to read that as a change in you. You conclude that your nerves are getting worse and you're less able than you were, and that perhaps you're simply not built for this.

I think there's a better explanation, and it's in this book's subtitle. Each refusal makes the next invitation harder. Here are four ways it does that, and they're my own reasoning except where I name a study.

First, the relief marks the event as dangerous, as the last chapter described. The mark accumulates. After ten escapes, social evenings carry ten layers of it.

Second, you never get the evidence that would correct the picture. In your imagination the leaving drinks went badly. You stood at the edge, your mind went blank and your face went red. Because you didn't go, that imagined version is the only one you have. It sits in your memory almost as if it had happened. If you'd gone, there'd have been an actual evening to set against it, and chapter 5 gives reasons to think actual evenings are usually milder than imagined ones. If you never go, the imagined version is never tested against anything.

Third, you get out of practice. Easy conversation is partly a skill, and skills fade without use. If the last time you made small talk with a half-stranger was four months ago, it will be stiffer than it

was when you did it weekly. You notice the stiffness and take it as proof that you're bad at this. It only shows that you haven't done it lately.

Fourth, the group moves on without you. Every evening you miss produces jokes you weren't there for, stories you haven't heard, and a bit more ease between the people who were there. When you do turn up, you're slightly more of an outsider than you were, and that makes the evening harder and the next refusal more likely.

Rachman and colleagues, studying what people do after an awkward social event, found something that fits. People who went over an event more afterwards also reported more avoidance of similar situations. Avoidance and the painful going-over went together. Chapter 13 comes back to that.

All four of those work in reverse as well. An evening attended leaves one less layer of danger and an actual memory to draw on. It gives you some practice and a shared joke. So the difficulty you feel is mostly a measure of how much avoiding you've done recently, and that can change.

"The dread is telling me how bad it will be"

By Thursday the dread was strong, and you took its strength as a forecast. If you felt this bad on Thursday, the evening itself was surely going to be dreadful. It seems a fair inference, but the research doesn't support it.

Start with what the dread is made of. Hendrik Hinrichsen and David Clark interviewed people with high and low social anxiety about what goes through their minds before a social event. The anxious group did particular things. In line with Clark's earlier account, these included dwelling on how it might go wrong, recalling past failures, and picturing how they'd look to others. In a second study the researchers asked people to do exactly that kind of thinking before giving a speech, while others did a distracting task. The people who did the anxious kind of thinking stayed more anxious through the wait, and their anxiety peaked higher during the speech. This happened whether they were socially anxious people or not.

So the mental rehearsal you did from Monday to Thursday wasn't a preview of Friday. It was producing the dread. Anyone who spent four days picturing themselves blank and blushing at the edge of a group would feel dreadful by Thursday, whatever the evening was going to be like.

The second piece of evidence is about how well people predict their own enjoyment. John Zelenski and colleagues ran five studies on this. Earlier research had found that people generally enjoy behaving sociably, meaning talking, joining in and being a bit

bold, and that this holds for introverts as much as for extraverts. Zelenski's team asked people to predict how they'd feel, then had them do it. Introverts predicted less pleasure and more negative feeling and self-consciousness than extraverts did.

Then both groups went ahead, and the introverts enjoyed it about as much as the extraverts. They'd been wrong about themselves, particularly about how self-conscious and bad they'd feel. The researchers suggest this may be why introverts don't act sociably more often. They overestimate costs that don't materialise.

These were laboratory tasks, and a task in a lab isn't a fortieth birthday party. I wouldn't lean on the detail. But the direction matches what people with this habit report when they do go to something. They'll say it was all right, or that they don't know why they'd got so worked up.

Here's a way to test it on yourself, which will come back in chapter 17. Before an event, write down a number from nought to ten for how bad you expect it to be. The day after, write down how bad it was. Do it five times. I expect the second number to be lower than the first most times, often by a lot. If it is, you'll have your own evidence that the dread isn't a forecast. It tells you how much rehearsing you've done.

"I'm just tired"

Of all the reasons for cancelling, this is the one you're most likely to believe yourself. It's Thursday, it's been a long week, and the thought of standing in a pub making conversation is exhausting. Rest seems like what you need.

Sometimes it is. But there's a simple observation that separates tiredness from dread, and you can make it the next time you cancel. Watch what happens to your energy in the half hour after you send the excuse.

If you were tired, you'd still be tired. Tiredness doesn't care whether you have plans. You'd go home, eat something, and be asleep by ten.

What usually happens is different. Within minutes of sending the message you feel lighter. You've got energy for the walk home. You might cook something proper, or stay up late watching a series. The exhaustion has gone, and you haven't rested at all. The only thing that's changed is the plans.

Exhaustion that disappears as soon as the event is cancelled was the dread, as far as I can see. This is my own reasoning, but I think it's sound. The weight described in chapter 1 drags on you, and being braced against something for four days is tiring in a real way. Your body's report that you're worn out is accurate. It's wrong about the cause, and so it's wrong about the cure. Resting doesn't

remove the weight. It lifts when you cancel, and it would also have lifted after half an hour at the event, when the dread found nothing to feed on.

There's a second test, which is to ask what you'd do with the same tiredness if the evening were something you had no nerves about. Suppose your closest friend rang and said, "I'm outside, come for one drink." If you'd go, tired as you are, then tiredness isn't the obstacle.

I don't want to overstate this. People with demanding jobs, small children or health problems really do run out of energy, and an evening at home can be what they need. Chapter 15 counts being truly worn out as an honest reason to decline. But when you hear yourself saying you're too tired, check whether the tiredness would survive a cancellation. If it would, stay home, and say so truthfully at the start and not on the day.

One more thing is worth knowing. Many people find that a social evening they dreaded leaves them with more energy than it took. You'll sometimes come home at ten more awake than you left, having laughed and talked. I can't promise that, and introverts may find it less often than others. But if you've been treating every event as a drain on your energy, it's worth checking that against a few actual evenings. The log in chapter 17 has room for it.

"Everyone will see I'm nervous"

Much of the dread is about being seen. You picture your red face, your shaking hand on the glass and the pause before you answer, and you assume these are as plain to everyone else as they are to you. If they are, then going means putting your nervousness on show.

Thomas Gilovich, Kenneth Savitsky and Victoria Husted Medvec studied this assumption, and they called it the illusion of transparency. Across several experiments, people overestimated how far others could make out what was going on inside them. People telling lies thought their lies were more detectable than they were. People tasting something disgusting while trying to keep a straight face thought their disgust was more obvious than it was. The researchers' explanation is that your own inner state is so vivid to you that you can't fully set it aside when you imagine someone else's view. You know your heart is pounding, so it seems it must show. Mostly it doesn't, because other people can't see or hear your heartbeat.

Those experiments weren't about social nerves in particular, so I'm extending them. But the mechanism applies with some force. To you, a blush is heat flooding your face. To someone across a pub table in evening light, it's a slight change of colour on a person they're only half looking at, if they notice at all. The blank moment that feels like ten seconds to you is a short pause to them, and conversations are full of pauses.

There's a second finding about what happens when people do notice. Savitsky, together with Nicholas Epley and Gilovich, ran studies in which people committed some small social blunder and predicted how harshly observers would judge them. The observers were consistently kinder than predicted. My reading is that the person who'd blundered was focused entirely on the blunder, and the observers weren't.

Think about this from the other side, because you have the evidence already. Recall the last gathering you went to. Try to remember who there seemed nervous, who blushed, who said something slightly off. Most people can't come up with a single instance. That's not because nobody was nervous. I'd guess a fair share of any room is, to some degree. You didn't notice because you were busy with your own evening. Everyone else was too, and nobody was studying you.

None of this means nerves never show. Sometimes they do, and someone sees that you're a bit on edge. What usually happens then is that they're a little warmer with you, and that's all.

"I never know what to say"

In the imagined version of Friday, someone turns to you and asks what you've been up to, and your mind goes white. This does sometimes happen. It's worth understanding why, because the usual explanation is wrong. You do have things to say.

When you're nervous in company, your attention goes inward. You monitor how you're standing and what your face is doing. You check whether your voice sounds odd and whether that last remark was stupid. Therapists call this self-focused attention. Freda McManus, Catarina Sacadura and David Clark tested it directly. In one study they had some people focus on themselves and use their usual protective habits in a social task, while others focused outward and dropped those habits. The inward, self-protecting version came off worse in a number of ways. I've only read the summary, which doesn't list them all.

The reason isn't mysterious. A conversation takes attention. You have to hear what the other person said, take in what they meant, and find something that connects to it. If most of your attention is on your own face, you miss what they said, and then you really don't have anything to say, because a reply has to be a reply to something. So when your mind goes white, it's because your attention was on yourself and you didn't catch what was said.

The NHS's self-help advice for social anxiety includes this very point. It says to try to focus on what people are saying rather than just assuming the worst. It sounds too simple to help, but I think it helps more than anything else in this book.

It helps to notice what conversation at a leaving do consists of. It isn't a performance of wit. Mostly it's questions and listening. People ask where someone is going next, how they found the job, and what they'll do with the week off. Anyone who asks a real question and then listens to the answer is good company, and is remembered as such. People with this habit are often better at the listening half than the confident talkers are, because they're not waiting for their turn to talk.

So you don't need things to say. It's enough to have two or three questions in your pocket, which chapter 16 will help you prepare. You also need to bring your attention back to the other person each time it drifts to your own face. It will drift, and you bring it back again. After ten minutes of that you'll usually find you're in a conversation.

"I've got my ways of getting through it"

When you do go to things, you have methods. Perhaps you arrive forty minutes late so that the room is full and nobody notices you come in. You might stay beside the one person you know well, or keep your phone in your hand and look at it when a gap opens. Some people drink the first drink fast, or rehearse sentences before saying them. Others offer to help in the kitchen and stay there, or plan their exit before they've taken their coat off.

I've called these props. Therapists call them safety behaviours, and they've been studied. In the first of McManus, Sacadura and Clark's studies, people with high social anxiety reported using more of them, more often and in more situations, than people with low social anxiety. Both groups thought the behaviours helped. In the second study, as the last chapter mentioned, the researchers compared a social task done with and without them. With the props and the inward focus, things went worse.

I can suggest a few reasons why. The first three are reasoning of mine and of the clinicians who write about this, and the experiments didn't measure them.

Props take attention. Rehearsing a sentence before you say it means you're not listening to the person talking. Monitoring your escape route means you're only half in the room. That feeds straight into the blankness of the last chapter.

Props can make you seem less friendly than you are. A person looking at their phone, standing a little back and giving short, careful answers looks uninterested. Other people respond by leaving them alone, and being left alone feels like the rejection they feared in the first place.

And props steal the credit. If the evening goes fine, you conclude that it went fine because you stuck by your friend and left by nine. You never find out that it would have gone fine anyway. So the next event is as frightening as this one was, and you need the props again.

Alcohol deserves its own mention. One drink at a party is ordinary, and I'm not against it. But if you can't face a room without drinking quickly first, the drink is a prop, and it has the same fault as the others. You come home believing the alcohol got you through. It also has faults of its own, which you know about.

Not all props are equal. Helping to carry plates is a perfectly good way to have something to do for ten minutes, and hosts are grateful for it. What matters is whether you're doing it to join in or to hide. Chapter 17 suggests dropping props one at a time, beginning with the easiest. You don't have to walk in with none. If you go with one fewer each time, you'll gradually find out how you manage without them.

"I'm just an introvert"

You may have settled on this as the explanation. You're an introvert. Introverts find company draining and need time alone. So staying in is simply you honouring your nature, and a book telling you to go to parties has misunderstood who you are.

I agree with a good deal of it. Introversion is real and it isn't a fault. Some people prefer small groups to large ones, one long conversation to six short ones, and a quiet evening after a busy day. If that's you, nothing here asks you to change it. You can build a social life out of dinners for four and walks with one friend and never go to a loud party again.

But introversion and nerves are different things, and they call for different responses. Introversion is a preference. It says, I'd rather do this than that. Nerves are a fear. They say, something bad will happen if I go. You can have either without the other. There are nervous extraverts, who long for company and dread it. There are calm introverts, who go to the party without a flutter, enjoy an hour, and leave because they've had enough.

You can tell which one is operating by how the refusal feels afterwards. When an introvert turns down a big party because they'd rather read, the evening in is a pleasure. There's no weight beforehand and no drop in the stomach at eight o'clock. When nerves turn it down, you get the pattern from chapter 1. There was dread beforehand, a rush of relief, and then a flat evening and regret. Look back at your list of ten invitations. For each one you refused, ask which pattern followed, and you'll be able to tell.

The label can also hide things from you. Once "I'm an introvert" is the reason, you no longer ask whether you wanted to go. You wanted to go to those leaving drinks. You said yes within a minute.

Zelenski's studies from chapter 5 are relevant here. His introverts expected to dislike behaving sociably, and then enjoyed it about as much as anyone. In related experiments his group found that acting in an outgoing way raised introverts' mood without raising their negative feelings. They found no sign that acting that way tired the introverts out on a test of concentration afterwards. Again, this was in the lab and over short periods, and an hour in a lab isn't a wedding weekend. But it suggests that what introverts expect from company can be worse than what they get.

I'd go along with the label as far as this. Let your introversion choose the kind of event and how long you stay. Choose the dinner over the club night, and go home at ten if you like. But when you wanted to be somewhere and nerves are the reason you're not going, that isn't introversion.

"I'll go when I feel more confident"

This is the most reasonable-sounding form the habit takes. You're not refusing for ever. You're waiting until you feel up to it. You'll go to things again after some more rest, or some more reading, or some work on yourself. It seems sensible to get the confidence first and go to the party afterwards.

I think that's the wrong way round, and I'd like to explain why as carefully as I can, because a great deal depends on it.

Ask where confidence comes from. For any activity, it comes from having done the thing and found that you could. People who are confident drivers have driven a lot, and it went all right. They didn't feel confident on their first morning with L-plates. They felt frightened, drove anyway with someone beside them, and the confidence built up behind them as the miles did. It didn't come from reading about driving or from waiting at home until they felt ready.

Social confidence is no different. The person who walks into a room easily has walked into a great many rooms. Their ease doesn't come from a personality that they were given and you weren't. It comes from a stock of evenings that went fine, and the stock is large enough that the next evening carries no threat.

Chapter 4 described what waiting does to that stock. While you wait, the imagined bad evenings pile up and the actual good ones don't. You get out of practice, and the group moves on without you.

So the confidence you're waiting for can't arrive while you wait. Each month of waiting leaves you with less of it, and you take that as a sign that you need to wait longer.

The NHS makes a related point about social anxiety in general. For some people it gets better as they get older, it says, but for many people it doesn't go away on its own without treatment. Treatment, as chapter 19 will describe, consists largely of doing the feared things in a planned way.

There's a fair objection here. It sounds as if I'm saying you have to do the hard thing while feeling unready, which is exactly what you can't face. In a way I am. But two things make it less bleak than it sounds.

The first is that you don't have to start with the hard thing. You can start with something small enough to manage while nervous. A coffee with one friend is an event, and it counts, and it adds to the stock.

The second is that you don't need confidence in order to go. You only need a willingness to feel nervous for an hour. You already have that, and you've shown it many times at the dentist, in job interviews and on first days at work. You went to all of those frightened. The rule in chapter 18 asks for the same thing and no more. The confidence will come later, after you've been to enough evenings, and you may not notice it arriving.

"They won't miss me"

It's a comforting thought when you're writing the excuse. There'll be thirty people there. Nobody will notice one fewer. Your colleague will be surrounded all night and won't give you a thought.

In one sense you're right, and chapter 2 gave the evidence. Givi and Kirk found that a declined invitation does much less damage than the person declining fears. Your colleague wasn't hurt by Thursday's message. She read it, thought "that's a shame", and went back to her packing.

But "they won't miss me" isn't quite the same claim as "they won't be angry", and it's less true. Think about how an invitation comes about. Someone made a list, and you were on it. For the leaving drinks that may have been the whole office. For the fortieth, your friend sat down and chose the people she wanted in the room, and she wanted you. An invitation is a small statement that your company is liked. The habit hears that statement and responds as if it were a threat.

The pattern matters more than any one refusal. What follows is my own observation, and I've no study for it. People who get three or four refusals in a row from someone don't usually take offence. They draw a kinder conclusion, which does more harm. They decide that you don't enjoy that sort of thing, or that you're very busy, or that you've got a lot on at home.

So they stop asking, meaning to be considerate, since it seems pointless to keep putting you in the position of having to say no. From where you sit, the invitations simply thin out. It can look like proof that people never much wanted you there. They did want you there, and they stopped because you taught them to.

Small occasions are where absence shows most. Thirty people at a pub can absorb a gap. At a dinner for six it shows. And the things that matter most to the people holding them are usually the ones where your absence is felt most. A wedding or a funeral is like that, and so is a fortieth, or the last night before someone moves away. People often remember for years who came to those.

There's something on the other side of this that the habit never counts. Turning up is one of the simplest ways of showing someone they matter to you. You don't have to be sparkling. Your colleague won't remember what you said on Friday. She'd have remembered that you were there, that you gave her a hug, and that you stayed for a drink. If you're there for an hour you've given her nearly all of that.

"I went last time and it was awful"

Sometimes the case for staying in rests on evidence. You did go to the last one. You said something clumsy to someone's husband, there was a silence, and you went home and lay awake going over it. You've thought about it most days since. So you conclude that evenings like that are awful for you.

Two things are mixed together in that memory. One is the evening, and the other is the going-over, and the going-over has done most of the damage.

Rachman and colleagues collected basic information on this by questionnaire. They found that going over an awkward or embarrassing social event afterwards is common. The more socially anxious people were, the more of it they did. The memories kept coming back uninvited and got in the way of concentrating. And as chapter 4 mentioned, people who did more of it also avoided similar situations more.

Consider what the going-over does to the record. The evening lasted three hours. You had perhaps six conversations, most of them perfectly pleasant. One contained a clumsy remark and a pause of a few seconds.

In the weeks since, you haven't replayed the three hours. You've replayed those few seconds, perhaps a hundred times. Each replay makes them more vivid and crowds out the rest. By now your

memory of the evening is the clumsy remark and not much else. If someone had filmed the evening, you wouldn't recognise it from your memory of it.

Then remember chapter 7. The remark was almost certainly less noticeable than you think, and the husband was almost certainly kinder about it than you imagine. He's very unlikely to have thought about it again.

There's a practical fix, and it's about getting in first. On the night, before you go to bed, write down three things that happened at the event. They should be plain facts and not judgements. "Talked to her brother about his allotment. Laughed at the story about the hire car. Left at half nine." Then write your number out of ten. This takes two minutes, and it gives your memory a fuller record before the going-over can edit it down to one moment. When the clumsy remark comes back at two in the morning, you have something to put beside it.

I should be fair about this. Some evenings really are bad. You can be stuck with a bore for an hour, or the friends you expected may not come, or someone may be rude. That happens to everybody, confident people included. A bad evening tells you about that evening. It doesn't tell you about parties in general or about you. If you'd had a disappointing meal at a restaurant, you wouldn't conclude that you're unfit to eat out.

What staying in costs

You may think of the habit as costing the odd missed night out. I think it costs more than that. Most of this chapter is my own reckoning.

Friendships. Friendships are kept alive by time spent together. If you see someone twice a year because you cancelled four other times, the friendship gets thinner, however fond of each other you are. Nobody quarrels. You just have less and less of each other's lives in common.

Work. A lot of working life runs on small familiarity. People get thought of for the interesting project because someone chatted to them at the summer party. Disagreements are easier to settle with someone you've had a drink with. Skipping every social event at work doesn't get anyone sacked. But after a few years of it you're known less well than the colleagues who turned up.

The occasions that don't come round again. This is the cost people regret most, in my observation. It's the wedding you found a reason to miss, or the retirement do for someone who'd been kind to you. The relief lasted an hour, and the absence can't ever be undone.

The people at home. If you have a partner, they've either been going to things alone and explaining your absence, or they've stopped going. If you have children, they're watching how an adult responds to an invitation.

A shrinking map. Avoidance spreads. It begins with big parties and moves to small ones. Then it's phone calls, which become texts. After a while it's the shop where the assistant is chatty, or the school gate. The NHS list of signs of social anxiety begins with worry about everyday activities such as meeting strangers, starting conversations, speaking on the phone, working or shopping. People don't usually start there. They get there in stages, and each stage seemed reasonable when they reached it.

What you think of yourself. Every excuse is a small untruth told to someone you like, and part of you keeps count. You also gather evidence, week by week, for a view of yourself as someone who can't cope with ordinary things. That view is wrong. It rests entirely on evenings you didn't attend.

The evenings themselves. I've left this until last because it's easy to forget. Some of those evenings would have been good. You missed a conversation you'd have remembered, a friendship that might have started, and a night when you'd have laughed until your face hurt. The habit never counts any of that. The evenings you stayed in for are mostly ones you couldn't now tell apart.

Against all that, the habit has given you a few hundred separate hours of relief, and each one made the next dread heavier.

Which invitations to turn down

This book is called Go anyway, and the title needs a limit. I don't think you should go to everything. A life with no refusals in it is exhausting, and saying yes to things you don't want is a habit with costs of its own. What you need is a way to tell an honest no from a nervous one. The test and the list below are my own.

Ask one question. "If I could be certain of feeling comfortable there, would I want to go?"

If the answer is no, then nerves aren't the reason. You don't want to go, and you wouldn't want to go if you were the most confident person alive. Here are some honest reasons. You don't much like the people. You're truly worn out, which isn't the same as dreading it. You can't afford it. You've a prior commitment that's real. The event is built around something you don't do, such as heavy drinking. Someone will be there who treats you badly. Crowded, noisy rooms overwhelm you for reasons that have nothing to do with fear of people. Or you'd simply rather spend the evening another way.

In all those cases, decline, promptly and truthfully. "Thanks for asking, I won't be able to come" is a complete reply. You don't need to invent a problem at home.

If the answer is yes, nerves are what stand between you and something you want. That's the habit, and that's when the rule in chapter 18 applies.

If the answer is "I'm not sure", look at the evidence from your body. An invitation you don't care about produces a shrug when it arrives. One that matters to you, and that you're frightened of, produces the weight. The weight is an uncomfortable sign, but it tells you that you care how the evening goes. It tends to be strongest before the events that matter most to you.

Two more points about refusing. First, when you do decline, do it at the start. A no on the day the invitation arrives costs the host nothing. A cancellation the afternoon before costs them a place at the table and sometimes money. It also costs you four days of dread that you needn't have had. Second, you're allowed a few nervous refusals. There'll be weeks when you've nothing left, and one evening in won't undo your progress. What matters is that going is your default when you wanted to go, and that staying in is something you chose for a reason you could say aloud.

Getting through the door

The hardest part of any event is the stretch from the pavement to your first conversation. Most of the dread is about those ten minutes, and the ten minutes are nearly always the worst part of the evening. This chapter is about making them easier. It's my own set of suggestions, built on the research in earlier chapters and on the NHS's advice to break down challenging situations into smaller parts.

Reply quickly, and say yes. The longer an invitation sits on the fridge, the more rehearsal it collects. If chapter 15's question gives a yes, reply the same day. Then put it in the calendar and tell someone you're going, so that backing out means an awkward conversation.

Cut down the rehearsing. Hinrichsen and Clark's work in chapter 5 showed that picturing how badly it will go produces the dread. You won't stop the pictures arriving. When you notice one, you can turn to something practical about the evening. Think about what you'll wear, how you'll get there, and what time you'll leave. Planning of that kind is useful, where picturing yourself blushing isn't.

Arrive near the start. This is the opposite of the late-arrival prop, and I think it's the most useful tactic in the chapter. At ten past six the pub has five people in it. The host is free and pleased to see you. Conversations haven't formed yet, so there are no closed circles to break into. By seven, when the room is full, you're

already in a group and newcomers are joining you. If you arrive at seven, you walk in alone and have to find a way into a circle that's already formed.

Know your first three minutes. Decide in advance who you'll go to first. Usually that's the host or the person whose occasion it is. Decide on your opening line, which can be as plain as "Congratulations, how are you feeling about it all?" That gets you over the threshold with something to do.

Carry three questions. They needn't be clever. "How do you know her?" works at any party. "What have you got planned for the summer?" works most of the year. At a leaving do you can ask "What will you miss least about this place?" Questions point your attention outward, which chapter 8 said matters most.

Have something in your hand. A drink of any kind gives your hands something to do. It needn't be alcoholic.

Give it an hour. This matters a good deal, and here's the reasoning. Nerves are highest as you walk in. If you stay, they come down, usually a long way. Clinicians who treat anxiety explain this by saying that the body doesn't keep an alarm running at full strength when nothing bad is happening. If you leave after fifteen minutes, you leave while they're still high, and what you've learned is that it was as bad as you feared and escape fixed it. If you stay an hour, you leave when they're low, and you learn that it got easier. The figure of an hour is my own choice. After that, go home whenever you like.

While you're there, and afterwards

You're through the door and you've said hello to the host. This chapter covers the rest of the evening and the twelve hours after it, which matter as much.

Bring your attention back, again and again. Your attention will go to your face, your hands and your last sentence. Each time you notice, bring it back to the person in front of you. Listen to what they're saying, and notice what they seem to feel about it. You'll have to do this dozens of times in an evening, and that doesn't mean you're failing at it.

Let pauses be pauses. A gap in a conversation feels to you like something you caused and have to fix. It's neither of those things. The other person is as responsible for it as you are, and most gaps get filled within a few seconds. If one doesn't, use one of your three questions. You can also say "I'm going to get another drink, can I get you one?", which is an ordinary way of ending any conversation.

Drop one prop. Pick the easiest one tonight. Leave the phone in your coat pocket. Next time, spend twenty minutes away from the friend you came with. The time after that, say the sentence without rehearsing it first. One at a time is enough. Each evening you get through without a prop tells you that you didn't need it.

Take a break if you need one, and come back. Five minutes in the garden or the toilets is fine, and many people do it. What matters is coming back. A break that turns into leaving is the excuse again.

If the nerves surge, stay put and let them pass. The NHS notes that some people with social anxiety have panic attacks, with an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety, usually only for a few minutes. If that's what happens to you, it's worth talking to a GP. For an ordinary surge, stay where you are, breathe slowly, and keep listening to whoever's talking. The NHS suggests breathing exercises for stress as one of its self-help tips. Surges pass in a few minutes. If you've stood through one, you'll be less frightened of the next.

Leave properly. When your hour is up and you'd like to go, find the host, thank them, say goodbye to whoever you were last talking to, and go. Don't slip away unseen. A proper goodbye takes a minute, and it means the last thing people see is you being friendly on your way out.

Write the three facts that night. Chapter 13 explained why. Write down three plain things that happened, and your number out of ten. Put the prediction from chapter 5 beside it. If you like, add a word about how much energy you had when you got home.

Stop the going-over when it starts. It will start, probably in bed. When you catch it, don't argue with it and don't try to work out whether the remark was really that bad. Tell yourself it's the going-over and that you've already written the evening down, then turn to something else. A book is good for that, or a podcast, or planning tomorrow. If it keeps coming back for days, that's a sign that more help would be useful, and chapter 19 covers it.

Look at the log after five events. You'll have five predictions and five results, and fifteen plain facts. My expectation is that the results are milder than the predictions nearly every time, and that the facts include several things you were glad not to have missed. They're from evenings you actually went to, so you can trust them more than the imagined ones.

The decision

This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes late because at the start it would have sounded like being told to try harder. By now you've seen what cancelling does. The relief lasts an hour and is paid for over the weekend and at the next invitation. You've seen that the dread comes from rehearsing, that your nerves mostly don't show, and that props and inward attention are what make evenings go badly. And you've seen that the difficulty you feel now comes from the avoiding you've done recently.

Here's the rule I'd suggest. Put it in your own words if you like.

When I've been invited to something and the only reason to say no is nerves, I say yes, I go, and I stay at least an hour.

It has five parts, and each answers a chapter.

I sort the invitation honestly. If I'd want to go were I sure of being comfortable, it's nerves, and I go. If I wouldn't, I decline straight away and truthfully.

I don't cancel. Once I've said yes, the decision is made. The dread on the day isn't new information. I expected it, and it peaks just before the thing it's wrong about.

I arrive early with a plan for the first three minutes. I know who I'll greet, what I'll say, and the three questions I'm carrying.

I stay an hour, with my attention on other people and one prop fewer. After the hour I'm free to go.

I write three facts and a number the same night. I judge the evening from what I wrote down.

It helps to plan for the moments when the habit will try to restart. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled ninety-four tests of plans in the form "when X happens, I'll do Y" and found that they make people more likely to follow through. A plan like this works because you've decided what to do before the difficult moment comes. Three are worth writing down.

When I find myself drafting an excuse, I'll delete it and ask chapter 15's question.

When I catch myself picturing the evening going badly, I'll switch to planning what time I'll arrive and who I'll speak to first.

When I'm at the door and want to turn round, I'll go in, find the host, and start my hour.

I'll be honest about what to expect, and this is my expectation and not a finding. The first two or three events will be hard. The dread will be as strong as ever beforehand, because it's been trained for a long time and one evening doesn't retrain it. You'll feel the nerves when you walk in. You may have a clumsy moment, and the going-over may come for it that night.

What should change first is the evening itself. It ought to get easier after the first twenty minutes, and by the end you may find you don't want to leave yet. The dread beforehand changes more slowly. For most people it shrinks over a run of events, and I can't tell you how many. It may never vanish, and plenty of sociable

people feel a flutter before every party for the whole of their lives. They go regardless, and they think of the flutter as part of getting ready.

Start small if you can. Your first event under the rule doesn't have to be the fortieth. A coffee with one friend counts, and so does lunch with two colleagues or half an hour at a neighbour's.

Weddings, strangers and cancelling on the day

When it's a big formal occasion. Weddings and the like are long, structured and full of people you don't know. They're also easier than they look, because the structure does a lot of the work for you. There's a ceremony to watch, a meal with a seat that's been chosen for you, and speeches to listen to. There's also a standard first question, which is how you know the couple. Break it into parts, as the NHS suggests, and think only about the part you're in. The hour rule doesn't fit a wedding, so set a different minimum, such as staying until the speeches are over.

When you won't know anyone. This is the hardest case and the one where arriving early matters most. Find the host and ask them to introduce you to one person. Hosts like being asked to do this. Failing that, look for someone else standing alone, who'll be as glad of company as you are. The question about how they know the host works on anyone.

When everyone will be drinking and you won't be. Hold a soft drink that looks like any other drink. If anyone asks, say "I'm not drinking tonight", and you needn't explain further. If the whole point of the evening is getting drunk, that's an honest reason to decline under chapter 15.

When you're coming back after a long gap. If it's been a year or more since you went to anything, start at the very bottom of the ladder. Have a coffee with the friend you find easiest, for forty-five minutes, somewhere quiet. After that, see two people. After that,

try a small gathering. A couple of weeks at each step is plenty. You may find, as many people do, that your friends are simply glad to see you and don't ask for an explanation of the gap.

When the invitations have stopped coming. Chapter 12 described how this happens. People stopped asking out of consideration, so they need to be told that things have changed. Pick one or two friends and say it plainly. "I've been bad at coming to things, and I'd like to be asked again." It's an easier sentence to say than it looks, and friends are usually touched by it. Then do some inviting yourself. Ask one person for a coffee, or ask two people round. Invitations tend to go to people who also give them.

When your partner is the sociable one. It can help and it can hinder. It hinders if you use them as a prop all evening. Agree beforehand that you'll arrive together and then separate for a while, and that there'll be a signal if either of you really wants to go. Ask them not to answer for you or rescue you from pauses.

When you're the host. Hosting frightens many people with this habit, yet it's often the easier role. You've got jobs to do and a reason to move between people, and you're on home ground. Start with two or three guests.

When you want to cancel on the day. This is when the habit is strongest, and it's the moment the rule is for. The dread peaks in the last few hours. It will offer you reasons. You're tired, you've a bit of a headache, and it's raining. Ask whether you'd have accepted any of those as a reason to miss something you were

looking forward to. If you're actually ill, stay home. Otherwise the feeling that you can't face it is the dread you were expecting. Get dressed, go, and start your hour.

When it's a friend who keeps cancelling on you. You now know what's probably going on. Don't stop asking, and don't make a joke of it in front of others. Ask them to something small and short, tell them who'll be there, and say you'd really like them to come. If they cancel, reply kindly and ask again in a few weeks.

When you slip. Some afternoon you'll send the excuse, and the relief will come, and then the flat evening. Don't read it as proof that you can't change. One cancelled evening doesn't undo the ones you attended. Write down what happened in the hours before you cancelled, because there's usually a pattern, such as a bad day or a long stretch of rehearsing. Then say yes to the next thing, and make it soon and small.

When it's more than nerves. Go back to the NHS's description in the preface. It lists worrying about everyday activities, avoiding social activities or worrying a lot about them, always fearing you'll do something embarrassing, and finding it hard to do things when others are watching. It also lists physical symptoms such as feeling sick, sweating, trembling or a pounding heartbeat. If that's a fair picture of your life, self-help may be a useful first step, which is the NHS's own view, but it's unlikely to be enough. The NHS says it's a good idea to see a GP, and that you can also refer yourself directly to an NHS talking therapies service.

The treatments work. Evan Mayo-Wilson and colleagues pooled 101 trials with more than thirteen thousand participants. One-to-one cognitive behavioural therapy had the largest effect of any treatment, psychological or medical, and the authors recommended it as the first choice. Guided self-help based on the same principles also did better than waiting, and so did certain antidepressants. The NHS's summary is that CBT is generally considered the best treatment. It's largely a structured, supported version of what this book describes. It's done with someone who knows how to pace it and who can help with the parts a book can't reach.

If your mood is very low, or you have thoughts of harming yourself, ask for an urgent GP appointment or call 111.

Twenty to five again

It's twenty to five on a Thursday in June. There's a summer party tomorrow for the whole building, on the roof terrace, from half past five. You said yes the day the email came.

The dread started on Tuesday this time, a day later than it used to. It's there now, a weight under your ribs. At lunchtime you caught yourself picturing the terrace, with you at the edge holding a glass and nobody to talk to. You noticed the picture, and you made yourself think about which train you'd catch home. A draft of an excuse got as far as "So sorry" at about three o'clock, and you deleted it.

Friday at twenty-five to six you walk out onto the terrace. There are nine people there. Your stomach is tight and your face is warm. You go straight to the woman from facilities who organised it, and say it looks great, and ask how long it took to set up. She tells you about the saga of the gazebo. By six you're in a group of four, and one of them is new and knows nobody. You ask her how she's finding the place. Your phone is in your bag.

At about ten to six you said something about the finance director that came out wrong. There was a small pause, and then someone laughed and the talk moved on. You felt the heat in your face. Nobody seemed to notice.

You'd meant to leave at half past six. At twenty past seven you realise you haven't looked at the time in a while. You say goodbye to the woman from facilities and the new starter, and you catch the

ten to eight.

That night you write, "Gazebo story. New starter used to live two streets from my sister. Stayed nearly two hours." You'd predicted seven out of ten for how bad it would be, and you write down three. In bed the remark about the finance director comes back, and you wince. You tell yourself it's the going-over and that the evening is written down. It comes back twice more, and then you fall asleep.

It's the sixth event in your log. The fortieth, in March, was the second. You went at the start and stayed three hours. Your friend said "You came!" when she saw you, and you hadn't known until then that she'd been expecting you not to.

The predictions in the log read eight, eight, seven, eight, six, seven, and the results read four, three, five, two, three, three. The five was a dinner where you were stuck next to a man who talked about his loft conversion all evening. It was just a dull evening, and you'd have found it dull however confident you were.

The dread still comes. It probably always will, a day or two ahead. You've stopped treating it as a verdict on the evening.

If you've read this far without changing anything, look at what's on your fridge or in your inbox. Pick the invitation you've been putting off answering, ask yourself chapter 15's question, and if the answer is yes, reply now.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a GP or a therapist who knows you. The NHS services I describe are those for England as I found them in September 2026. Arrangements differ elsewhere, and they change.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 3, 6, 14, 15 and 20, and most of chapters 4, 11 and 12. The person in the examples is invented, along with the colleague, the leaving drinks, the fortieth, the roof terrace and every figure in the log.

Before you start. The description of social anxiety disorder, the advice to see a GP, and the statement that for many people it doesn't go away without treatment are from the NHS page "Social anxiety (social phobia)", last reviewed in May 2023. The two-week guide for low mood is from the NHS pages on depression.

Chapter 2. Givi and Kirk, "Saying no: the negative ramifications from invitation declines are less severe than we think", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 126, 2024, pages 1103 to 1115. The invitations in the studies were to ordinary fun activities, and

the studies measured reactions to a single decline. Nobody, as far as I know, has studied what a run of declines does. The list of four needs is mine.

Chapter 3. That behaviour which removes an unpleasant feeling gets repeated is a basic principle of learning, usually called negative reinforcement. The account of relief marking the event as dangerous is how cognitive behavioural therapists commonly explain avoidance. I've given it in my own words and haven't tied it to a single source.

Chapter 4. Rachman, Grüter-Andrew and Shafran, "Post-event processing in social anxiety", Behaviour Research and Therapy 38, 2000, pages 611 to 617. It was a questionnaire study, so it shows that going over events and avoidance go together and can't show which causes which. The four ways that refusing makes the next time harder are my reasoning.

Chapter 5. Hinrichsen and Clark, "Anticipatory processing in social anxiety: two pilot studies", Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry 34, 2003, pages 205 to 218. The authors call them pilot studies. The summary I read doesn't list the kinds of thinking involved. The three I name are from the account by Clark and Wells that the study set out to test, as it's generally described. Zelenski, Whelan, Nealis, Besner, Santoro and Wynn, "Personality and affective forecasting: trait introverts underpredict the hedonic benefits of acting extraverted", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 104, 2013, pages 1092 to 1108. The first study had 97 participants and the other four had 495 between them. The studies

concern introversion, which isn't the same as social nerves, and chapter 10 says so. The prediction exercise is mine, though therapists use similar ones.

Chapter 7. Gilovich, Savitsky and Medvec, "The illusion of transparency: biased assessments of others' ability to read one's emotional states", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, 1998, pages 332 to 346. Savitsky, Epley and Gilovich, "Do others judge us as harshly as we think? Overestimating the impact of our failures, shortcomings, and mishaps", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, 2001, pages 44 to 56. Neither paper studied people with social nerves in particular. A later paper by Brown and Stopa in the *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 2007, tested both ideas in a socially stressful task and got mixed results for the illusion of transparency, so I'd hold my extension loosely. What I say about gatherings you've been to is an invitation to check your own memory.

Chapter 8. McManus, Sacadura and Clark, "Why social anxiety persists: an experimental investigation of the role of safety behaviours as a maintaining factor", *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 39, 2008, pages 147 to 161. The summary says safety behaviours and self-focused attention were unhelpful "in a number of ways" without listing them. The advice to focus on what people are saying is quoted from the NHS page. That people with this habit are often good listeners is my impression.

Chapter 9. McManus and colleagues as above. The three reasons props backfire are from the clinical literature as I understand it and from my own reasoning, and the chapter says the experiments

didn't measure them.

Chapter 10. Zelenski and colleagues 2013 as above. Zelenski, Santoro and Whelan, "Would introverts be better off if they acted more like extraverts? Exploring emotional and cognitive consequences of counterdispositional behavior", *Emotion* 12, 2012, pages 290 to 303. The test of concentration was the Stroop task. The cost they did find fell on extraverts asked to act introverted. The distinction between a preference and a fear is mine.

Chapter 11. The NHS statement is from the page named above. The comparison with learning to drive is mine.

Chapter 12. Givi and Kirk as above. That hosts stop asking out of consideration is my observation and I've no study for it.

Chapter 13. Rachman and colleagues as above. The correlation between going over events and social anxiety was 0.40, which is moderate. Writing three facts on the night is my suggestion. It resembles exercises used in therapy and hasn't been tested as I describe it.

Chapter 14. The list of everyday activities is quoted from the NHS page.

Chapter 16. Breaking situations into smaller parts is NHS advice. The rest is mine. That anxiety falls if you stay in a situation is the basis of exposure in cognitive behavioural therapy. I've stated it from general knowledge, and the hour is my own figure.

Chapter 17. The description of panic attacks and the suggestion of breathing exercises are from the NHS page.

Chapter 18. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule and its parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 19. Mayo-Wilson, Dias, Mavranouzouli, Kew, Clark, Ades and Pilling, "Psychological and pharmacological interventions for social anxiety disorder in adults: a systematic review and network meta-analysis", *Lancet Psychiatry* 1, 2014, pages 368 to 376. There were 101 trials and 13,164 participants. Individual CBT and one class of antidepressants were the only treatments that beat an appropriate placebo as well as a waiting list. The work was funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Treatment options, self-referral and the NHS's own self-help guide are described on the NHS page. Medicines are a matter for you and your doctor, and nothing here is advice about them.