

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS - HOUSTON

STUDENT ANXIETY AND SOLITUDE IN THE CAVE: CONTEMPORARY SOLUTIONS

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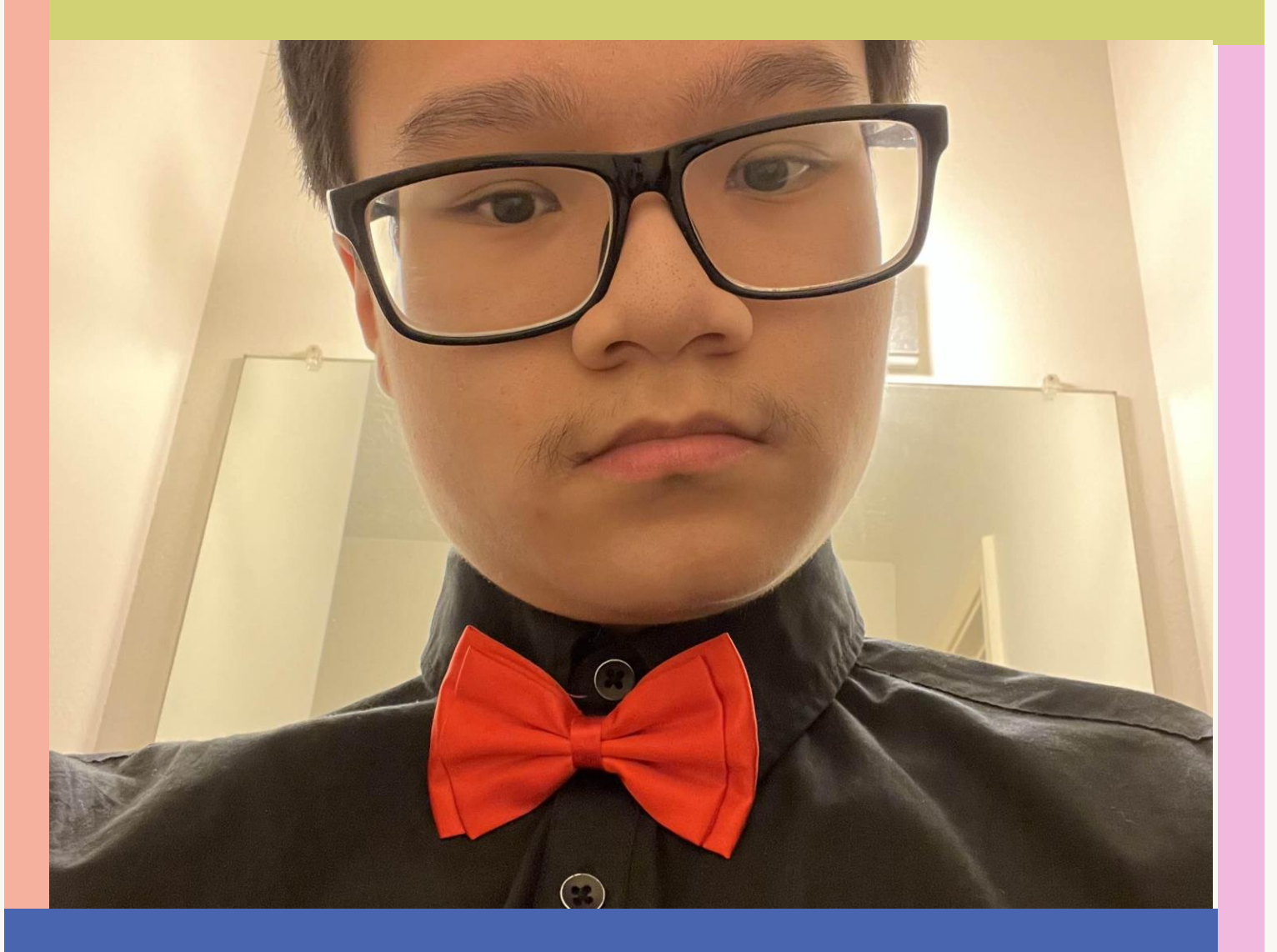
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ABOUT ME

- Currently 20 years old
- Natural born in the U.S to Vietnamese immigrant parents
- First-generation college student who went from high school to university
- 2nd year (current sophomore) at the University of St. Thomas – Houston (Catholic university & Liberal Arts college)
- Accounting Major with a passion for writing and public speaking



OPENING

Have you ever gone silent in a group conversation even though you had something to say? I think we've all been there at one point in our lives.

Did you know that social anxiety disorder affects an estimated 15 million adults (about 7.1% of the population) in the U.S? [\(ADAA\)](#)

But only about 5% of people with social anxiety disorder seek treatment within the first year of symptoms. [\(ADAA\)](#)

What is the issue? No one speaks up.

How do we prevent that? Let us find out together.

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANXIETY?

- Intense anxiety or fear of being judged, negatively evaluated, or rejected in a social or performance situation
- People with social anxiety disorder may worry about acting or appearing visibly anxious (e.g., blushing, stumbling over words), or being viewed as stupid, awkward, or boring. As a result, they often avoid social or performance situations
- It is important to note that this disorder is not simply shyness



WHY DOES IT MATTER TO US?

Can cause issues with everyday life:

- Speaking in public
- Meeting new people
- Dating
- Going for a job interview
- Answering a question in class
- Asking for help
- Talking to a cashier in a store or restaurant

People with social anxiety disorder are also at an increased risk for developing major depressive disorder and alcohol use disorders.

THE HUMAN AND PHILOSOPHICAL CASE (ARISTOTLE & FRANKL)

Nicomachean Ethics:

- Eudaimonia (flourishing/happiness) — Aristotle argues that the goal of human life is to flourish, which requires living virtuously and engaging with others. Social anxiety can be seen as an obstacle to the kind of flourishing we are built for as social beings.
- "Man is a social animal" — Aristotle's foundational claim that humans are naturally oriented toward community makes a powerful opener. Social anxiety, then, is not just a personal struggle — it works against our very nature.
- Virtue as habit — Aristotle teaches that courage, for example, is not the absence of fear but acting rightly despite fear. This maps directly onto gradual exposure therapy — students do not need to eliminate anxiety; they need to build the habit of acting through it (one of the solutions).

Man's Search for Meaning:

- Meaning as a motivator — Frankl argues that humans can endure almost any difficulty when they have a sense of purpose. For students with social anxiety, connecting socially to something larger than themselves — a cause, a community, a goal — can be a powerful motivator to push through discomfort.
- Attitude toward suffering — Frankl's insight that we cannot always control our circumstances but can choose our response is directly applicable to anxiety management. This aligns with mindfulness-based approaches.
- Paradoxical intention — Frankl developed a therapeutic technique directly relevant to anxiety: instead of fighting the fear, the patient is encouraged to *intend* or *wish* for what they fear. This is a clinically recognized technique.

SOLUTION 1: CHANGING YOUR THINKING

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):

Helps a person become aware of automatic ways of thinking that are inaccurate or harmful (for example, having a low opinion of their abilities) and then question those thoughts, understand how the thoughts affect their emotions and behavior, and change self-defeating behavior patterns.

Challenge the Story You Tell Yourself:

1. Find the negative thought ("Everyone will judge me")
2. Challenge it ("Is that actually true?")
3. Replace it ("Most people are focused on themselves, not me")



SOLUTION 2: GRADUAL EXPOSURE & HABIT BUILDING

Avoiding social situations makes anxiety worse over time, so it is important to develop good habits as Aristotle says, "We become courageous by doing courageous things — not by waiting until we feel ready."

The exposure ladder — start small, build up gradually:

Level 1: Make eye contact and smile at a classmate

Level 2: Ask a professor a question after class

Level 3: Speak up once during a group discussion

Level 4: Introduce yourself to someone new

Consistency beats intensity — small daily actions add up over time.



Solution 3: Practical Tools

4-7-8 Breathing:

Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 7, exhale for 8

Activates the body's natural calming response.

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding:

Name 5 things you see, 4 you feel, 3 you hear, 2 you smell,
1 you taste

Brings you back to the present moment.

Paradoxical Intention (Frankl):

Instead of fighting the anxiety, lean into it intentionally
"I'm going to try to look as nervous as possible" — and
watch it dissolve.

Frankl discovered that the harder we try to force ourselves
to be calm, the more anxious we become. The solution,
counterintuitively, is to stop resisting.

SOLUTION 4: LIFESTYLE & CAMPUS RESOURCES

Lifestyle Habits:

- Exercise regularly — clinically shown to reduce anxiety
- Prioritize sleep — sleep deprivation amplifies anxiety symptoms
- Limit caffeine and alcohol — both worsen anxiety over time

Campus Resources:

- Campus counseling and mental health centers
- Student clubs and organizations — low-pressure social practice
- Telehealth options (meeting virtually)

Frankl believed that taking responsibility for our own wellbeing — body and mind — is itself an act of meaning. Seeking help is not weakness; it is wisdom. You are not alone in your struggles, so don't try to fight the battle alone. Man is made for community, and it is natural for us to look for out a community where we can freely belong of our own will and surround ourselves with likeminded people that we can make friends with.

You Have the Power to Choose Your Response

This week, try one thing:

- Challenge one negative thought when it arises
- Take one small step up your exposure ladder
- Practice 4-7-8 breathing before a stressful situation (such as a test or before going up to talk to someone)
- Visit your campus counseling center (no need to schedule a meeting immediately, but know where it is for future reference)

Remember:

Social anxiety is common, treatable, and not permanent.

You are not defined by your fear — you are defined by what you do with it.

Aristotle — We become who we are through our choices and habits. Every small act of courage builds the person you are becoming.

Frankl — We cannot always control what we feel, but we can always choose how we respond to it.

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