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I knew well for starters, then those where there would be few strangers, and so on.”

**Get a buddy**

Benjamin also takes a friend – one who is aware of her social anxiety – along with her to most gatherings, and it’s a strategy that is endorsed by experts. Suri says, “For this to work well, your friend must be on the same page as you. He or she must understand that you will go to the party together, meet the same people and leave together. Even if you do mingle with different groups of people, your friend can keep an eye out for cues that you are feeling overwhelmed.” In situations where a friend isn’t at hand, you can take the host into confidence, advises Bahl.

**Plan your party goals**

“Goals help us to determine whether or not we want to do something. If you are clear about wanting to interact with people at a party and actively choose to enjoy this time, it can train your mind towards accepting and achieving it,” says counselling psychologist and success coach Sushma IR. She advises setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound) goals. A good example of a SMART goal is attending your friend’s Christmas party, being there for two hours and making friendly banter with at least two of your friend’s friends.

Suri recommends keeping your goals small and realistic, even if they may seem trivial to others. “If all you want to do is go to a party to click a few pictures that you can upload on your social media accounts, go for it,” she enthuses. “Achieving your goals, however small, can create a sense of accomplishment, which serves as further incentive for you to overcome

and when I did strike up a conversation with someone, the conversation would almost always end with an awkward silence.” To avoid this, Bangar recommends preparing a few topics in advance.

“Although parroting your ice-breaker may sound artificial at first, it will give you something to fall



**Social anxiety can either take a form, which is limited to certain types of social interactions, or be a wider fear that strikes whenever the sufferer faces a new situation or new people**



–Sapna Bangar

back on when your mind goes blank.” You can practise your small talk in front of a mirror or with close friends. “Think of it as if you are preparing for an interview. With time and enough practice, it will come more naturally.”

**Don’t make it about you**

Suri offers another trick: “After introducing yourself, direct the conversation to the other person by asking them about themselves. Ask ‘how’ questions that draw the person into the conversation. To create an emotional connect, talk about something they are interested in or passionate about. For instance, when someone tells you about their profession, you could ask them how they got into it,” she says. “Ask open-ended questions that require more than just ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers,” adds lifestyle consultant Priyanka Desai.

**Grab a bite**

Hunger can make you feel jittery, so

your anxiety.”

### Act against your impulse

Social anxiety sufferers often prefer to arrive late, believing that this allows them to slip in and out of the party unnoticed. However, the opposite approach can work far better. Bahl explains: “Arriving within the first half-hour of the party will allow you to enter a non-intimidating environment. There will be fewer people and the setting will be more private. As other guests arrive, it will be easier to meet them one by one rather than trying to greet a group of strangers.”

### Prepare your small talk

For 28-year-old PR professional, Joyson Castelino, the fear of coming across as uninformed or incompetent often kept him from opening up or initiating conversations at parties. “By the time the event actually came around, I’d have worried myself sick by overthinking all the possible ways I could embarrass myself. I would actively avoid meeting people at parties,



**Individuals experiencing social anxiety start worrying about an event several days before it, all through the party, and then for days afterwards**

—Nikita Bahl



don’t turn up at a party ramisned. While there, do eat something, and keep yourself adequately hydrated. Experts also recommend going easy on the alcohol. “They may call it ‘liquid courage’, but alcohol can actually heighten anxiety and is best avoided at first. You can gradually introduce a drink or two, provided you are sure it won’t turn into a crutch you can’t do without,” Bangar says.

### Give yourself a break

It’s OK to take a breather when you begin to feel overwhelmed. You could visit the restroom, drink some water and take a few deep breaths to steady your nerves. “Breathing deeply can help you regain control of your anxiety. People don’t notice that their breaths become rapid and shallow when they become nervous. This, in turn, depletes your brain’s supply of oxygen. Think positive thoughts and go back to the party when you are ready to face the crowd again,”

Bangar says.

If you leave the party when your anxiety peaks, Bangar warns, it will take you much longer to muster up the courage to attend the next party you are invited to. If you work at it, however, she says, the cycle of anxiety gets successively shorter each time. “The next time you feel panicky at a party, it will take you less time to calm down, and the time after that, it’ll get even easier.”