Managing Social Anxiety on Public Transport

by KIKI WOODHAM

Coping With Taking Public Transport

It's around rush hour on a Thursday morning, and I have to take the bus to an appointment. I manage to snag one of the last seats, next to a thin, average-looking man in his 30s who somehow looks like a realtor to me. As soon as I sit down, it starts.

Ever so insidiously, that feeling of being watched, noticed and judged creeps over me. People are packed into the double bus like sardines — there's no possibility of employing my usual tactic of sitting quietly alone in the back today. I start to feel fidgety, and in the eight minutes it takes to go two stops to my destination I can practically feel all the things the other passengers must be thinking about me.

I start to get fidgety, trying to adjust my clothes 'just right' so that I look my best/thinnest. I worry that my hair is sticking up oddly or my roots need bleaching already, or that the guy sitting next to me is annoyed that he got stuck sharing a seat with the only plus-sized person on the bus.

If my bike wasn't in the repair shop this would be a lovely 15-minute bike ride in the June sunshine. Why did it have to be broken? If I put on some music right now, will I be bothering Mr. Realtor while he's reading his newspaper? Then he'll be really annoyed. I'm trying not to sit close enough to crowd him, but now I'll bet my butt is hanging over the edge of the seat. The people behind me must love that.

I take out my phone and check my email just to look like I have something important to do. What doesn't kill us supposedly makes us stronger, but I really, really wish I weren't getting quite so big a dose of 'strong' right now.

Perceived Scrutiny

Finally the bus glides to a halt in front of my stop. I gratefully inhale its exhaust as it pulls away, and walk to my appointment (with my therapist) where I will spend the next hour gratefully relaxing in what has become a very comfortable and familiar place. Today I have other problems to discuss with the therapist, so my anxiety over the bus can wait til the next appointment, but I know what he'll tell me anyway.

He'll remind me that this scrutiny I feel is perceived, and I know he's right. I tell myself that all the time, everywhere I go. Social anxiety stems from the feeling of being scrutinized, though in many cases we're not even noticed, let alone judged.

This is not to say, "It's all in your head," because that's dismissive and makes the symptoms sound imaginary, and anxiety should never be treated that way. I can tell you firsthand that there's nothing made-up about it. The feeling of being judged and criticized by others, regardless of whether or not you're actually being judged and criticized, is very real and serious.

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Strategies For Coping

So how do we deal with the reality of feeling so very uncomfortable in the presence of others?

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a way of 'reprogramming' your behavior and way of thinking, is the first-line treatment for social anxiety. Medications can also be helpful. Anxiolytic (anti-anxiety) medications can be used for short-term therapy or particularly stressful situations, and antidepressants are often used for long-term treatment. In more severe cases both types of medication can be combined, with or without CBT.

Whether or not you have access to medication and therapy, there are a few things you can do all by yourself to help ease your feelings of anxiety when you have to use public transportation. Most of these can also be applied to other situations that cause your social anxiety to flare up.

Take Your Time

First, take plenty of time before you head off. Whether you're at home or at work, allow yourself as much time as you possibly can to get ready, have a cup of coffee, eat a meal or snack, listen to some good music, or whatever else you need or want to do before you leave to catch your ride. By not having to rush to get where you need to be, you'll start your trip of feeling as relaxed and happy as possible.

Be Prepared

Know where you're going and how to get there. Check ahead online for possible delays or detours. It can be difficult to summon up the courage to ask for information or help when you need it, so have an alternate route in mind just in case. I write it down ahead of time and put it in my purse — I've been in enough situations where I've ended up lost or delayed simply because I couldn't manage to ask for directions or didn't want to seem stupid by looking like I didn't know where I was going.

In cases where you need to buy tickets, try to do so ahead of time. If you don't have a lot of experience with local public transportation, ask a friend to help you sort out your route, and let them know that you might need to call them for advice or information if you get stuck somewhere. Pack any supplies you might need, like a bottle of water, a snack if it's a longer trip, bandages for a blister, medication, your coping cards for anxiety, etc.

Boost Your Confidence

Do something that makes you feel good about yourself. Whether that means wearing your favorite jeans, putting on makeup, fixing your hair, or putting on your most comfortable shoes, try to do one thing that shows you care about yourself. When you feel taken care of (pretty, comfortable, etc.) you feel more confident and — hey, what do you know — you feel less scrutinized.

For me, that means comfortable vintage-style dresses (yeah, it's oddly specific). For someone else, the right haircut or a really comfortable pair of sneakers might be just the thing that nudges them toward feeling a little happier when they walk out the door.

Listen to Music

If you like music (who doesn't?) take some with you. Taming anxiety is just one of the things listening to the right music can do for you. We all have those songs that just make us feel great. Find them, and make sure you have something you can listen to them on while you're on the road. Life feels a whole lot more manageable with a soundtrack.

Try This Exercise

When you've been on the bus/train/ferry/vehicle for a few minutes, try a simple exercise. Retreat into your own mind for a minute, and try to remember the last five people who got on the bus (no cheating by paying extra close attention ahead of time). If you're really, really observant, you might have a vague idea of what three of them looked like or where they sat — and that's only if there was something distinctive about them. Maybe one was struggling with a large suitcase, toting a crying baby, or wearing a particularly bright color that caught your attention.

Now, what kind of opinion did you form of them? Most likely you didn't form much of one, and that's exactly how much thought they gave you. I hate to say you're not unique and special, because you are, but random strangers don't really think so. Remember that, and keep remembering it as often as you can. No matter how callous it sounds, it's true — most strangers on the bus really don't care about you.

At the end of the day, remember that no matter how differently others experience such situations, these feelings are very real and valid for you and should be treated and dealt with as such. The good news is that by improving the parts you do have control over and preparing for the ones you don't, you can minimize your feelings of anxiety and make your experience with public transportation more relaxing.