

**The Spirals of Social Success and Failure**  
Taken from "Social Anxiety and Social Skill Competencies"  
Michelle Garcia Winner

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My goal was to find a way to help our clients decrease anxiety while increasing their social competencies. The result was a treatment strategy called the *Spirals of Social Success and Social Failure*.

I developed this approach for high-level teens and young adults who had first developed social competencies and were now ready to explore social anxiety. We discovered this teaching strategy helped motivate them to challenge their anxiety by giving them alternative strategies to use when stressed by specific social situations. An overview of the social concepts we shared with clients, as well as the description of the spirals, follows.

**Social anxiety has deep tentacles; once it disrupts our functioning it likes to keep that power in place!** Once it inhabits a person, anxiety will not go away without a fight. This means as our students recognize they have increased social competencies, they have to actively work at reducing their anxiety. This involves learned strategies, as well as their own shift in perception in making a choice in the moment: are you going to default to anxiety or use your strategies?

Some of the key social learning-social anxiety reduction strategies we teach our clients include:

**1. Take ownership; be personally accountable for what you need to learn.**

After many years of working with adolescents, I realized that while I understood they had social learning differences, as long as I prompted them to use their strategies, I was the one taking ownership of their problems. Now I realize that as I teach them these strategies, they have to work at using them, which first means they have to realize these strategies are theirs and not ours (the teachers and parents).

**2. Accept that your job is to become more comfortable with social discomfort.**

The neurotypical teen and adult world is filled with social discomfort. Using strategies does not mean our clients won't feel discomfort. Their job is to work at learning how to be comfortable with the fact they will be uncomfortable socially at times! The mentor's job is to encourage the client to use the treatment strategies even when experiencing discomfort.

3. **Recognize and celebrate the small steps of progress being made.** We need to help our students feel intrinsically proud of themselves for their progress. Avoid using token rewards for progress as these provide extrinsic but not intrinsic motivation.
4. **Use your inner coach, rather than your self-defeater voice, inside your head.** You and I use an “inner coach” or “private voice” in our heads to encourage and motivate ourselves through difficulties. Our inner coach may say to us: “You can do this!” “Just do it and get it over with!” “Remember last time this wasn’t as bad as you thought it was going to be, so just go do it!”

Unfortunately, many of our students have a “self-defeater” voice in their heads. This voice discourages rather than encourages: “You’re bad at this.” “You’ve never been able to do this, so you won’t be able to do it now.” Individuals who have a loud self-defeater voice in their heads will default to avoiding the uncomfortable task at hand; those with an inner coach have a far better chance of pushing themselves through the uncomfortable task. We need to help our students be realistic about their strengths and challenges while reinforcing their choice to use their inner coach as much as possible.

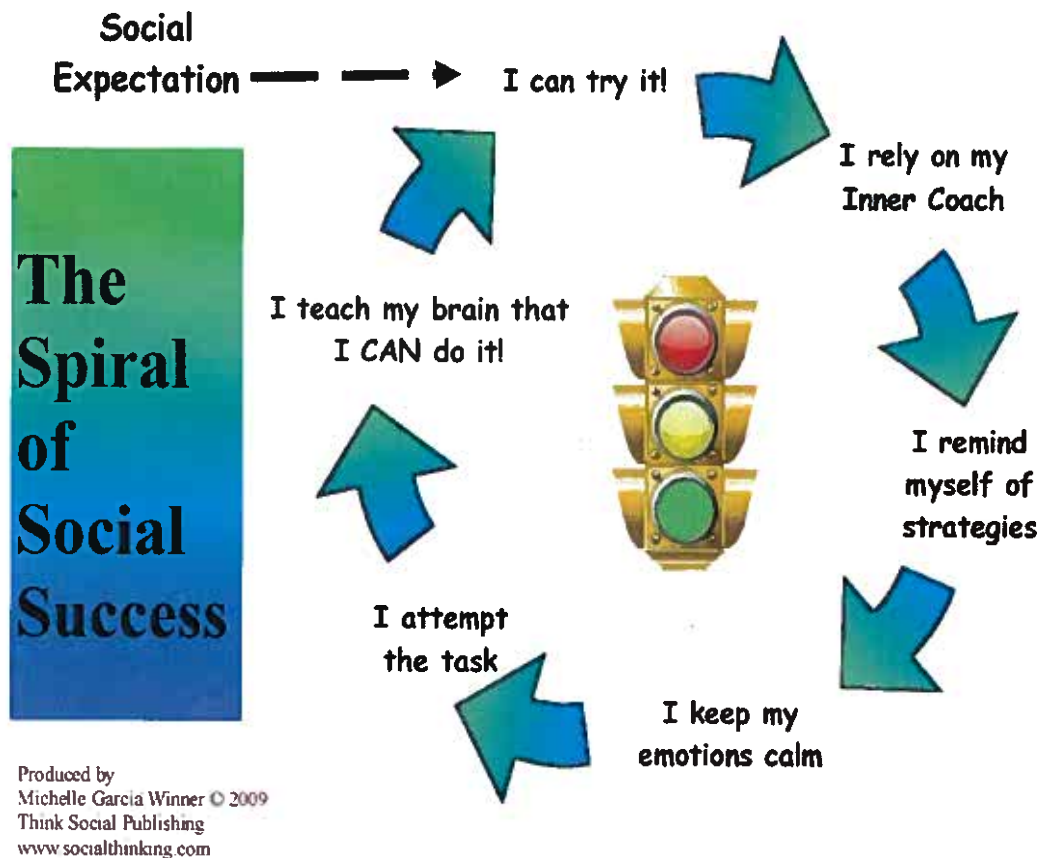
5. **Stop making excuses for avoiding social encounters.** Those with strong self-defeater voices tend to find a lot of benign excuses for avoiding the task at hand. Many of our students don’t recognize that what they are saying is, in fact, an excuse for not pushing themselves through an uncomfortable moment. Instead, they automatically default to their excuses. Our strategy is to explore the personal excuses they make as we assign them tasks that provide opportunities to practice social competencies and use their anxiety-reducing strategies. Once students begin to notice and then take ownership of the fact they are making excuses, they further progress.
6. **Your brain always learns; whether it learns positive or negative ways to cope, it is always learning!** We discuss how our brains are always learning, all the time, that anytime we are awake we are learning from our experiences. If we “default” to what we are accustomed to doing, we constantly teach our brains we can only do it the way we have done it before. If students want to teach their brain a new set of skills, they have to try to do things differently. This idea may seem elementary, but it can be difficult for our concrete-thinking, rule-bound students to change the way they do things, especially their thinking patterns. I often ask them a direct question: “Do you want to teach your brain you can’t do something, or do you want to teach your brain you *can* do something?” Hopefully their answer is a “can-do”

response, and we circle back to our other strategies to help them retrain their brain.

### **The Spirals of Social Success and Social Failure**

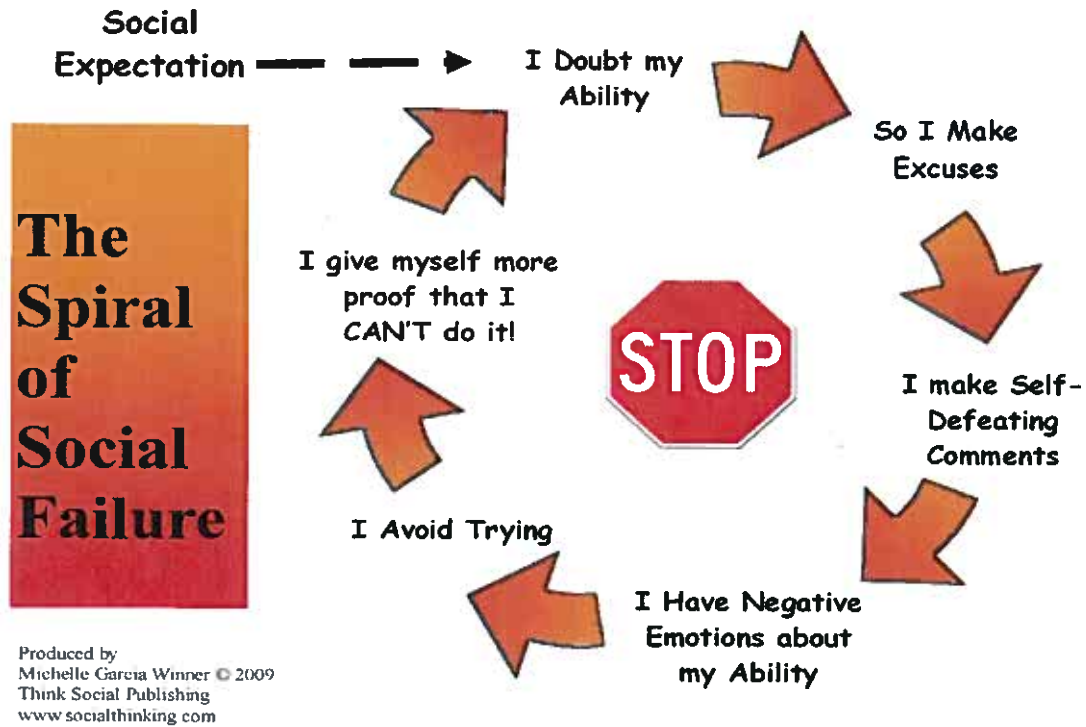
Visual representations are strong—and welcomed—tools in helping our students understand the interrelationships that exist in social thinking and social processing. To help our students understand the concepts outlined in this article, I developed two graphic representations of the thought processes used in working through social situations. The **Spiral of Social Success** summarizes these concepts:

- You will encounter some stress approaching this situation. In the past your anxiety would prompt you to bail out of this situation. Instead of starting by doubting yourself, explore what strategies you can use to help yourself deal with the uncomfortable social situation.
- Use your inner coach to remind yourself how much better you will feel once you use your strategies—that you are capable of using these strategies as well as choosing specific strategies to use.
- You feel better about yourself when you are demonstrating your abilities or social competencies.
- This encourages you to use the strategies.
- In doing so, you are training your brain that “you can do it” better than you have done it before!



Conversely, the **Spiral of Social Failure** illustrates what happens when our clients fail to embrace their social-learning–social-anxiety reducing strategies:

- You encounter the same stressful situation, one you previously avoided.
- Your anxiety prompts you to think of excuses for why you won't engage in this situation today.
- Your self-defeater voice assures you that you can't do it and that you have never been able to do it.
- You have negative emotions about your inability to get through this situation.
- You avoid putting yourself in the situation.
- You teach your brain one more time that you cannot do it! Your memory now reflects your inability and your self-defeater voice grows stronger.



The purpose of the Spirals of Social Success and Social Failure was to help our students understand how best to place the strategies they were learning in the context of their own functioning.

Our students helped us adjust the spirals so the wording more clearly matched their own experiences and emphasized how they related to the content of each spiral. This visual presentation paired with lessons that taught them the key concepts outlined in the graphics—increased accountability, self-learning, letting go of excuses, and embracing change—led to some very positive results.

They discovered they could choose positive behavioral responses to anxiety-laden situations and retrain their brains to learn new ways of acting and reacting. While the situations still caused anxiety, our clients gained confidence in attempting to push through their anxiety, further reinforced by the success they could achieve within the interaction. However, this learning process takes time. It may take years to help our students, through active learning of these strategies, to get them onto the Spiral of Social Success.

Some level of anxiety is inherent in every social situation we encounter. This set of strategies does not offer a cure for the anxiety experienced by individuals with social learning challenges. However, it can help minimize some of the anxiety by helping our students better appreciate how anxiety affects us and giving our students a toolbox of options to use when anxiety arises.

Such coping strategies are beneficial—not just for individuals with social learning challenges, but for us all!

*Michelle Garcia Winner is the founder of Social Thinking®. She works in her clinic in San Jose, CA, has written numerous books, and speaks internationally. Visit her website, [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com), for more information.*