

A Review of the Contextual Adaptiveness of Thought Suppression in Individuals with Social Anxiety

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Abstract: Thought suppression is often described as a maladaptive response in social anxiety, but that description is too blunt to explain the recent evidence. This literature review examines whether the adaptiveness of thought suppression among socially anxious individuals depends on contextual factors, including the timing of regulation, the content of the target thought, the intensity and controllability of the social situation, the degree of cognitive load, and the availability of alternative strategies. Recent ambulatory assessment, experimental, and clinical studies suggest that suppression can maintain social anxiety when it becomes rigid, self-focused, repetitive, or followed by post-event rumination. However, recent work on intentional intrusion control also shows that deliberate suppression is not always followed by ironic rebound and may reduce distress when it is brief, specific, and supported by adequate control resources. The review therefore rejects a simple harmful-versus-helpful classification. It argues for a contextual flexibility account in which suppression is evaluated by its fit with situational demands and longer-term consequences. The evidence also reveals major challenges, including construct overlap between thought suppression, experiential avoidance, expressive suppression, rumination, and safety behavior; limited causal inference in daily-life research; and insufficient attention to developmental and cultural contexts. Future research should use event-contingent designs, micro-longitudinal modeling, and personalized intervention algorithms to identify when suppression becomes a risk factor and when it functions as short-term psychological containment.

Keywords: Thought Suppression; Social Anxiety; Emotion Regulation Flexibility; Post-event Rumination; Contextual Adaptiveness

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1. Introduction

Social anxiety is not simply shyness with a more clinical name. It is a persistent pattern in which people expect social judgment, monitor their own performance, and interpret ambiguous social cues as evidence of possible rejection. The diagnostic definition emphasizes fear or anxiety about social situations in which a person may be scrutinized by others, and it also emphasizes avoidance, distress, impairment, and disproportionate fear (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In everyday life, this pattern can turn ordinary social moments into small threat episodes. A classroom answer, a workplace meeting, a short conversation, or even a message left unanswered can become psychologically noisy. The person does not only face the situation. The person also faces a stream of predictions about embarrassment, visible anxiety, and later regret.

Thought suppression enters this picture because socially anxious people often want to remove the very thoughts that make the situation feel dangerous. They may try not to think, "I sounded foolish," "They noticed my anxiety," or "I will be judged." Suppression can seem practical because the person needs to keep functioning in the moment. A student still has to present. An employee still has to speak in a meeting. A person on a date still has to answer a question. In such moments, suppressing an intrusive thought may look like a form of mental discipline. Yet the same strategy can become a trap when it keeps the person away from processing the meaning of the threat, checking evidence, tolerating uncertainty, or learning that the feared social outcome did not occur.

Older popular accounts often treated thought suppression as almost automatically self-defeating. The familiar idea was that trying not to think about something can make it return with greater force. Recent scholarship is more careful. Mamat and colleagues (2024) argue that the simple rebound story has been overstated and that different forms of suppression may have different consequences. Experimental work on suppressing unwanted thoughts also suggests that deliberate suppression can reduce the vividness and distress attached to negative material under certain conditions (Mamat & Anderson, 2023). That evidence does not mean that suppression is always helpful. It means that a serious review cannot start with the slogan that suppression is bad. The more defensible question is narrower and sharper: when does thought suppression help socially anxious individuals get through a situation, and when does it maintain the disorder?

This review takes the position that the adaptiveness of thought suppression depends on context. Context includes external situational features, such as whether the social event is controllable, intense, public, brief, or high-stakes. It also includes internal features, such as cognitive load, attentional control, prior learning, belief about emotions, and the exact content of the target thought. It also includes timing. Suppression before a social event may function differently from suppression during a conversation, and both may differ from suppression after the event when post-event rumination begins. Treating these cases as the same strategy is methodologically convenient, but it is psychologically lazy. Social anxiety is dynamic, and the regulation strategy must be studied dynamically as well.

The central aim of this review is to integrate recent evidence on thought suppression, social anxiety, and emotion regulation flexibility. The review focuses on studies published mainly within the last five years and gives priority to ambulatory assessment, experimental, and clinical work because these designs can capture regulation processes closer to real life. It first explains the theoretical background of social anxiety and thought suppression. It then reviews current findings according to timing and context. It next discusses major controversies, including the problem of construct overlap and the difficulty of judging adaptiveness from a single time point. The conclusion argues that future research should stop asking whether suppression is good or bad in general. That question is too crude. The field needs to ask whether suppression fits the demands of a specific moment and whether it opens or closes later opportunities for flexible coping.

2. The Anxiety Avoidance Loop and the Flexibility Imperative: Why Suppression Cannot Be Judged in a Vacuum

Social anxiety can be understood as a disorder of anticipated evaluation. The feared outcome is not only objective failure. The feared outcome is being seen as anxious, incompetent, strange, boring, weak, or socially unacceptable. Recent cognitive research in adolescents and adults continues to show that negative social cognitions, self-focused attention, safety behaviors, and post-event processing are core processes in social anxiety (Leigh et al., 2023; Rozen & Aderka, 2023). These processes matter because they create a self-maintaining loop. A person enters a social situation expecting evaluation. The person then monitors internal signs of anxiety. The person interprets normal discomfort as evidence of poor performance. The person may use safety strategies to reduce immediate threat. Afterward, the person reviews the event through a biased lens. The original fear is therefore protected from disconfirmation.

Thoughts are central to this loop. Socially anxious individuals do not merely feel anxious; they often experience a rapid stream of self-critical predictions and images. These thoughts may concern visible blushing, trembling, mental blankness, poor speech, or rejection by others. Some thoughts occur before the event as anticipatory worry. Some arise during the event as self-monitoring. Others appear afterward as post-event processing. Because these thoughts are unpleasant and threatening, the desire to suppress them is understandable. It is also clinically important. When a person suppresses a thought, the person

is not only regulating cognition. The person is making a judgment that the thought is dangerous enough to remove from awareness.

Thought suppression refers to deliberate attempts to keep unwanted mental content out of consciousness. It is narrower than general avoidance, but it often overlaps with avoidance in real life. A person may suppress a thought while continuing to face a situation. A person may also suppress a thought by distracting themselves, working excessively, scrolling on a phone, changing the topic, or mentally rehearsing a safe script. Contemporary research has become more cautious about this construct because self-report measures often blend suppression attempts with intrusions that keep returning. That measurement issue matters. A scale score may reflect an active strategy, a failure of control, or the presence of highly intrusive material. If these components are not separated, researchers may mistakenly blame suppression for outcomes that are partly caused by intrusive thought frequency itself.

The theory of ironic processing remains influential because it explains why suppression can backfire. The basic logic is that successful suppression requires both an operating process that distracts attention and a monitoring process that checks whether the unwanted thought has returned. Under cognitive load, stress, fatigue, or strong emotion, monitoring may keep the thought accessible while the operating process becomes weak. Mamat et al. (2024) reconsider this account and argue that suppression outcomes depend on the type of suppression and the conditions under which it occurs. This revision is useful for social anxiety because socially anxious situations often contain high load, self-monitoring, and threat vigilance. Those conditions may make suppression more likely to fail, but they do not prove that suppression must fail in every context.

Emotion regulation flexibility provides the broader framework for judging adaptiveness. A strategy is not adaptive merely because it has a good reputation, and it is not maladaptive merely because it appears in clinical samples. A strategy becomes adaptive when it fits the demands of the situation and supports valued functioning over time. Recent daily-life research has applied this idea to social anxiety by examining how individuals choose, switch, and combine strategies across contexts (Daniel et al., 2023; Daniel et al., 2025; Goodman et al., 2021; Tng & Yang, 2024). This line of work is important because socially anxious individuals may not only use certain strategies more often. They may also have difficulty matching strategies to contextual demands. That is the real problem. A rigid strategy used at the wrong time can become pathological even if the strategy has short-term utility.

This flexibility framework changes how thought suppression should be interpreted. Suppression can serve at least four functions. First, it can operate as avoidance. The person treats the thought as intolerable and refuses to engage with its meaning. Second, it can operate as short-term containment. The person temporarily places the thought aside to complete a task and returns to it later. Third, it can operate as attentional control. The person redirects attention away from unhelpful material toward the external demands of the situation. Fourth, it can operate as a bridge to later processing. The person postpones analysis until a safer or more appropriate time. These functions are not identical. Calling all of them "avoidance" destroys useful distinctions.

The same distinction applies to social anxiety. A socially anxious person who suppresses the thought "I will be humiliated" during a speech may be avoiding fear. The person may also be preventing cognitive overload so that the speech can continue. The difference depends on what happens next. If the person later reviews evidence, receives feedback, and learns that the feared outcome did not occur, temporary suppression may have supported functioning. If the person later ruminates for hours, avoids future speeches, and treats the suppressed thought as proof of danger, suppression has likely joined the maintenance cycle. Therefore, adaptiveness must be evaluated across time rather than at the moment of immediate relief alone.

A contextual account also needs to distinguish thoughts from emotions. Thought suppression targets mental content, while expressive suppression targets outward emotional expression. Experiential avoidance targets unwanted internal experience more broadly. These processes often co-occur in social anxiety, but they are not interchangeable. A person may suppress the thought "they dislike me" while still showing emotion. Another person may hide facial anxiety while continuing to think about rejection. Goodman, Kashdan, and Imamoglu (2021) found that socially anxious individuals often value emotional control and may rely on regulation strategies that reduce visible or felt emotion. This belief in control can make suppression appealing. However, it can also make normal anxiety feel unacceptable, which increases pressure to regulate.

The theoretical implication is straightforward but often ignored. Thought suppression should not be treated as a stable moral character of coping. It should be treated as a process whose effect is conditional. The conditions include target thought content, social context, timing, emotional intensity, cognitive resources, personal goals, and available alternatives. A strategy that helps a person remain present during an unavoidable social task may harm the same person if it prevents learning afterward. A strategy that protects someone from being flooded during a brief public performance may damage them if it becomes the default response to every social discomfort. The concept of context is therefore not a decorative add-on. It is the thing that determines whether suppression is psychological flexibility or psychological avoidance.

3. Evidence in Motion: How Timing, Intensity, and Cognitive Load Reshape the Effects of Suppression

Recent research on social anxiety has moved increasingly toward daily-life methods. This shift matters because laboratory tasks often simplify social anxiety into brief speeches, conversations, or images, while real social anxiety unfolds across the day. Ambulatory assessment studies collect repeated reports in natural settings, which allows researchers to examine when anxiety rises, which strategies are used, and what happens afterward. A recent systematic review of ambulatory assessment studies in social anxiety found that these methods have been used to capture cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal processes that would be missed by single-session questionnaires (Fernandez-Alvarez et al., 2024). This literature is especially relevant to thought suppression because suppression can be brief, private, and situation-specific. A person may suppress a thought during a meeting and forget to report it accurately two weeks later.

Goodman et al. (2021) used experience sampling to study emotion regulation flexibility among people with social anxiety disorder and healthy controls. Their findings showed that people with social anxiety disorder used disengagement strategies, including rumination and thought suppression, more often than controls in daily life. The important point is not simply frequency. The study examined strategy use in relation to contextual demands such as emotional intensity and controllability. This design reflects the central issue of this review. If a person uses thought suppression because the situation is briefly uncontrollable and immediate action is needed, the strategy may be understandable. If the person uses the same strategy across many situations regardless of controllability, then the strategy becomes rigid. Rigid suppression is more likely to maintain anxiety because it prevents more flexible responses.

Research on emotion regulation diversity also complicates the picture. Daniel et al. (2023) examined state and trait emotion regulation diversity in social anxiety and found that greater diversity in avoidance-oriented strategies was related to higher social anxiety severity. At first, that sounds odd because flexibility is often praised. The finding shows why precision matters. More strategies are not automatically better when the strategies share the same avoidant function. A person can switch among distraction, suppression, safety checking, and rumination while remaining trapped in the same avoidance system. This is not flexibility. It is a busy form of rigidity. The person looks active, but the underlying aim remains escape from internal threat. Thought suppression may therefore be especially maladaptive when it belongs to a broader avoidant repertoire.

Daniel et al. (2025) also found that trait social anxiety moderated relations between strategy switching and momentary anxiety. The study used intensive longitudinal data and suggested that socially anxious individuals may show both over-switching and under-switching depending on the pattern of state anxiety. This finding is directly relevant to the context-dependent account. A socially anxious person may abandon strategies too quickly when anxiety is high, moving from suppression to distraction to reassurance seeking without giving any strategy enough time to work. Another person may hold on to suppression too long, even when the social situation demands engagement or cognitive reappraisal. Adaptiveness therefore cannot be inferred from the presence of suppression alone. Researchers must examine whether the person switches away from suppression when it stops fitting the situation.

A daily diary study by Tng and Yang (2024) adds a further caution. The authors examined social anxiety and emotion regulation flexibility across daily contexts and found that relationships between social anxiety and flexibility indicators were not always simple. This matters because the field is tempted to turn flexibility into another slogan. The data suggest that emotionally intense days, specific negative emotions, and contextual appraisals can change which strategies are selected. Thought suppression may be more likely when shame is high than when sadness is high. It may be more tempting when the person is

physically present with others than when the person is alone. These details are not noise. They are the mechanism. If the field wants to understand suppression in social anxiety, it must stop treating all negative emotion episodes as interchangeable. Experimental evidence has also challenged the assumption that intentional suppression always produces rebound. Mamat and Anderson (2023) trained participants to suppress unwanted thoughts over several days and found that suppression training reduced the vividness and distress of negative thoughts without clear evidence of paradoxical rebound. Ashton et al. (2023) similarly examined mindfulness and intrusion control, showing that intrusive thoughts can be regulated and that dispositional mindfulness relates to better control over intrusions. These findings are important because they separate suppression from failed suppression. A person who can intentionally inhibit an unwanted thought may not experience the same consequences as a person who repeatedly tries and fails. The social anxiety literature often measures the latter and then calls it suppression. That is a conceptual mess dressed as a result.

This newer evidence does not mean that suppression should be recommended casually to socially anxious individuals. It means that the mechanism must be specified. Trained suppression of specific thoughts in a structured task differs from desperate suppression of diffuse social fear during a stressful interaction. The first may strengthen control over mental intrusions. The second may increase self-monitoring and threat salience. The target thought also differs. Suppressing a single image or sentence may be easier than suppressing a broad identity fear such as "I am socially defective. When suppression targets a precise mental event, it may reduce its immediate impact. When it targets a large self-schema, it may become an endless battle. Social anxiety often involves the second kind of target, which explains why suppression can become so exhausting.

Timing is one of the most important contextual variables. Before a social event, suppression may reduce anticipatory worry in the short term, but it may also prevent preparation that is useful and realistic. A student who suppresses the thought "I may forget my points" might feel calmer, but the student may also avoid practicing. A speaker who briefly suppresses catastrophic images after completing preparation may preserve sleep and focus. These are not the same case. Pre-event suppression is likely to be maladaptive when it blocks planning, feedback seeking, or exposure to uncertainty. It may be more adaptive when it interrupts repetitive, unproductive mental rehearsal after practical preparation has already been completed.

During a social event, suppression may have a different function. The person has limited attention. The social situation requires listening, responding, eye contact, language production, and awareness of the other person. If the thought "I look anxious" keeps intruding, suppressing or setting aside that thought may help the person redirect attention outward. In this narrow sense, suppression can support task performance. However, social anxiety is also maintained by self-focused attention. If the person suppresses the thought by constantly checking whether it has disappeared, attention remains turned inward. The person is then not present in the conversation. The strategy has failed because the monitoring process becomes another form of self-focus. The difference between outward redirection and inward monitoring is critical.

After a social event, suppression often interacts with post-event processing. Post-event processing refers to repetitive review of a social situation, usually with a focus on perceived mistakes and negative self-impressions. Recent reviews and meta-analytic work show that post-event rumination is strongly linked to social anxiety and may maintain negative appraisals (Donohue et al., 2024; Edgar et al., 2024; Flynn & Yoon, 2024). Suppression after a social event may therefore be risky. A person may try not to think about an awkward moment, but the unresolved meaning of the moment returns as rumination. The person then interprets the return of the thought as evidence that the event was serious. This cycle makes suppression look like relief at first and maintenance later.

Kane and Ashbaugh (2022) examined post-event processing between speech tasks and showed that cognitive and affective factors around social performance can shape later anxiety processes. This type of research is valuable because it treats post-event processing as a bridge between one social exposure and the next. In real life, socially anxious individuals do not experience isolated events. One presentation becomes evidence for the next presentation. One awkward conversation becomes a warning about the next group meeting. If suppression prevents adaptive post-event learning, it may preserve the threat value of social memories. If it temporarily delays processing until the person is calmer and able to evaluate evidence, it may be less harmful. Again, the time course determines the meaning of the strategy.

The intensity of emotion also matters. When social fear is mild, suppression may be unnecessary and may increase attention

to the unwanted thought. In mild situations, reappraisal, acceptance, curiosity, or external attention may work better. When anxiety is intense, the person may need immediate containment before more elaborated strategies become available. This is especially true when the person must continue functioning. A person giving a public presentation cannot always pause to analyze the origin of a self-critical thought. Brief suppression may help the person stay on task. But if the person uses suppression because anxiety itself is considered unacceptable, intense fear can produce a war against normal bodily arousal. That war is rarely adaptive.

Controllability is another key context. If the social situation is controllable, suppression may be less adaptive because the person can change the situation directly. A person can ask for clarification, prepare better, request feedback, or adjust the pace of a conversation. If the situation is uncontrollable or already unfolding, temporary suppression may be more defensible. Goodman et al. (2021) examined how people regulate daily stressors in relation to demands such as intensity and controllability. Their work suggests that the match between strategy and context matters more than a fixed ranking of strategies. Suppression may be poorly matched to controllable problems because it regulates the thought while ignoring the solvable task. It may be better matched to brief uncontrollable intrusions when action is not possible.

Cognitive load shapes whether suppression succeeds. Suppression requires resources. A person must maintain the intention not to think the unwanted thought while also engaging in the social situation. This is hard during interviews, presentations, examinations, or conflict discussions. Under high load, the monitoring component of suppression may keep the target thought accessible, especially when the person fears visible anxiety. Socially anxious individuals often enter social situations with already elevated self-monitoring. Adding suppression can overload the system. In low-load contexts, however, a person may have enough resources to redirect attention away from a specific intrusive thought. The same strategy can therefore fail in a meeting but work during a quiet walk after the meeting.

The specificity of the target thought is equally important. Suppressing "I stumbled over one sentence" is different from suppressing "everyone thinks I am worthless." The first is a bounded event-based thought. The second is global, identity-based, and affectively loaded. Intentional suppression research often works with discrete targets, while social anxiety often involves broad evaluative fears. This difference may explain why laboratory suppression can look more successful than clinical suppression. It also suggests that researchers should classify target thoughts by specificity, self-relevance, emotional intensity, and relation to core fears. A suppression attempt aimed at a single intrusive image may be adaptive if it prevents derailment. A suppression attempt aimed at a stable negative self-belief may simply confirm that the belief is too dangerous to face.

Social goals also change the meaning of suppression. If the goal is to complete an external task, such as finishing a presentation or answering a customer question, temporary suppression may support performance. If the goal is to connect with another person, suppression may interfere because it can reduce openness, responsiveness, and emotional availability. A socially anxious person may suppress self-critical thoughts so aggressively that they become less able to listen. The person may appear distant, stiff, or overly controlled. Other people may then respond with less warmth, which confirms the original fear. In such cases, suppression has social consequences, not just internal consequences. The strategy changes interpersonal behavior, and interpersonal behavior changes later beliefs about the self.

Cultural context must also be considered, although the recent literature remains thin. In some cultures or settings, emotional restraint and social harmony are valued. Suppressing disruptive thoughts during a public or hierarchical interaction may be seen as mature self-control rather than avoidance. In other settings, direct emotional expression and spontaneous self-disclosure may be valued more highly. The adaptiveness of suppression therefore depends partly on the social norms surrounding emotional control, face concern, and public performance. However, researchers should not romanticize cultural restraint. A strategy can be socially rewarded and psychologically costly at the same time. The important question is whether suppression helps the person meet cultural and relational demands without intensifying private distress or future avoidance.

Developmental stage is another neglected factor. Adolescents and emerging adults often face intense peer evaluation, identity formation, and school or university performance demands. Leigh et al. (2023) show that cognitive and behavioral processes associated with social anxiety are already visible in adolescents. Thought suppression may be especially tempting during this period because young people are highly sensitive to peer judgment and may have less stable regulation skills. At the same

time, adolescents may benefit from learning how to distinguish temporary mental noise from meaningful evidence. If they are taught only that suppression is bad, they may feel guilty when they naturally try to push away intrusive thoughts. If they are taught only to suppress, they may miss opportunities for exposure and cognitive learning.

Individual differences in mindfulness, attentional control, and emotion beliefs likely moderate suppression outcomes. Ashton et al. (2023) found that dispositional mindfulness was associated with fewer intrusions and better downregulation of intrusive thoughts. This suggests that people who can notice thoughts without immediate identification may not need rigid suppression. They may allow the thought to pass or redirect attention without treating the thought as a threat. By contrast, people who believe that anxiety or negative thoughts are dangerous may suppress with urgency. Goodman, Kashdan, and Imamoglu (2021) showed that valuing emotional control is relevant in social anxiety. A strong control belief can turn suppression into a compulsive rule: I must not have this thought. That rule is more dangerous than a brief decision to set a thought aside.

Technology-based research is beginning to test context-aware regulation support. Beltzer et al. (2022) developed an emotion regulation recommender algorithm for socially anxious individuals using contextual bandits. The logic of this work is highly relevant to suppression. A recommender system does not assume that one strategy is best for all people at all times. It learns which strategies are useful for a particular person in a particular context. This approach could eventually clarify when suppressing, distracting, reappraising, accepting, or seeking support is most helpful. It also shows where the field should go. Social anxiety treatment may become more precise when it can identify the moment when suppression shifts from useful containment to avoidant maintenance.

A process-based view also helps explain why suppression may coexist with exposure. Exposure therapy requires contact with feared cues without escape or safety behaviors that prevent learning. If suppression is used to avoid internal fear during exposure, it may reduce learning. The person stays in the room but escapes mentally. However, if suppression is used briefly to prevent a single intrusive image from derailing the exposure, and the person still engages with the social situation, the effect may be different. Clinical guidance should therefore avoid simplistic rules. Therapists need to ask what the client is suppressing, why the client is suppressing it, what the client does next, and whether the strategy blocks or supports corrective learning.

Recent treatment research on social anxiety also emphasizes processes such as fear of evaluation, post-event rumination, and emotion dysregulation (Donohue et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2024). These processes interact. A socially anxious person may fear evaluation, suppress that fear during the event, and then ruminate afterward because the suppressed material was never tested. Another person may suppress a catastrophic image long enough to complete a behavioral experiment and then review objective evidence afterward. The same surface strategy appears in both cases, but the learning consequences differ. Researchers should therefore measure not only whether suppression occurred, but also whether the person approached, avoided, learned, ruminated, or recovered after using it.

The emerging evidence points toward a balanced conclusion. In social anxiety, thought suppression is frequently associated with maladaptive patterns because it often appears within avoidance, self-monitoring, and post-event rumination. Yet suppression is not inherently toxic. It may be adaptive when it is brief, specific, intentional, low in monitoring, and used to support engagement with an unavoidable or valued social task. It is more likely maladaptive when it is chronic, global, identity-focused, rigid, cognitively demanding, and followed by rumination or avoidance. This distinction is not academic decoration. It changes the research question, the measurement strategy, and the clinical recommendation. The field should not ask people to never suppress thoughts. It should help people learn when suppression is a tool and when it is a cage.

4. Contextual Factors That Determine Adaptiveness

The first contextual factor is the function of suppression. A behaviorally similar act can serve different psychological purposes. One person may suppress a thought because the thought is irrelevant to the task and would only disrupt attention. Another person may suppress the same thought because its presence feels shameful or dangerous. The first use is closer to attentional selection. The second use is closer to experiential avoidance. This distinction is often invisible in standard questionnaires, but it is essential. In social anxiety, the danger is not that a person ever tries to move attention away from a thought. The danger is that the person learns that socially threatening thoughts must be eliminated before social life can continue. That lesson

strengthens fear of internal experience.

The second factor is whether suppression increases or decreases contact with the social environment. Adaptive regulation should usually help the person notice what is actually happening. If suppressing a thought frees attention so that the person can listen to a conversation, observe feedback, and respond naturally, it may support learning. If suppressing a thought pulls attention inward because the person keeps checking whether the thought has returned, it may undermine learning. Social anxiety already biases attention toward the self. A strategy that intensifies self-monitoring adds fuel to the system. Therefore, researchers should measure attentional direction after suppression, not only distress reduction. External engagement may be the clearest sign that suppression is functioning constructively.

The third factor is whether suppression is paired with later meaning-making. Some thoughts are badly timed rather than clinically useless. A person may not be able to evaluate a fear of rejection while standing in front of an audience. It may be reasonable to set the thought aside and return to it later. However, the later return matters. If the person reviews the thought with curiosity, checks evidence, and updates beliefs, temporary suppression may have protected functioning without blocking learning. If the person never returns to the thought except through involuntary rumination, suppression may have delayed and intensified the problem. This means that adaptive suppression often needs a second step. It is not a complete regulation sequence by itself.

The fourth factor is the level of threat realism. Social anxiety often involves exaggerated threat, but some social situations genuinely are evaluative, hostile, or high-stakes. It would be naive to treat all social fear as cognitive distortion. A person in a competitive interview, a public examination, or a discriminatory environment may face real consequences. In such contexts, suppressing distracting thoughts may help the person protect performance. The problem arises when the person uses the existence of real evaluation to justify global avoidance. Context-sensitive research should therefore distinguish realistic social risk from inflated social threat. This distinction prevents two common errors: pathologizing useful self-control and validating every anxious prediction as evidence-based.

The fifth factor is the availability of alternative strategies. Suppression may look adaptive simply because no better strategy is available in the moment. A person who lacks skills in reappraisal, acceptance, problem solving, or interpersonal repair may rely on suppression by default. The short-term benefit then hides a skills deficit. Conversely, a person with a broad repertoire may use suppression selectively and flexibly. This difference is clinically important. Treatment should not only reduce maladaptive suppression. It should expand the range of available responses. When a person has more options, suppression can become one tool among many rather than the only door in a burning room.

The sixth factor is social cost. Suppression is private, but its consequences are not always private. When a person suppresses thoughts rigidly, the person may become less expressive, less spontaneous, or less responsive. Other people may experience the person as distant or tense. That interpersonal feedback can then reinforce social anxiety. However, not every act of suppression has this cost. Briefly setting aside an intrusive thought may make someone more available to the interaction, not less. Studies should therefore include interpersonal outcomes, such as perceived warmth, conversational involvement, and partner response. Adaptiveness should not be judged only by the individual's anxiety score when the central fear concerns social connection.

The seventh factor is recovery. An adaptive strategy should allow the nervous system and the cognitive system to settle after the event. If suppression is followed by faster recovery, less rumination, and greater willingness to face the next social task, it may have served a useful function. If suppression is followed by delayed emotional rebound, sleep disruption, or avoidance of future contact, it has likely failed. Recovery is a better criterion than immediate relief because social anxiety is a repetitive condition. People do not need only to survive one conversation. They need to preserve the capacity to enter the next one. Future studies should measure recovery trajectories rather than stopping at post-task distress.

The eighth factor is the person's interpretation of the suppression attempt. If a person thinks, "I chose to set that thought aside because it was not useful right now," the attempt may feel agentic. If the person thinks, "I must get rid of this thought or I cannot cope," the attempt may increase helplessness. The same cognitive act can therefore have different metacognitive meanings. Social anxiety is shaped by beliefs about anxiety, control, and social performance. Suppression that confirms

a belief in mental danger may be maladaptive even when it reduces distress for a few minutes. Suppression that confirms attentional agency may be less risky.

The ninth factor is repetition. A single act of suppression may be harmless, but repeated suppression can become a habit. Habits are efficient because they reduce decision making, but they can also reduce flexibility. A socially anxious person who automatically suppresses every evaluative thought may never learn which thoughts are inaccurate, which are irrelevant, and which require action. Repetition also makes suppression harder to study because the current episode is shaped by a long history of previous attempts. Researchers should therefore distinguish occasional, strategic suppression from chronic, default suppression. The latter is more likely to indicate a maintenance process.

The tenth factor is the fit between suppression and the person's values. Social anxiety often narrows life by making people avoid valued social roles. If suppression helps a person give a speech, attend a class, ask a question, or meet a friend, it may support values-based action. If suppression is used to keep life small and emotionally controlled, it becomes part of avoidance. This criterion is especially useful because it moves the discussion beyond symptom reduction. A strategy can reduce anxiety while also reducing life. That is a poor trade. The best judgment of adaptiveness asks whether suppression helps the person participate more fully in meaningful social contexts.

5. The Unresolved Questions in Suppression Research

The first major challenge is construct ambiguity. Thought suppression, expressive suppression, experiential avoidance, distraction, safety behavior, and rumination are often discussed as if they were clearly separate in theory but then measured with overlapping items in practice. A person who reports trying not to think about a social mistake may also be avoiding emotion, distracting attention, and ruminating about the failure of suppression. If the measure does not separate these processes, the result becomes difficult to interpret. Some studies may find that suppression predicts anxiety because the items partly measure intrusive thoughts. Other studies may find that suppression is useful because the task measures intentional inhibition of a specific target. These are not contradictory findings. They are different constructs wearing the same name tag.

The second challenge is the distinction between short-term and long-term adaptiveness. Suppression can reduce immediate distress, and immediate distress is not trivial. People must function in real time. However, social anxiety is maintained across repeated events. A strategy that helps a person survive one interaction may still strengthen avoidance over months. The reverse can also occur. A strategy that feels uncomfortable in the moment, such as allowing a feared thought to remain present, may produce better long-term learning. Therefore, adaptiveness should be evaluated across multiple time scales. Single-session studies and retrospective questionnaires cannot fully answer this question. Researchers need designs that capture immediate relief, next-hour consequences, next-day rumination, and later willingness to enter social situations.

The third challenge is causal inference. Ambulatory assessment can show that suppression occurs near anxiety, rumination, or avoidance, but it cannot easily prove which process caused which. Social anxiety may cause suppression. Suppression may maintain anxiety. A third factor, such as shame or perceived uncontrollability, may cause both. Experimental designs can manipulate suppression, but they often simplify the social context. The field needs hybrid designs that combine ecological momentary assessment with experimental prompts, digital tasks, and real social challenges. Without this combination, researchers will keep discovering correlations and then pretending that the causal story is clearer than it is. That is how a literature becomes large without becoming sharp.

The fourth challenge concerns event phase. Many studies ask whether a person generally suppresses thoughts, but social anxiety is organized around episodes. Before the event, the person predicts threat. During the event, the person manages attention and behavior. After the event, the person interprets the meaning of what happened. Suppression may have different effects in each phase. A questionnaire that asks, "I try not to think about upsetting things," cannot identify these phase-specific effects. Event-contingent designs should ask what was suppressed, when it was suppressed, what the person was trying to achieve, and what happened afterward. This would allow researchers to distinguish pre-event worry control, in-event attentional redirection, and post-event avoidance of memory.

The fifth controversy concerns the status of rebound. The older rebound claim remains influential because it is simple and memorable. Recent work has made the issue less simple. Mamat and Anderson (2023) found that suppression training did not

necessarily produce rebound and may reduce distress attached to unwanted thoughts. Mamat et al. (2024) argue that ironic processing should be reconsidered rather than treated as a universal law. This creates an uncomfortable but productive tension for social anxiety research. If suppression can sometimes work, then clinical models must specify why it often fails in social anxiety. The likely answer is not suppression itself but suppression under threat, load, self-monitoring, and rigid control beliefs. That answer is more complex, but it is closer to the truth.

The sixth challenge is the measurement of context. Researchers often say that regulation is context-dependent, then measure context with one or two broad variables. That is not enough. Context includes social audience, relationship closeness, hierarchy, public visibility, stakes, emotion intensity, controllability, fatigue, prior experiences, and available time. It also includes digital contexts, such as messaging, social media exposure, video calls, and online performance. Social anxiety increasingly occurs in hybrid social environments. A person may suppress thoughts after seeing that a message was read but not answered. Another person may suppress thoughts while watching their own face during a video meeting. These contexts may differ from traditional face-to-face tasks. The literature has not caught up fully.

The seventh challenge is the tendency to rank strategies instead of modeling strategy fit. Many papers still imply that reappraisal and acceptance are good, while suppression and avoidance are bad. That framework is convenient for teaching, but it is weak for research. Reappraisal can be useless when a situation requires action. Acceptance can become passivity when boundaries are needed. Suppression can be harmful when it blocks learning, but useful when it prevents a temporary intrusion from ruining task performance. A better model would treat strategies as tools whose value depends on timing, target, intensity, and goal. The field should stop writing as if coping strategies have fixed personalities. They do not.

The eighth challenge concerns clinical translation. If clinicians tell socially anxious clients that suppression is always bad, clients may interpret normal efforts to manage attention as failure. That can increase shame. If clinicians teach suppression without caution, clients may strengthen avoidance. A more precise message is needed. Clients can learn to identify whether they are temporarily setting aside a thought to stay engaged or trying to eliminate a thought because it feels intolerable. They can learn to return to important thoughts later, test predictions, and reduce post-event rumination. In this model, the clinical target is not every act of suppression. The target is rigid, fear-driven suppression that prevents exposure, learning, and valued social participation.

The ninth challenge is cultural and developmental generalizability. Much of the recent high-quality work uses university samples, Western samples, or adults who can complete repeated smartphone assessments. Adolescents, vocational students, working adults in high-evaluation occupations, and non-Western populations are less represented. This gap matters because social norms about restraint, public embarrassment, authority, and emotional expression shape suppression. It also matters because developmental stage shapes regulation capacity. A strategy that is harmful for an adult with long-standing social anxiety may function differently for an adolescent who is still learning how to manage social threat. The literature needs more cross-cultural and developmental designs before it can make broad claims.

The tenth challenge concerns individualization. The same person may benefit from different strategies across different moments. Between-person averages may hide meaningful within-person patterns. A group-level finding that suppression predicts anxiety does not mean suppression is harmful every time a particular person uses it. It may be harmful for one person after peer rejection, neutral for another during a work task, and helpful for a third during a brief intrusive image. Personalized modeling and recommender systems, such as the approach developed by Beltzer et al. (2022), offer one path forward. These methods can test which strategies work for whom and under what conditions. They also fit the actual clinical problem better than one-size-fits-all advice.

A final controversy is philosophical as much as empirical. Some therapeutic traditions emphasize acceptance of thoughts rather than control. Recent suppression research suggests that control is not always pathological. The field should not turn this into a childish fight between acceptance and control. People need both. A healthy mind can allow thoughts to come and go, but it can also redirect attention when a thought is irrelevant, intrusive, or poorly timed. Social anxiety becomes problematic when the person loses flexibility, not when the person ever tries to control a thought. The future of this literature should be less ideological and more functional. The question is not whether suppression violates a preferred theory. The question is

whether it helps the person live, learn, and connect in a particular context.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

The literature reviewed here supports a contextual account of thought suppression in social anxiety. Suppression is often maladaptive in socially anxious individuals because it frequently occurs alongside self-focused attention, avoidance, rigid emotional control beliefs, and post-event rumination. It can prevent corrective learning when the person uses it to escape from feared internal material rather than to engage more fully with the social situation. It can also intensify monitoring when the person repeatedly checks whether the unwanted thought has disappeared. In these conditions, suppression does not solve the problem. It reorganizes the problem around mental control.

At the same time, recent evidence prevents a simple condemnation of suppression. Experimental and intrusion-control research indicates that intentional suppression can reduce the vividness and distress of unwanted thoughts under some conditions. Daily-life research indicates that strategy effectiveness depends on contextual demands. A person may use suppression adaptively when the strategy is brief, specific, low in monitoring, and directed toward maintaining engagement in a valued task. Suppression becomes more dangerous when it is chronic, global, self-punitive, and followed by avoidance or rumination. The useful distinction is therefore not suppression versus no suppression. The useful distinction is flexible containment versus rigid avoidance.

Future research should move in five directions. First, studies should measure suppression at the event level rather than only at the trait level. Second, researchers should separate suppression attempts from intrusive thought frequency and from failed control. Third, studies should model time course, including immediate relief, later rumination, and future approach behavior. Fourth, research should test moderators such as emotional intensity, controllability, cognitive load, thought specificity, social goals, mindfulness, and emotion-control beliefs. Fifth, the field should include more adolescent, occupational, clinical, and non-Western samples. Social anxiety does not occur only in psychology departments with convenient undergraduate participants, although one would not know that from parts of the literature.

Clinical work should also become more nuanced. Interventions should not merely instruct socially anxious people to stop suppressing thoughts. That instruction can be too broad and sometimes counterproductive. Instead, treatment can help clients map the function of suppression. Does the strategy allow them to stay in the conversation, or does it pull attention inward? Does it postpone processing until a better time, or does it block processing altogether? Does it reduce an intrusive image, or does it intensify fear of having the thought? These questions are practical and testable. They can also be used in cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based work, exposure, and digital just-in-time interventions.

The strongest conclusion is also the least flashy: thought suppression is not one thing. It is a family of control attempts that differ by target, timing, context, and consequence. In social anxiety, this matters because the feared object is often internal as well as external. The person fears both the audience and the mind's prediction of the audience. A good theory must therefore explain when controlling a thought helps the person face the world and when controlling a thought becomes another way of hiding from it. The next generation of research should abandon the crude question of whether suppression is adaptive. It should build the evidence needed to answer the sharper question: adaptive for whom, in which moment, against which thought, for what purpose, and at what later cost?

The practical value of this conclusion is that it gives researchers and clinicians a stricter standard. They should not celebrate suppression because it lowers distress once, and they should not condemn it because it appears in anxious people. They should examine function, fit, and aftermath. That standard is less neat, but neatness is not evidence. A contextual model is harder to test, yet it is better matched to the lived reality of social anxiety.

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