

Just Lunch

a freeform larp about being a woman with social anxiety by Heather Silsbee

You Need:

- Three players
- A clock or timer with a large, easy-to-read display
- A writing utensil for each player
- Printouts of the character sheets included with these rules
- A table and three chairs
- Three blank note cards
- About two hours

The Situation

Marian, Jasmine, and Rachel were all born in the same small midwestern town. They went to the same schools for most of their lives and, in high school, developed a close friendship. For those four years they were inseparable. But when they graduated, they realized they all had different interests and life goals. They all went in different directions, geographically and otherwise. Now it's been more than 5 years since they have seen each other or really talked. Through social media posts, Rachel discovered that they would all be in Chicago on the same weekend and insisted that they meet up. Marian suggested a new, highly reviewed restaurant and everyone agreed to carve out an hour of their day for lunch and catching up.

Setting

The only setting you need to play *Just Lunch* is a table and chairs. But you can optionally play at an actual restaurant or cafe. If you want to do this, the players should decide on characters ahead of time and show up in-character. All of the rules are the same, except you can skip the “place your order” step at the beginning of play, since you will actually be ordering from the restaurant. Please be respectful of the restaurant property, staff, and customers. Break character or stop play at moments if necessary.

How to Play

Your main in-character task in *Just Lunch* is simply to have a conversation with your friends over lunch. Talk about anything you would normally discuss with a friend you haven't seen in awhile. Reminisce on past memories from your hometown or high school, ask about your friend's new life, or talk about your own. If you can't think of anything else, talk about the weather in Chicago. Just keep the conversation going. You can and should define anything about the world and your characters' relationships that you would like during play. Just try not to invent important facts about others' characters without checking in with them first. An easy way

to do this without breaking character is to ask a question about something you may have forgotten, “*Didn’t you go to senior prom with Carlos?*”

Each character has a list of anxieties about the situation or their lives in general. They may be certain topics of conversation, aspects of the restaurant setting, physical needs, or just general negative expectations. Always be aware of your anxieties in play. If one of your anxieties is triggered, choose one of two options: Cover, or Concede.

Choosing to Cover means that you successfully cover up your anxiety and are able to keep your cool in the situation. React with a smooth, socially acceptable behavior: a smile and nod, a follow-up question, laughter, etc. Then, shade in one box on your energy meter, indicating that your energy is drained and it is a little harder for you to participate in the social situation. Covering up anxiety is exhausting.

Choosing Concede means that you give in to what your anxiety wants you to do. Choose a behavior from your “Concede behaviors” list and do it. Each character’s concede behaviors list is different, since people react to anxiety in different ways. You may need to leave the room for a few minutes, abruptly ask to change the topic of conversation, or answer a question in a short, brusque manner. After performing the behavior, add a new anxiety to your list that’s related to your behavior. In order to preserve your energy, you may have made a social blunder or offended someone. You may now be worried that your friend thinks you’re rude, or be more intent on avoiding a certain situation. Your energy meter stays the same.

If you fill up your energy meter, you have run out of energy to deal with the situation. You need to excuse yourself and leave the restaurant as quickly as possible. Feel free to make up an excuse (pull out your cell phone and pretend to receive an important call, feign food poisoning) or just say you need to go and do it. Move your character sheet to the middle of the table so everyone can see that you’re leaving because your character ran out of energy, not because you, as a player, need to leave the game.

One of your jobs as a player is to push on the other characters’ buttons. Pay attention when the characters are introduced and aim to touch on their anxieties. That being said, don’t force a conversation just to make another character anxious, or repeatedly harp on one of another character’s sensitive topics. You should also aim to make the conversation natural and respond how your character would, knowing that they likely still care about their friends’ comfort. If you suspect that another player is feeling very uncomfortable, check in with them out-of-character.

Player Safety

This game includes sensitive content and may cause actual anxiety or other negative reactions. So it is particularly important to implement safety tools, touch boundaries, and an open door

policy. I recommend using the safe words “Cut” and “Brake.” Saying Cut during play means that the larp needs to stop, either just for a moment or permanently. Say Cut if you feel very uncomfortable or unsafe and don’t want to continue the game as it’s going. You can also say it if you have some other emergency and need to stop the game for a while. Saying “Brake” means that you’re okay continuing the larp right now, but it’s getting a little intense. If someone says “Brake” you can continue at the current level of play intensity, but don’t push any further. For example, you may say “Brake” if someone touches your arm and you’re okay with that, but don’t want any additional physical contact.

Speaking of physical contact, another great safety practice is to establish touch boundaries before play. Before starting the game, each player should say where they are comfortable being touched during the game (if anywhere). In *Just Lunch*, the two most likely points of physical contact are giving hugs, or lightly touching someone’s arm or shoulder during conversation. So instead of asking for each person’s boundaries, you could say “Is everyone okay with brief hugs? How about touching the arms or shoulders?” If so, limit your physical contact to those areas. If not, respect other players’ specific boundaries or just agree not to have any physical contact in the game.

Every game of *Just Lunch* should also have an “open door policy.” That means that everyone should agree that anyone can leave the game at any time without explanation. Everyone also agrees that no one will be judged for leaving, and others won’t speculate about why any person left. This is very important for a game about anxiety, since it’s very possible that a person having actual anxiety may need to leave without explanation.

Before Play

Everyone should look at the possible character descriptions and anxieties and pick one that appeals to them. Jasmine is the character with the most severe anxiety and therefore is the most likely to have to leave the game early. Rachel is an extrovert and one of her anxieties is a lull in the conversation, so it may often be her responsibility to think of new topics to keep the conversation going. Marion’s character is dealing with anxieties about her sexuality. Make sure the player who picks each character is okay with her particular challenges.

After giving everyone several minutes to read through their entire sheet, read your sheet aloud, including your list of anxieties. This will remind everyone of what each character is like, and let them know what topics you may want to bring up in play.

Starting Play

Set your timer to 60 minutes. Or, if using a clock, make sure everyone notes down the time when you start, and what time you will end: 60 minutes later. The timer is meant to create a sense of nervous energy from the start, as would be present in such a situation. In an awkward situation

people will often want to check the time to see how much longer they will need to deal with it, or, to make sure they are able to fit in all of the things they want to talk about. Having the time visible also serves the practical purpose of allowing everyone to know when to end the game without needing someone else to stop you.

Enter the play space. All of the in-character play in *Just Lunch* happens at or immediately around the table. Sometimes players may need or want to leave this area, either for in-game or out-of-game reasons. If they do, they are temporarily out of play, and their character cannot hear or see what is going on at the table. No one should follow another player out of the play space to have a scene elsewhere. When you're all ready to begin, the players should enter the play space one by one and sit down. They should greet each other when entering. After all players have entered, greeted the others, and placed any belonging at the table, they should get up one by one to place their order. Only one person should place their order at one time, so the other two remain at the table and continue the game.

Place your order. The restaurant is a cafeteria-style self-serve place. Customers go to the counter and place their order and bring it back to the table. When it's your turn to place your order, grab a notecard and a pen/pencil and go off somewhere else nearby. Write down your order on the notecard. Wait about 3 minutes before going back to the table.

At the end of play time all remaining characters should say goodbye to the others and leave the play space.

Playing Anxiety

Everyone has likely had a taste of social anxiety at some point in their life—being afraid of saying the wrong thing on a first date with someone you like, arriving to a party early and not seeing anyone you know, or making a mistake at work and being afraid of what your boss will think. But for some people, those feelings are an integral part of everyday life. Making a phone call, passing someone on the sidewalk, sending an email that may inconvenience someone, walking through a busy grocery store, needing to make small talk with your hair stylist, thinking again and again about the “wrong” thing you did yesterday, last week, or last month. It's exhausting to say the least. And you can easily get stuck in an anxious loop that's hard to get out of. The very thing you need to do to calm your anxiety may make you stand out in the situation, causing more, or different, anxiety.

Women in particular are held up to certain social standards that make things even more complicated. Women are expected to be social creatures, to go places in groups, to smile and look approachable, to hug their friends, to be polite, to have certain body language, to look pretty when out in public. All of these things can be exhausting for any woman, and even more so when you have to “fake it” while covering up your anxiety.

The three women in *Just Lunch* have varying levels of anxiety about their situation. But they're all held up to these same standards, as well as the conventions of what is "normal" to do in public and what is expected behavior between friends who no longer know each other very well. Keep this in mind during play. If you're in a situation that you think would cause your character anxiety but is not listed on their sheet, feel free to choose Cover or Concede action as if it were on the list.

In My Head

Everyone has different experiences with anxiety and reacts to it in a different way, so don't worry too much about "getting it right." But for anyone who may still be struggling with how to embody the anxieties of their character, I'll offer my experience as one specific example:

My social anxiety is most severe when I'm expected to interact socially with multiple people I don't know. Particularly rough are large parties, or meeting several new people at once. I already tend to be quiet, but in those situations I can shut down and barely talk at all unless asked a direct question. Even if I'm totally comfortable with the topic of conversation, I'm reluctant to give my input out of fear that the others will think I'm rude for inserting myself in their discussion, or that I'll say the wrong thing and make a bad impression. Meanwhile I'm worried that I'm making the wrong impression by staying quiet, but that behavior is more in my comfort zone. If I feel anxious for too long I will feel the need to escape the situation and cry. That's my "concede" behavior in those circumstances. I hate to cry in front of other people and almost never will, but if I have a chance to escape to place I consider safe I may cry there, which does help. But then I worry that people will be able to tell that I've been crying and ask me what's wrong, etc. You can see where the cyclical thinking and accumulating anxieties come in.

That's all pretty much the worst case scenario for me. With people I know well I'm generally more comfortable, but there are still some sticking points. If a conversation is particularly important to me I get stressed out and often find it hard to find the right words to say, like my mind goes blank for a minute, which can cause more anxiety. I also often worry that others will think I'm rude or uninterested so I overcompensate by making a particular effort to smile and nod a lot, or look very thoughtful so that they know I'm paying attention. That's my attempt to cover. I know that attempt fails sometimes because occasionally someone will notice my enthusiastic nodding, stop, and ask if I already know about whatever they're saying. Often after social interactions, even a very brief one such as waving to a coworker in the hallway, I will go back over the event in my mind for a few minutes wondering if I should have done something differently. As I get older I get better at reminding myself that those things don't really matter and stopping the cycling thoughts. In a way I'm lucky that I'm an introvert, so I

don't feel a desire to often put myself in the social situations that stress me out. But that also means that even the best interactions drain my energy a little, so social anxiety can pretty easily compound on top of that.

Marian

Determined, snarky, adventurous.

You did as many activities as you could in high school and still do. You work hard at whatever you set out to do and usually succeed. You went to a big state college and studied Communications and now work for a marketing firm. You have always found it a little hard to make friends even though you try hard at that too. It might be that you intimidate people and that puts them off. It seems that people also think you're strange because you never date anyone. In college you realized that you are asexual, something you always felt but never had a word for. You're proud of your sexuality and want to be an advocate for others but really hate "coming out" to people and dealing with all the questions they have, so you usually try to avoid the subject. You have also always been very aware of your appearance. People tend to find you attractive and tell you that, which is very awkward for you. Now that you're in a corporate setting you are trying to perfect the art of looking professional and feminine without drawing extra attention. You're in Chicago for a business conference. You don't have very high expectations for this lunch. You're already so busy with the conference that it was hard to find an hour to spare, and now you're expected to be excited to make small talk. Besides, you'll all just be going back to your separate lives, so there's no use in getting re-attached.

Anxieties:

- Extended conversation or questions about sex, dating, or relationships
- Comments on your physical appearance
- Making someone else uncomfortable (or seeming to)
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Concede behaviors:

- Abruptly ask to change the topic of conversation
- Refuse to answer a question, or answer it rudely
- Leave the room for a few minutes

Energy:

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Jasmine

Introverted, clever, considerate.

You were always the “smart one” in school and got excellent grades without trying very hard. You got a partial scholarship a small, prestigious college in Chicago and graduated a couple years ago. You loved college and were very comfortable there. Well, except for the obligatory social events, but you were usually able to avoid those and stick to interacting with people in a few low-key clubs and organizations. But when it was time to go out on your own you kind of froze and didn’t know what to do. You have a job at a bookstore, which you really like most of the time. But it barely pays your rent and minimum student loan payments. And you, and your boss, know that the customer service portions of the job don’t particularly suit you. You are anxious about seeing Marian and Rachel again. You’re afraid you won’t have anything in common anymore and won’t have anything to talk about. You don’t want anyone to judge you for not having a real career, and there are plenty of things about high school that you’d rather not talk about again. You can’t afford to buy anything at this restaurant, but know that it’s expected that you get something.

Anxieties:

- Having to order something at the restaurant
 - This anxiety automatically triggers when you place your order. If you choose to Cover, order a full meal, even though you can’t afford it. If you choose Concede, just order a glass of water, and add the following anxiety “Someone asking about your order”
- Conversations about money
- Being the focus of a conversation for too long
- Extended conversations about high school social events
- Causing a lull in the conversation
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Concede behaviors:

- Leave the room for a few minutes
- Try not to talk for a few minutes; answer direct questions in as few words as possible
- Start a new topic of conversation that is awkward or seems out-of-place

Energy:

(Note: Jasmine starts with one space filled in)

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Rachel

Extroverted, affectionate, attentive.

You stayed in your hometown after high school and went to a two-year community college. You married your high school sweetheart and are now a stay at home mom for a one-year-old. You love your family and being able to stay at home with your child. You have an interest in photography and occasionally do work for your friends for free. You're in Chicago to take photos for your sister-in-law's wedding. Maybe someday you'll make that a career, but you aren't really thinking about it right now. You get upset when people ask about your career goals or imply that being a mother isn't enough of a job. You love feeling involved in your community and often volunteer to help organize different activities, where you meet a lot of interesting people. You're genuinely excited to see Marian and Jasmine again and want to hear all about their lives. Though you like organizing events, you're always disappointed if they don't go as planned, and this is gathering is no exception. You were the most upset when you all stopped talking. You hope you'll all bond again and things will be just like old times.

Anxieties:

- Significant lulls in the conversation
- Signs that someone doesn't want to talk to you
- Someone being offended by something you say or do
- Someone asking about your career goals
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Concede behaviors:

- Abruptly ask to change the topic of conversation
- Start a new topic of conversation that is awkward or seems out-of-place
- Do your nervous habit (fidgeting with your hair or a pen, humming to yourself, etc. You can define this at the start of play or try out different things)

Energy:

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Thank you!

Thank you so much to everyone who contributed to this game either by giving feedback on the design and text, or by sharing your experience of anxiety with me. I was humbled to see how many people were willing to open up to me about something that can be very personal (and especially difficult for anxious people)!