

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANXIETY?

Dr. John Schinnerer, Guide To Self

Social anxiety is the third largest psychological problem in the world today but few understand this.

A young man wastes time sitting in front of the telephone, agonizing because he's afraid to make a call. He's afraid to call a stranger in a business office about the phone bill because he's afraid he'll be imposing and they'll be mad with him. It's very hard for him to take rejection, even over the phone, even from someone she doesn't know. He's especially afraid to call people he does know because he feels that he'll be calling at the wrong time -- the other person will be busy -- and they won't want to talk with him. He feels rejected even before he makes the call. Once the call is finished, he overanalyzes and thinks about the words that were used, the tone it was said in, and how he was perceived by the other person....his nervousness and speeding thoughts concerning the call prove to him that he "screwed" this conversation up, too, just like he always does. Just thinking about the call is enough to call us his anxiety.

A young lady resists going to work since a meeting is scheduled the next day. She knows that such meetings always include her co-workers discussing their current projects. The mere thought of talking in front of her peers spikes her anxiety. Sometimes she loses sleep the night before due to the anticipation of her upcoming nervousness. In other words, she becomes nervous about the prospect of being nervous. When the meeting is finally finished, a huge wave of relief comes over her as she begins to let go of the anxiety. Yet the memory of the meeting remains in the forefront of her mind. She is convinced she embarrassed herself and that everyone present saw how nervous she was when she spoke, and how foolish she acted in the meeting. She recalls that in front of the boss she stammered, paused too long, her face turned red, and she won't remember what to say. The movies are replayed in her mind over and over and over again.

Another individual would like to go to out socially--- and, in fact, he is truly lonely---yet he never goes out as he is unbearably nervous when meeting new people. Groups of people make things worse for him. The idea of talking to unknown people scares the daylight out of him. He is certain people will stare at him and expose him as an imposter. He is afraid they will reject him and humiliate him. Even if they act nice, they'll surely notice his flushed face, frozen look and stuttering speech. They'll sense his discomfort, mistake it for arrogance and dislike him. He feels he has no way to win. And so he spends the night alone again. He is in his comfort zone at home. Home is the only area in which he feels totally at ease. Home is the only place he can relax. He hasn't gone out in seven years.

In public, people with social anxiety feel that everyone is scrutinizing their every move and judging them, despite the rational knowledge that this is not the case. Socially anxious people cannot relax in public. They cannot enjoy themselves when they are out. They can never truly settle down when others are around. To them, it always seems like other people are negatively judging them. Regardless of their rational thoughts, they still feel extremely self-consciousness while they are in the presence of others. For many, it is nearly impossible to relax and focus on anything other than the anxiety and the fear. The anxiety is agonizing, making it easier to avoid social situations and other people completely.

Social anxiety is an extreme fear of social situations and conversing with other people which creates feelings of self-consciousness, fear of judgment, evaluation, and criticism. This often leads to feelings of inadequacy, humiliation, and depression.

If you usually become anxious in social settings, but seem fine when you are alone, then "social anxiety" may be the problem.

Social anxiety disorder (or social phobia) causes relationship problems for millions of people all over the world every day of their lives. In the United States, studies have recently shown social anxiety disorder to be the third largest psychological disorder in the country. Such anxiety affects approximately 15 million Americans each year. In general, social anxiety is not well understood by the mental health care field. As a result, people with social phobia are frequently misdiagnosed. Socially anxious people have been misdiagnosed as "schizophrenic", "manic-depressive", "clinically depressed", and "personality disordered" to name a few.

An example of a specific social phobia is the fear of speaking in front of groups. On the other hand, generalized social anxiety makes a person anxious, nervous, and uncomfortable in the vast majority of social situations.

People who suffer from social anxiety disorder typically experience considerable emotional distress in situations such as:

Introductions to other people

Criticism and Judgments

Being the center of attention (e.g., birthdays)

Having someone watch while doing something

Talking to people in positions of authority (e.g., doctors, PhDs and police)

Social encounters, especially with strangers

Making "chit-chat" at social engagements

The physiological symptoms that are associated with social anxiety frequently include intense dread, a quickening heart rate, blushing face, dry throat and mouth, shaking, difficulty swallowing, and muscle tension. Constant, pervasive, ongoing and intense anxiety is the most common symptom.

People with social anxiety know that their anxiety does not make rational sense. We know now that each one of us has two "types" of brain – the emotional brain and the thinking brain. These account for our emotional intelligence and traditional intelligence. Therefore, knowing something is not the same as feeling it. Sometimes we have feelings that are inconsistent with our thoughts. This is frequently the case in anxious people. They feel anxious despite their rational knowledge that there is nothing to be afraid of.

On the positive side, cognitive-behavioral therapy for social anxiety disorder has been shown to be highly successful. Individuals with anxiety for years have flourished while in therapy. Due to successful therapy, anxious people have reported a new and improved life -- one that is nearly free of fear and anxiety.

Any therapist working with anxious people must understand their feelings of self-consciousness. Now it is true that those who have gone through social phobia rationally realize our mind is exaggerating. However, it still feels like others are watching and judging them. Their self-consciousness is very real. If the therapist does not understand this, it is doubtful they will be able to help you.

Keep in mind that a true mental health care professional will welcome your questions. If the therapist seems put off by your questioning, you may want to consider another therapist. Those who suffer from social anxiety need support, encouragement, and a relaxing environment while they work through therapy. Assuming you do enter therapy, remember that it is your time to heal. You are not putting anyone out. You should not be judged in therapy. You should be supported.

Another avenue to successfully triumphing over anxiety is a behavioral therapy group solely for those with social phobia. This is necessary. If there is no social phobia therapy group offered, you may want to seek therapy somewhere else. A behavioral therapy group is essential to your ultimate success. Please realize that this does not mean a "support group." Support groups frequently lead to a worsening of anxiety symptoms.

In addition, the anxiety group should be focused solely on socially anxiety. It should not be a mixed anxiety group. Although anxiety is similar across anxiety disorders, social phobia sufferers need specific, customized activities

run by a specialist in this area. A social phobia behavioral therapy group should only be for those with social anxiety.

While it is not easy to overcome social anxiety, it can be done. I have done it myself. Countless thousands of others have overcome it as well. It may feel hopeless when you are smack dab in the middle of the problem. It may feel as if you'll never get better. It may seem as if your life is one panic attack after another. However, your anxiety can be stopped relatively quickly with the help of a cognitive-behavioral therapist who specializes in social anxiety.

The key components to vanquishing social anxiety are:

1. A knowledge and awareness of the situation,
2. A vow to carry through with cognitive-behavioral therapy even when it provokes your anxiety,
3. Practice changing the "tapes" in your head so that your inner voices become positive and automatic.
4. Sharing in a social anxiety therapy group in which you can work on anxiety-provoking situations at your own pace. In other words, the individual who feels nervous while speaking in public uses certain strategies to meet his or her goals, whereas the person who wants to learn how to make anxiety-free small talk at parties slowly works toward his or her goals. The means by which this is done includes role-playing, acting, using a tape recorder and video camera, question and answer periods, and purposefully doing foolish acts as part of a behavioral therapy group focused on social anxiety.

During therapy, you'll want to practice, set realistic goals in small increments, meet your goals, and slowly move up your expectations, until your long-term goals are finally met. You should not be pressured or be made to feel guilty by others in the group. No one should force you to do or say a thing. However, this rarely happens! Those in the group understand why they are there and, despite their anxiety, they typically choose to work on their specific anxieties. The job of the therapist and the group is to encourage, support and motivate. The final decision on progress resides within you. No one can stop a motivated person who continues practicing.

Don't give up. A better life is waiting for you. If you are motivated to end your lifetime of anxiety, then cognitive-behavioral therapy has the methods, techniques, and strategies to alleviate your anxiety and make the world a much more relaxing place.

Many of us have suffered through the life-altering fears and pervasive anxiety that social anxiety causes and have come out healthier and happier on the other side. You can too. Seek out a professional therapist today for a happier, more fulfilling life.

