

SOCIAL ANXIETY



Social Anxiety & Social Phobia Symptoms, Causes, Treatments

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What is Social Phobia?

Many people are uncomfortable in social situations, but for about 1 out of 10 Americans, the discomfort rises to the level of clinically significant anxiety. Sometimes referred to as social phobia, social anxiety disorder can cause individuals to avoid a wide range of social situations. When interacting with a group of people, individuals with social anxiety disorder can experience an overwhelming sense of fright or panic; are excessively concerned about scrutiny, embarrassment, or humiliation; and are preoccupied about how others perceive them and what others think of them.

Types of Social Anxiety Disorders

Generalized Social Phobia. The most common of the social anxiety disorders, generalized social phobia, affects individuals in a variety of social situations. In other words, a person with this type of disorder will be uncomfortable and avoid the majority of situations where they have to interact with others, particularly people they don't know or groups of people.

Specific Social Phobia. This type of social anxiety is linked to specific situations, such as fear of public speaking, fear of eating in front of others, fear of using public restrooms, and so on.

Avoidant Personality Disorder. This is often considered the most severe form of social anxiety and represents a condition in which individuals have a life-long pattern of extreme shyness and self-isolation.

Causes of Social Anxiety

Social anxiety stems from shyness, which is referred to by psychological scientists as *temperamental inhibition*. We know from neurological and physiological research that temperamental inhibition has a strong biological component. Shy or withdrawn children have brain wave and heart rate patterns that are different from the physiological patterns of non-inhibited children. Moreover, these differences are present at birth. In addition, early social experiences can then either improve the tendency to be shy (with some individuals overcoming their shyness), or alternatively, childhood experiences can aggravate the biological predisposition and result in social anxiety disorders.

Treatment

Medication. A variety of medications, such as anti-depressants, benzodiazepines, and beta-blockers, can be effective in alleviating the symptoms of social anxiety. While medication is often an important

part of treatment, the problem with medication therapy is that it is a treatment and not a cure. In other words, symptoms are resolved during the time that the individual takes medication, but when a person stops taking the medication, the symptoms generally return.

Psychotherapy. Psychotherapy, sometimes called talk therapy, can permanently reduce or eliminate the symptoms of social anxiety. A variety of psychotherapy modalities exist, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, insight-oriented therapy, and psychoeducational therapy. Competent therapists use a variety of modalities and tailor their treatments to the needs of each patient.

Getting Help

The first step to conquering your social anxiety, whether you have moderate discomfort when speaking in public or more severe social phobia, is getting a comprehensive evaluation by a qualified mental health professional. Based on your situation, your provider should recommend a course of treatment that will either require psychotherapy alone or a combination of psychotherapy and medication.



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