

SOCIAL ANXIETY

What is Social Anxiety?

Let's start by considering the term 'Social Anxiety' - what does it mean? The word "**Social**" refers to being amongst people - ie. being in social situations. This does not only mean situations in which you socialise (eg. parties, dinner with friends). It also includes all types of situations in which you are amongst people. Situations such as public speaking, entertaining people, meetings, exams, going to restaurants, writing in front of others, using public toilets, dating and speaking on the telephone are a sample of the various situations referred to by the word 'social'.

The word "**Anxiety**" refers to a mental or emotional state of apprehension and fearfulness, which may range from a feeling of unease to acute panic or terror. Prolonged or intense anxiety may lead to physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, nausea, blushing or feeling dizzy. Anxiety generally occurs as a response to a feared situation and is exacerbated by negative or fearful thoughts.

For people with social anxiety, the key element is extreme anxiety caused by a persistent fear of criticism, or fear of behaving in a way that may cause embarrassment or humiliation. The anxiety is experienced in situations where the person with social anxiety believes that he/she is being scrutinised by others. Many people become nervous before certain social or performance situations such as giving a speech. However, for many people these types of social situations bring feelings that go far beyond simple nervousness. Some people will become so anxious over the possibility of embarrassing themselves that they will avoid such social situations or endure them with extreme anxiety or distress. The anxiety experienced can lead to panic like attacks including symptoms such as heart palpitations, faintness, nausea, shortness of breath and profuse sweating.

Social anxiety may become extremely distressing and disabling for some people, to the extent that they avoid all feared social or performance situations and are unable to function normally in their work, educational, social and family environments. At this point the social anxiety has developed into a disorder (called **Social Anxiety Disorder** or **Social Phobia**), and the sufferer will generally require support and treatment. It is important to realise that the person with social anxiety disorder recognises that their social fears and anxiety are excessive and unreasonable, but feel unable to change their feelings or behaviour.

Thoughts and beliefs which are commonly associated with social anxiety include the following: "I look out of place" - "I sound stupid" - "I don't fit in" - "I'm making a fool of myself" - "I'm inferior to the other talkative people".

For some people, social anxiety may be selective - they may have an intense fear of public speaking, for example, but be comfortable in other social or performance situations. These specific social phobias involve a focused area of fear, discomfort and avoidance. Others may have more generalised social anxiety and have several social phobias about a variety of situations in which their performance may be observed.

Who is Affected by Social Anxiety Disorder?

Social Anxiety Disorder affects literally millions of people - up to 13% of the population - more than 500,000 Victorians. Social Anxiety Disorder affects people from all walks of life and occurs in both males and females.

What Can be Done About It?

Helpful techniques include challenging the dysfunctional beliefs and fears and learning ways of facing the feared situation; relaxation, social skills training, desensitisation and supportive therapy. Some medications are effective and may be used in conjunction with therapy.

Self Help

- Don't avoid the feared situation. You may gain short term relief from your anxiety but your fear of the situation will remain
- Reduce feared situations into manageable tasks. It may seem impossible to go to a gathering for several hours and be the life of the party. However, you may be able to manage going for a short time and speaking to one or two people before leaving
- Act calm and confident
- Make eye contact
- Challenge your thinking, eg. "What is my evidence that they are all looking at me" or "...They think I am foolish", etc.
- Give yourself positive feedback
- Learn a breathing or relaxation technique so that you have a tool for the times when you are nervous

The University Counselling Service staff all have postgraduate qualifications in counselling and/or clinical psychology and are experienced and knowledgeable about treating social anxiety.

Adapted from: 'Emerging from Social Anxiety', Obsessive Compulsive & Anxiety Disorder Foundation of Victoria (Inc.). Their Helpline is 9576-2477

