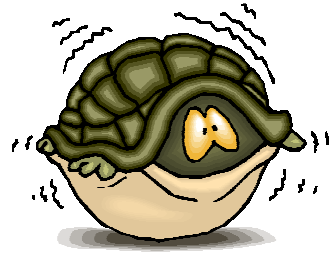

Information on Social Anxiety

By Nick Hanlon (Socialanxiety.co.uk), updated 12th February 2010



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What is social anxiety and social phobia?

Social anxiety is a general term that refers to all anxiety in relation to social situations. When social anxiety starts to pose as a significant or enduring problem for a person they might be experiencing what is called social phobia (also known as social anxiety disorder). Social phobia refers to a condition where marked and persistent anxiety is felt in relation to social situations. Social phobia may also be referred to as extreme shyness although there is some disagreement about whether or not social phobia is more than just shyness. Social phobia is not a fear of people as such, but the actual fear is that other people will evaluate you in negative ways and that this could then cause loss or harm. Because of this fear people feel at high risk of being criticised, disapproved of, embarrassed, bullied or rejected by others. Consequently, this perceived high risk of social danger causes them to experience anxiety in social situations.

How common is social anxiety and when does it start?

A study of over 8,000 people found that within any one year 7.9% of the United States population will experience clinical levels of social anxiety in the form of social phobia, and that within a lifetime, 13.3% will experience this. This makes social phobia the third most common mental health issue after major depression (lifetime-17.1%) and alcohol dependence (lifetime-14.1%) although other estimates give it a prevalence of 2-7%. While some research suggests that the number of men and women experiencing social phobia is equal, other research suggests that there are twice as many women as men experiencing it. Men are more likely to seek treatment though. Social phobia can start at any age, but usually people report it starting in their teens, early twenties or they say they have always been socially anxious.

Is social phobia a recognised medical condition?

Social phobia was clinically recognised in 1980 in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders third edition (DSM-III). This is fairly recent compared to other related psychological challenges such as depression. Social anxiety in general is under researched and not yet well understood by some doctors and therapists, but this is beginning to change as more research and books on the subject are published. Two types of social phobia are recognised by professionals, although there is some uncertainty about whether or not these are separate conditions. The first type is called a simple social phobia. People with the simple sub-type will usually fear only one particular situation such as public speaking, blushing, eating or writing in front of people. The second sub-type is called complex or generalised social phobia. People with the complex sub-type will fear and experience social anxiety in many or nearly all social situations.

Isn't social phobia just a term made up to sell medications?

There has been some media attention on social phobia where it has been suggested that pharmaceutical companies have been trying to label shyness as a medical condition in order to sell medications that treat it. Whether or not the pharmaceutical companies are engaging in bad practice should be seen as separate from the validation of the mental health condition, social phobia. The fact remains that everyday millions of people suffer with severe and disabling levels of social anxiety and this prevents them from meeting their social needs and leading a fulfilling life. It can potentially be damaging to label someone as having a disorder when they are just experiencing a healthy range of human emotions, but what can be even more damaging is to invalidate and ignore the suffering someone is experiencing. Sometimes labels such as social phobia can bring people together for support, help them understanding of the challenges they face, and help them and professionals identify ways of making progress. It is in no way shameful to experience social phobia and people do not need to be less socially anxious to be accepted, but nearly always people experiencing social phobia want to change to end the daily and significant emotional suffering they experience.

Are socially anxious people anti-social?

People who are socially anxious are rarely being anti-social and often desire to get along with people a great deal, but the fears and anxiety they experience around others can be so uncomfortable that they often end up avoiding social activities. This can sometimes mistakenly be interpreted as them being anti-social or rude. The conflict between their need to be with people and the need to avoid danger and anxiety is often what causes people experiencing social anxiety the most distress. Many express having few friends during their lifetime and some say that they have never intimately kissed or had sexual relations with another person. These experiences are not limited to the young and some people may still never have had such experiences in later life even though they may be attractive and kind. Consequently, people with social anxiety often express feeling very lonely and depressed about not being able to fulfil their social needs. Because the fears often lead to social avoidance many people do not seek help and believe they are the only ones who experience such difficulties.

Are socially anxious people just shy?

Many people go through a shy stage during their childhood and people who are socially anxious are often labelled as extremely shy. Shyness is not well defined in literature and people's definitions vary making it hard to compare it with social anxiety. Shyness can refer to timid behaviour, but some people with social anxiety will lead socially active lifestyles while enduring their anxiety. A distinguishing feature of social phobia is that the coping mechanisms people use when anxious keep them locked in a painful vicious cycle and this may be one way to separate it from shyness. Most people experience some passing moments of uncomfortable shyness during adulthood, but for people experiencing social phobia these fears are chronic, cause a lot of distress and do not easily pass. It could also be argued that shyness is just one type of social anxiety with some specific features.

Are socially anxious people fearful around everyone?

People experiencing social anxiety, especially those with the complex sub-type, find that they are anxious around most people. But there does seem to be some instances where they will find it easier to chat and express their personality. Usually very familiar people like their children, close family or partners are easier to be with, but this is not always the case. Many find that being around people who are very extroverted, confident or loud can trigger a lot of anxiety for them and that quieter people who they perceive as being less confident are easier to be with, but again this varies. Typically, when socially anxious people speak with other socially anxious people they find that their anxiety is less. They know that the other person understands their fears and they therefore often perceive them as being less likely to criticise and reject them.

How does social phobia develop?

We do not yet know exactly what causes social phobia, although some of the possible (but not definite) factors have been identified. Research has indicated that some genetic factors may play a role in the development of social phobia. It has been suggested that these genetic factors may predispose an individual to developing social phobia, but that individuals with these genetics will not always develop the condition. It should be noted that these genetic factors only put someone at greater risk of developing social phobia but do not directly cause it. Another theory is that very socially anxious people are more biologically sensitive to stress, but the argument of whether people are anxious because they are sensitive or sensitive because they are anxious must be considered. Also, people experiencing social phobia often have parents with various anxiety problems, including and excluding social phobia. It is possible that anxious thinking styles are inherited from parents or learnt from significant people in the early stages of development. People experiencing social phobia also often report that their parents were overly protective of them and this may increase a sense of vulnerability and therefore anxiety. Another point worth considering is the fact that people experiencing social phobia often report being bullied or abused when they were younger, but not all of them do. It is not clear if they are more susceptible to abuse because of existing social fears or if their social fears directly develop as a consequence of abuse. In the case of the former it should be noted that susceptibility does not mean that it is the person's fault that they were abused. That responsibility lies in the hands of the abuser.

Which one of these is most likely to be the cause?

Since some people do successfully overcome social anxiety by only changing their thoughts and behaviour this seems to rule out genetic and biological factors as a single cause. The current thinking is that social anxiety results from a combination of genetic, biological, cognitive and environmental factors. Certain people may be biologically or psychologically predisposed to problems with anxiety and then certain events later in life may trigger these predispositions to turn into social phobia. Much more research needs to be done before any clear conclusions can be drawn. People often believe that if they can work out how their social phobia started then they will be able to change it. Unfortunately, it seems that those who do manage to pinpoint the specific experience that triggered it often do not find a solution in their discovery.

Does anxiety involve your body as well as your mind?

Apart from being fearful, there are many real physical changes that occur in a person's body when they become anxious. Anxiety can be thought of as a primitive response to danger that has evolved to help us cope better with life threatening situations and to help us avoid danger. For this reason anxiety actually has a positive intention for us. It gets our body ready to deal with danger and the unpleasant feelings help motivate us to stay away from danger in the future. Unfortunately this primitive response can hinder us rather than help us in modern society where social risks are more prominent than physical risks such as being attacked by wild animals.

What happens in my body when I am anxious?

When we perceive that we may be at risk from danger our sympathetic nervous system is activated, this is called a 'fight or flight' response, meaning that our body is preparing to either run away from danger or fight it off. Our body will draw blood away from the digestive system and into our muscles and increase our muscle tension so we are ready for action. This can cause muscle aches, twitches, jerks, shaking and the digestive complaints often associated with anxiety, as well as a dry mouth and throat. Our breathing will speed up and our heart will beat harder and faster in anticipation of strenuous activity. If the activity does not take place then we can feel dizzy and light headed. Since strenuous activity causes lots of heat, our body may sweat ready to remove the anticipated heat. When we become anxious our body also produces adrenaline and other chemicals which can lead to difficulties with sleeping and racing thoughts. Other symptoms people may experience are being more sensitive to light, sound and touch, needing the toilet more, insomnia, feeling detached and or spacey, nausea, pins and needles, restlessness and difficulty concentrating on and remembering things.

What are the consequences of this?

When we are anxious our body expects strenuous activity and exercise therefore relieves anxiety. This is rarely appropriate in social situations and therefore anxious feelings have to be endured until they pass. Although these physical changes in our bodies are intended to help us, they often can make it harder to socialise and hinder social performance. Because anxiety is unpleasant and signs of anxiety can be visible to other people, often a fear of the onset of anxiety can develop which then causes more anxiety. All these physical changes use a lot of energy and consequently anxiety often leaves people feeling tired and drained. When we perceive that we are no longer at risk our parasympathic nervous system returns us back to a more relaxed 'rest and digest' state.

Is social anxiety the same experience for everyone?

There are remarkable similarities between the thoughts, feelings and behaviours experienced by socially anxious people, but also there are many differences. As discussed above, some people may have one specific fear like eating or writing in front of people, while others will find nearly all social situations difficult. Some people tend to avoid most social situations, while others endure their anxiety and continue to enter

situations they find difficult. Some people find speaking to people one on one more comfortable, while others feel more at ease in a larger group. Some find meeting strangers more difficult and others find it increasingly difficult the more someone gets to know them. Also, the behaviours and strategies people use to try and protect themselves from the perceived social dangers will vary from one person to another, but there are common ones that are often used.

How do socially anxious people manage their fears?

When we are in a situation where we perceive there to be potential danger we adopt 'safety behaviours' to minimise that risk. For instance, we may wear a seatbelt when driving our car or we may keep a panic alarm with us when out alone at night. When people fear being criticised and rejected they also adopt similar safety behaviours to try and minimise any perceived risks, like risks of rejection and humiliation. These often involve forms of hiding or avoiding but there are many things people may do. Some common ones are, avoiding social situations, avoiding eye-contact so as not to provoke people, carrying medications like beta-blockers to reduce anxiety symptoms or diazepam (valium) to remain calm (also prescribed as treatments), having a couple of drinks before meeting up with people to feel relaxed, wiping sweat away in case people notice it, trying to look and sound very confident, unnecessarily apologising, not talking about themselves and giving short minimal answers, tensing up or holding things tight to stop shaking, rehearsing what they will say before conversations, preparing excuses to leave places, being still to avoid attention, trying to be funny or amusing to make people like them, not expressing opinions, sitting in the background or on the outskirts of groups to avoid being talked to and trying to use anxiety control methods such as controlling breathing, trying to fight and suppress anxious feelings or blushing, and mentally reassuring themselves that they will be ok.

Do these safety behaviours help?

Safety behaviours may feel like they are helping because they reduce anxiety, but because the high risk of criticism and rejection often does not exist they can have a negative effect. Usually the effect is increased fear and anxiety in the future and reduced social performance in the present. When no criticism or rejection occurs and safety behaviours have been used, a person will usually conclude that their safety behaviours are working and that they have had a narrow escape. Safety behaviours also prevent people from accessing contradictory evidence to their fears. For example, someone who constantly avoids eye contact in fear of provoking a negative reaction never finds out that people are not staring at them in a judging or criticising way. Someone who never talks about themselves to prevent people from thinking they are boring does not find out that people might be very interested in them. Another feature of safety behaviours is that they can often hinder social performance and actually cause people's fears to become true. For example, someone who avoids talking to people and avoids making eye-contact with them could be incorrectly perceived as being rude and this may cause others to incorrectly hold a negative opinion of them. Someone who tries to hold themselves still to stop shaking makes their muscles more tense and consequently they shake even more. Someone who sits on the edge of a group to have less attention on them may become more noticeable as the odd one out. Additionally,

people may talk to them less and this may then seem to confirm their fear that no one likes them or wants them there, even if this is not so. People who are socially anxious usually feel very vulnerable without their safety behaviours and giving them up may feel very risky. As a result they often do not discover that they will likely feel better in the long-term without them and that they may not be quite as much at risk as they thought.

Is anxiety only experienced when around other people?

When a socially anxious person knows in advance that an unavoidable situation is coming up, like a presentation at work, they will often experience anticipatory anxiety and worry about how they will perform. They will likely predict that the experience will go badly and that they will make mistakes resulting in embarrassment and humiliation. Usually they find that the experience goes much better than they expected, but even when this does happen they still may continue to experience anxiety in the following days. This is because they will often replay and re-analyse the event in their mind over and over to check for things they may have done wrong that could provoke others to criticise and reject them. It seems important to identify these things so that they can prepare for any perceived consequences, but this process often just leads to ambiguous elements of the memory being interpreted in negative ways. The memory can quickly become distorted turning a positive experience into something they feel very embarrassed and shameful about. As a result they may then avoid meeting these people again and experience post-event anxiety about the perceived consequences of their actions.

What kind of thoughts do socially anxious people have?

People who experience social anxiety have many thoughts and worries about socialising and what others may think of them. Common ones include, "I'm inadequate", "People don't want me around", "I don't fit in or belong", "People think I'm stupid/strange/weird/odd", "People are laughing at me", "I can't think of anything to say", "My mind's always blank", "People find me boring and annoying to be around", "My bright red face must be so obvious", "I must do things the right way", "They hate me", "I must get people to like me", "I must not do anything wrong", "I sound stupid to people", "I'm not good enough for people", "I'm weak", "I don't have the social skills or know the social rules others have learnt", "I look foolish", "Everyone must notice my anxiety", "I'm annoying people", "I'm scared", "Are these people safe people?", "People are scary", "I'm useless", "I'm worthless", "They think it's my fault, it probably is", "Other people are better than me" and "People always try to take advantage of me". These thoughts are usually untrue but they may feel very real to the person thinking them.

Won't alcohol and just putting yourself out there sort it out?

With social anxiety confidence rarely increases through just forcing oneself into social situations. Since social situations are practically unavoidable, if exposure to social situations alone would reduce social anxiety, then the issue would easily be resolved. It is common for socially anxious people to force themselves into social situations to try and resolve their social difficulties, but without making changes to their thinking or specific behaviours first, this just often results in increased anxiety and an unpleasant memory. Unfortunately, some people may experience social anxiety decade after

decade without any resolve. It is also common for socially anxious people to use alcohol and other drugs to try and cope with their difficulties and be more comfortable and confident around people. This can provide short-term relief, but in the long run it only reinforces their perceived inability to socialise without these aids. This can lead to increased anxiety when they try to stop using the drugs or alcohol and may lead to addiction. Exposure to feared situations can be helpful for people with social anxiety, but this has to be done sensitively and in a specific way that addresses their individual fears gradually.

What kind of situations do socially anxious people find difficult?

Basically any situation where people could negatively evaluate them can prove difficult and trigger anxiety. This can include social situations where people are not directly observing them, such as chatting anonymously in an internet chat room. Usually the situations that are most difficult are things like public speaking, going to parties, speaking to people they find attractive, attending job interviews, dealing with people in positions of authority, clubbing and dancing, being in waiting rooms, using communal showers and public toilets, being with noisy groups or crowds, karaoke, eating, writing or drinking in front of others, attending school, going on dates, going to the hairdressers, speaking to shop keeper, meeting the parents of their children's friends, wedding receptions, being left with someone they do not know, being teased or criticised and being the centre of attention. People who are socially anxious also find the process of asking for help difficult and many choose to endure hardship rather than do things like, see the doctor, apply for benefits, seek the help of a therapist, join a support group, ring a support line or use other services put in place to help people in emotional distress.

Why don't they just snap out of it and pull themselves together?

People often wish they could just snap out of it and that it was only a matter of pulling themselves together, but because the fears and anxiety are so strong and not within their immediate control this is very difficult or impossible for them. Sometimes they may feel fairly confident on their own and then have high hopes of entering into a social situation as a confident and chatty person. Usually when they try to do this they are overwhelmed by a sense of danger that they cannot easily shake. It seems too risky to approach people and chat to them and the anxiety takes over. People experiencing social anxiety and other anxiety difficulties get caught in vicious cycles that they find hard to break. For example, they may go into a situation and because it feels risky they will experience anxiety and use safety behaviours. This can significantly hinder their social performance, making it difficult to concentrate on and engage in conversations. Since social inadequacy is one of the main things they fear happening, their hindered social performance reinforces their beliefs about being socially inadequate resulting in more anxiety and safety behaviours. When the anxiety and safety behaviours are not present they can usually perform very adequately. Also, as mentioned earlier, their responses to social situations can be misinterpreted resulting in the very thing they fear happening (others negatively evaluating them), causing more anxiety, safety behaviours and the continuation of the cycle. It is these vicious cycles that makes it hard for socially anxious people to just snap out of it and enjoy themselves around others.

What other feelings accompany social anxiety?

People with social anxiety experience the same emotions as any other person, but often there are certain emotions they experience more regularly. Apart from anxiety, fear, loneliness, depression and feelings of embarrassment and humiliation, they may also feel very frustrated about their situation. They may be angry at themselves and hate themselves for not being able to do the things they want to do. Understandably, they may also feel very envious or jealous of other people who are able to do and have the things they want. Often people with social anxiety have very low self-esteem and they may feel inadequate, worthless and insignificant. Also, because their focus is often very much on their unsatisfied needs for friendships and more intimate relationships, they may find themselves easily developing strong feeling for people who show interest in them. The emotions may go through cycles as they try to overcome their anxiety related difficulties. An example might be going from determination to change, to anxiety when socialising, to disappointment, to being angry with themselves, to frustration about their situation, to depression about it, to finding hope and then back to determination to change.

Does social phobia commonly occur with anything else?

Yes, it is common for people with social phobia to experience other difficulties with anxiety and mood disorders. Depression is often present along side the anxiety, and although this may be partly due to the fact that they find it hard to satisfy their social needs and do things like, find employment, it can also be a result of the excessive negative self-evaluation present in people with social phobia. Sadly, if a person becomes very depressed and socially anxious and believes that nothing will change their situation they may see suicide as the only way of ending their pain. Other problems with anxiety may also be present such as, generalised anxiety, which is characterised by excessive worry and anxiety about many things in life whether they are social or not. Because people with social phobia find it hard to seek help they are prone to self-medicating with alcohol and drugs which can lead to substance-abuse and addiction. Intense very unpleasant periods of anxiety called panic attacks can also occur which produce frightening strong physiological anxiety symptoms. Agoraphobia may be present when the individual becomes afraid to leave their home and be out in the public. Some of the other anxiety problems that commonly accompany social phobia are obsessive compulsive disorder, eating disorders, body dysmorphia (excessive concern over parts of the body being seen as unattractive), and shy bladder syndrome (being physically unable to urinate in public toilets or at other people's houses due to anxiety).

Please note that social anxiety is a common symptom of Aspergers syndrome which may on the surface resemble social phobia in many ways, but they are distinctly different from each other in both their cause and main defining features.

This document is aimed at helping you understand social anxiety and social phobia and is not a therapeutic guide. If you or a loved one is finding that their emotional states are affecting their well-being then please seek assistance from your family doctor.

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