



Social Anxiety

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANXIETY?

Social anxiety is the excessive fear of certain social or performance situations. Generally, people who experience social anxiety fear one or more of the following:

- formal speaking (e.g. giving a class presentation, speaking with a person in authority)
- informal speaking (e.g. going to a party, meeting someone new)
- being observed (e.g. eating in public, using public bathrooms, being watched while working)
- assertive communication (e.g. expressing disagreement with someone) (Liebowitz, 1987 in Heimberg and Becker, 2002).

Individuals who experience social anxiety tend to recognize that their fear is excessive, feel upset about their level of anxiety and realize that their daily routine, social life, and academic/occupational functioning has been adversely impacted.

WHAT CAUSES SOCIAL ANXIETY?

Problems with social anxiety typically begin in mid-adolescence, emerging out of a childhood history of shyness (Leahy and Holland, 2000). There are numerous possible contributors to the development of social and performance anxiety, including having a genetic predisposition, experiencing humiliating or distressing events (e.g. being bullied), and having poor social skills (Leahy and Holland, 2000).

WHAT CAN I DO TO REDUCE SOCIAL ANXIETY?

- See your doctor or a physician at the Student Health Centre (966-5768) to rule out any physical health problems that may be producing anxiety symptoms.
- Remember that some amount of anxiety is normal.
- Recognize that the most effective way to overcome anxiety is to face it. Believing that anxiety is "bad" and must be avoided makes it more difficult to cope. Adopting beliefs that suggest anxiety is uncomfortable but "o.k." can assist you in performing despite anxiety.

Social anxiety is characterized by intense and persistent worries about embarrassing oneself, or showing anxiety symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Those who experience social anxiety assume that they will perform poorly, that others will judge them harshly and that their performance reflects personal inadequacy (Wilson, 1996). As such, feared situations are anticipated and endured with intense distress, or (most commonly) avoided altogether (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Some people experience feelings of anxiety after the feared event is over because they believe they performed poorly and were evaluated negatively.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SOCIAL ANXIETY?

Symptoms of social anxiety can include the following:

Physical

- Trembling
- Sweating
- Dry mouth
- Trouble swallowing
- Increased heart rate
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea
- Muscle tension
- Cold, clammy hands
- Dizziness
- Frequent urination
- Headaches

Cognitive

- Negative self-talk
- Persistent worrying
- Repetitive thoughts
- Difficulty concentrating
- Going 'blank'
- Thoughts of being out of control
- Thoughts of going crazy
- Thoughts of anxiety recurring

Behavioral

- Avoidance
- Procrastination
- Social withdrawal
- Missed classes/exams
- Making excuses
- Increased caffeine use
- Increased alcohol/drug use
- Eating more/less
- Disturbed sleep

- Think about your thinking. Learn to recognize negative predictions ("He'll think I'm stupid"), harsh self-criticisms ("I'm so boring"), perfectionistic self-statements ("I have to get this right") and beliefs about helplessness ("It won't matter if I try"). Challenge negative self-talk. When you notice anxious thinking, try asking yourself questions such as: "Is this always true?" "What are the odds of that really happening?" "Could there be another possibility?" "Is there another explanation?" "Is this helpful?" "Would I talk to a friend this way?" Next, generate positive self-statements that are affirming, encouraging and believable (e.g. "I was nervous during my presentation and it showed. I got through it, though. And the class really seemed to like the last section. Next time I'll prepare more thoroughly.") (Bourne, 1995; Wilson, 1996).
- Challenge avoidance behavior. Avoiding anxiety-provoking situations alleviates anxiety immediately but only temporarily. Avoiding means you rob yourself of the opportunity to see that you can cope, that disasters rarely occur and that your level of anxiety will diminish.
- Stay in the anxiety-provoking situation until your physical discomfort lessens. If you can't stay, keep going back until you feel less anxious. Your anxiety will decrease.
- Learn to trust your body. Your body is incapable of maintaining an extreme level of anxiety for an extended period of time. Practising abdominal breathing can help alleviate uncomfortable anxiety symptoms.
- Take care of your physical health. Eat well, exercise regularly, get enough rest and avoid excessive use of caffeine. Seek professional help if you have problems with substance use.
- Seek and accept support from others.
- Read about anxiety management.
- Give yourself credit for taking charge and helping yourself cope. Be patient, too.

WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

If you think that you may be experiencing problems with social anxiety, and require professional assistance, call Student Counselling Services at 966-4920. You may also speak to your family doctor or a physician at Student Health Services (966-5768) about a referral to a counsellor who has experience treating this difficulty.

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

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Leahy, R. & Holland, S. (2000). *Treatment Plans and Interventions for Depression and Anxiety Disorders*. New York: Guilford Press.

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