

Social Anxiety Disorder

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Monique is a 35 year old computer analyst. She enjoys her job but finds that she experiences a lot of difficulty with meetings with clients and business meetings at work. Speaking to her supervisor, especially about problem areas is also difficult. In these situations she worries that she will stumble on her words or that her mind will go blank when people are expecting her to speak. She hates to be the centre of attention and worries that people will notice that she is blushing when her turn comes to speak. Over the years she has tried to cope with these situations by avoiding these meetings whenever possible and by saying as little as possible at meetings. Social situations with familiar people are less difficult but she finds it stressful when she is meeting new people.

What is Social Anxiety Disorder?

Social anxiety disorder or social phobia involves fear of social situations. Typically people are afraid they will be embarrassed or humiliated by showing signs of anxiety, saying or doing something which other people will react negatively to, or not knowing what to say or do. We say that a person has social anxiety disorder when the problem with social situations causes significant distress or interference with functioning. For example, many people find that their social life is greatly reduced because of social anxiety. Others find that their education or advancement in the workplace have been limited because of the difficulty with speaking in front of people. Some people with this disorder may be described as very shy while others appear to be comfortable in social situations even though they feel very anxious.

Common physical symptoms include blushing, excessive perspiration, feeling overheated, rapid heart rate, trembling or shaking, dry mouth, or losing track of conversation (feeling that your mind goes blank). People with social anxiety disorder may experience intense anxiety symptoms in social situations and anticipating difficult social interactions. *Situations which are commonly feared* include talking in a group, speaking in front of a large or small group, having a conversation (especially with an

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unfamiliar person), meeting someone new, speaking to a person in authority and dating situations. Some people experience difficulty using the telephone, eating or drinking when other people are watching, or participating in activities where there may be an audience such as sports, music or acting. Some people fear just a few types of social situations while others fear many situations and almost every social interaction is affected.

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Unhealthy coping: Some of the ways that people attempt to cope with social anxiety may make the problem worse. Often people avoid difficult situations or they do their best to say the minimum in challenging social situations. Avoidance often leads to a lack of confidence that one can cope in difficult situations. Others with social anxiety spend more time than necessary preparing for situations where they will have to speak in front of people. Alcohol produces a temporary reduction in anxiety and some people develop serious substance abuse problems due to excessive use of alcohol or marijuana to cope with anxiety in social situations.

Social anxiety disorder clearly runs in families

Social anxiety disorder is very common. Up to 4% of adults are found to have social anxiety disorder in community surveys and

probably an equal number have milder symptoms that do not meet the full criteria for a diagnosis of social anxiety disorder. Without adequate treatment, people with social anxiety disorder are at increased risk for the development of other anxiety problems, depression or alcohol problems (particularly in men).

What causes Social Anxiety Disorder?

Social anxiety disorder clearly runs in families, although it can also be found in people who do not have other family members with the same problem. In some individuals problems with excessive shyness are present from the first years of life (an anxious temperament). Others begin to experience difficulty during the teenage years when there is more development of social aware-

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ness. Social anxiety disorder is more common in people who have grown up in a stressful family situation with excessive family conflict; parental problems with anxiety, depression, or alcohol abuse or emotional, physical or sexual abuse. Some families and schools seem to be better at helping young people to develop strong social skills, while in other families (especially when one of the parents has social anxiety) there is less social contact and fewer opportunities to develop social skills. Social anxiety disorder is also influenced by stressful events close to the time where the problem develops or worsens. Common stressful events are a separation in the family, a break up of a romantic relationship, loss of a friendship, or conflict in interpersonal relationships.

Help for Social Anxiety Disorder

At one time there was little understanding of how to treat social anxiety. Fortunately in recent years, a number of treatments have been shown to be effective in helping people with social anxiety disorder. The treatments that have the strongest research support are a form of psychological treatment known as cognitive-behaviour therapy and pharmacological treatment.

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) helps people learn to cope with anxiety more effectively. The approach helps the person to understand anxiety problems, how they develop and to establish effective coping strategies. The coping strategies may include changing thinking patterns in social situations, more effective social behaviours, relaxation, and learning to gradually face feared social situations in new ways. Cognitive behaviour therapy may be provided in one-on-one treatment or in small groups. Special training is required to provide this form of treatment.

Pharmacological treatments: Certain medications have been found to be effective in treating social anxiety disorder. The medications that have been evaluated most extensively are antidepressant medications (which are also used as anti-anxiety medications), especially classes of medicine known as the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors

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(SSRIs) and serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). If a medication treatment is started and found to be helpful it is usually recommended to continue for at least one or two years. Medication treatment may be prescribed by a general or family physician or by a specialist in psychiatry.

If you are taking a herbal medicine, you should let your doctor know before starting any prescribed medicine for depression or anxiety.

Information about treatments: For more information about treatment see your family doctor or contact your provincial psychological association for the names of members who specialize in anxiety treatment.

Note: Herbal Medicines: Some people with problems with social anxiety use herbal medicines that are suggested to help for anxiety or depressed mood. Usually these medicines have been evaluated less thoroughly than other forms of medicine. If you are taking a herbal medicine, you should let your doctor know before starting any prescribed medicine for depression or anxiety.

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Resources

There are a number of excellent self-help books available on overcoming social anxiety disorder. Recent ones include:

Ten Simple Solutions to Shyness. (2004) By Martin M. Antony Ph. D. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc. This is a concise book with great ideas on overcoming social anxiety.

Triumph Over Shyness: Conquering Shyness & Social Anxiety. (2001). By Murray B. Stein, M.D. and John R. Walker, Ph.D. New York: McGraw-Hill. More detail with a step-by-step self-help program.

There are also a number of web resources on this topic. For a brief self-help program check: www.anxieties.com. For public speaking anxiety see information on the excellent program at Toastmasters Clubs: www.toastmasters.org.

Helpful Websites

ADAC/ACTA: www.anxietycanada.ca

Anxiety Disorders Association of America: www.adaa.org/

Association/Troubles Anxieux du Québec (ATAQ): www.ataq.org/

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