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Quarantine

Sitting at home with no one around and no future prospect of having to stand up and conduct a presentation at work, or interact with the local cashier at Publix, is the dream for a person living with social anxiety disorder. This just so happens to be the current reality of a person living through a global pandemic. Most people in the United States have been in a forced solitude since April, and whether we still are or not depends on whom you ask.

This quarantine has proven to affect everyone differently; some people have taken the time to go through a physical transformation and some have been suffering from lack of social interaction. There is however, a small population of people with diagnosed social anxiety, who have been effected in a very different way. The forced isolation from social interaction has impacted people who are afraid of social situations in a way that could be temporarily relieving, but could have serious issues when it comes to integrating back into society.

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According to Christina Brook and Louis Schmidt in their journal titled "Social anxiety disorder: A review of environmental risk factors", social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a "debilitating and chronic illness characterized by persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations." Social anxiety, in a both non-generalized and generalized sense is a fear of social situations, but can vary in its extremity. Those who are pre-disposed to SAD from their family, tend to have generalized SAD, which can result in an increase in diminished functions and have more severe symptoms.

Those who have researched social anxiety have classified it along with other constructs such as avoidant disorder, social phobia, shyness, self-consciousness, peer neglect and social isolation. According to Brooke and Schmidt, those with social anxiety tend to avoid important events, school, work, and tend to withdraw from academic and family functions. During this pandemic with everyone at home and no social events occurring, those with social anxiety have nothing to avoid. While this may be an initial relief, those who are trying to work on recovering from this disorder are facing major setbacks.

While some people will be excited and ready to get back into society and interact with people after quarantining for months, those with social anxiety will need some time to readjust. An article in Medical News Today discusses how avoiding social interaction has the potential to maintain social anxiety, as the main way to treat the disorder is to introduce those with SAD into social situations gradually. In this sense, the pandemic has made it impossible for people with social anxiety to work on cognitive behavioral

therapy, except for communicating with people via Zoom calls or FaceTime in order to maintain human interaction.

Without the opportunity to maintain consistent exposure to social situations, it will be hard for progress in treating social anxiety to continue. The article also mentions how spending a long period of time alone will halt the progress that social exposure contributes to social anxiety and how it challenges the thought patterns that cause fears.

While the socializing aspect during a pandemic is limited and can cause setbacks for people with social anxiety, the article in Medical News Today also mentions how the pandemic can be a source of stress in itself for people with SAD. Most people, whether they have a mental disorder or not, have been having feelings of stress during the pandemic. Some of these stresses range from worries about health, concern on the financial strain, and being isolated from society. Those with anxiety disorders can have these stresses amplified. According to a Singapore study done during the H1N1 outbreak (Tausczik), public anxiety during pandemics is significantly increased. Since people are socially distanced from their friends and family, it creates a generalized sense of anxiety.

In the article, "Social Anxiety During the Pandemic: Blessing or Curse?" Andy Rosen discusses how people with social anxiety now have more factors to be worried about when leaving the house during a pandemic. Before, it might have been a hard thought for people with social anxiety to place an order at Starbucks. Now, with factors like standing six feet apart with your mask properly on and making sure your hands are clean, it can be even harder to fathom leaving the house. Rosen encourages those with social anxiety to keep in mind that the pandemic is a learning curve for everyone, not just those with anxiety. He mentions that this unprecedented time will result in the social awkwardness of everyone, since most people are at a socializing disadvantage.

There is still a lot unknown about the future impacts the isolation from COVID-19 will make on society, but in the article "How Will COVID-19 Influence Social Anxiety," Shmuel Fischler discusses the possible effects. Fischler points out that the way we communicate with people has been changed since re-introducing social interactions. The simplest of tasks such as being in an elevator with a stranger, has become a point of stress, even for those who never had social anxiety previously. This could potentially be reassuring to those with SAD, according to Fischler. Since everyone is in the same boat of uncertainty and awkwardness, it could actually help those with social anxiety feel less alone.

People with social anxiety are encouraged to try and maintain social interaction through safe measures. This can include sending emails, voice conferencing with people, staying present on social media, and making phone calls. These exercises can help people manage their anxiety while still quarantining. Another option for people with social anxiety to maintain social interaction is to utilize online services that places like gyms or art classes are holding. As stated above, social interaction is the best way to treat social anxiety, and even though we are in a pandemic, people are evolving to the change and being social is more than possible.

Those struggling with social anxiety can reach out to the National Social Anxiety Center for help. This center has therapist who specialize in cognitive therapy for those with social anxiety. Anyone who may have developed social anxiety during the pandemic or has been living with it for a while can call (202)-656-8566 for help.

Sources

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