

Social Phobia

Social phobia is a disorder characterized by overwhelming anxiety and excessive self-consciousness in social situations. People with social phobia have a persistent, intense, and chronic fear of being scrutinized by others and of being embarrassed or humiliated by their own actions. Although it is common for many people to experience some anxiety before or during a public appearance, anxiety levels in people with social phobia can become so high that they begin to avoid social situations. While many people with social phobia recognize that the fear may be excessive or unreasonable, they are unable to overcome it. In addition, they often worry for days or weeks in advance of a dreaded situation.

Social phobia can be limited to only one type of situation (such as a fear of speaking in formal or informal situations, or eating, drinking, or writing in front of others) or, in its most severe form, may be so broad that a person experiences phobic symptoms in any social setting. Social phobia can be very debilitating - people with this illness often avoid forming or maintaining close relationships or they turn down chances to advance their careers. Some even become housebound.

Physical symptoms often accompany the intense anxiety of social phobia. People with social phobia experience symptoms that may include:

- Blushing
- Profuse sweating
- Nausea or other stomach discomfort
- Trembling
- Difficulty talking

These visible symptoms heighten their fear of disapproval in social settings and the symptoms themselves can become an additional focus of fear. Fear of symptoms can create a vicious cycle: as people with social phobia worry about experiencing the symptoms, the greater their chances of developing the symptoms.

How Common Is Social Phobia?

- At least 3.7% of the U.S. population (approximately 5.3 million Americans) has social phobia in a given year.
- Social phobia occurs in women twice as often as in men, although a higher portion of men seek help for this particular disorder.
- The disorder typically begins in childhood or early adolescence and rarely develops after age 25.
- Social phobia often runs in families and may be accompanied by depression or alcoholism

What Causes Social Phobia?

Research to define causes of social phobia is ongoing. Some investigations implicate a small structure in the brain called the amygdala in the symptoms of social phobia. The amygdala is believed to be a central site in the brain that controls fear responses.

Animal studies are adding to the evidence that suggests social phobia can be inherited. In fact, researchers supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) recently identified the site of a gene in mice that affects learned fearfulness.

One line of research is investigating a biochemical basis for the disorder. Scientists are exploring the idea that heightened sensitivity to disapproval may be physiologically or hormonally based.

Other researchers are investigating the environment's influence on the development of social phobia. People with social phobia may acquire their fear from observing the behavior and consequences of others, a process called observational learning or social modeling.

What Treatments Are Available for Social Phobia?

Research supported by NIMH and other institutions has shown that there are two effective forms of treatment available for social phobia: certain medications and a specific form of short-term psychotherapy called cognitive-behavioral therapy. Medications include selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs), and high-potency benzodiazepenes. Some people with a form of social phobia called performance phobia have been helped by beta-blockers more commonly used to control high blood pressure.

Cognitive-behavior therapy is also very useful in treating social phobia. The central component of this treatment is exposure therapy, which involves helping patients gradually become more comfortable with situations that frighten them. The exposure process often involves three stages. The first involves introducing people to the feared situation. The second level is to increase the risk for disapproval in that situation so people build confidence that they can handle rejection or criticism. The third and final stage involves teaching people techniques to cope with disapproval. In this stage, people imagine their worst fear and are encouraged to develop constructive responses to their fear and perceived disapproval.

Cognitive-behavior therapy for social phobia also includes anxiety management training - for example, teaching people techniques such as deep breathing to control their levels of anxiety. Another important aspect of treatment is called cognitive restructuring, which involves helping individuals identify their misjudgments and develop more realistic expectations of the likelihood of danger in social situations.

Supportive therapy such as group therapy or couples or family therapy to educate significant others about the disorder is also helpful. Sometimes people with social phobia also benefit from social skills training.

What Other Illnesses Co-Occur with Social Phobia?

Social phobia can cause lowered self-esteem, depression, and in extreme situations, suicide attempts. To try to reduce their anxiety and alleviate depression, people with social phobia may use alcohol or other drugs, which can lead to addiction.

Many people with social phobia may also develop other anxiety disorders. In particular, people with social phobia may become so anxious that they experience panic attacks (intense bursts of terror accompanied by physical symptoms) when in dreaded social situations. As more situational panic attacks occur, people with social phobia may take extreme measures to avoid situations in which they fear another panic attack may occur or in which help may not be immediately available.

This avoidance, similar to that in many panic disorder patients, may eventually develop into agoraphobia, an inability to go beyond known and safe surroundings because of intense fear and anxiety.

For More Information:

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.