

Social anxiety disorder

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What is social anxiety disorder?

People who have social anxiety disorder, which is also known as social phobia, suffer from severe anxiety when they take part in a range of social situations. Such situations can include attending parties and work gatherings, speaking up in a group, going to the theatre or cinema, catching public transport, eating or drinking in public, writing or signing one's name in front of someone else or using the phone or public toilets.

Social anxiety disorder is more than shyness – lots of people describe themselves as being shy without experiencing any interference with their life. However, people with social anxiety disorder worry much more than most people do about others thinking badly of them. They worry so much that it interferes with their life. They become highly anxious and worried at the thought of looking anxious, saying or doing something embarrassing or making a mistake. The anxiety is so unpleasant in these situations that they may avoid them completely.

Some people drink alcohol to get them through such situations, and sometimes this can lead to problem drinking. Social anxiety can stop people making friends, establishing intimate relationships, completing studies or getting ahead at work. It can also lead to depression and thoughts of suicide.

Social anxiety disorder affects about one person in every 50. Men and women are affected almost equally. It usually starts in the teenage years.

What causes it?

It seems that an inherited tendency to be especially sensitive and cautious is the biggest factor in developing social anxiety disorder. Anxiety often runs in the family, and other relatives may also be highly socially anxious. Experiences in childhood and parenting style may influence this tendency in a positive or negative way.

Should I get treatment?

Effective treatments are available for social anxiety disorder, and are well worthwhile if these problems are stopping you from leading life the way you'd like to.

Psychological treatment called cognitive behaviour therapy (or CBT) is effective. This requires some work on your part – learning how not to worry so much about what others think, and how to get back into doing things you've been avoiding. When CBT is effective, the results will usually continue even after the treatment finishes.

Antidepressant medications are also effective even if you're not depressed. They can take several weeks to start working, and generally work well as long as you keep taking them.

You can talk to your doctor for more information about social anxiety and treatment options for this condition.

This handout provides information for people who have social anxiety disorder.



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