

A Closer Look

Understanding Mental Illness

Anxiety Disorder

Social Phobia (Social Anxiety)

Social phobia, also called social anxiety, is a disorder characterized by overwhelming anxiety and excessive self-consciousness in everyday social situations.

What are the symptoms of Social Phobia?

People with social phobia have a persistent, intense, and chronic fear of being watched and judged by others and of being embarrassed or humiliated by their own actions. Their fear may be so severe it interferes with work, school, and other ordinary activities. While many people with social phobia recognize that their fear of being around people may be excessive or unreasonable, they are unable to overcome it. 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 or drinking in front of others — or, in its most severe form, may be so broad a person experiences symptoms almost anytime they are around other people. Social phobia can be very debilitating. It may even keep people from going to work or school on some days. Many people with this illness have a hard time making and keeping friends.

Physical symptoms often accompany the intense anxiety of social phobia and include blushing, profuse sweating, trembling, and other symptoms of anxiety, including difficulty talking and nausea or other stomach discomfort. These visible symptoms heighten the fear of disapproval 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?

About 3.7 percent of the U.S. population ages 18 to 54 - approximately 5.3 million Americans - has social phobia in any given year. Social phobia occurs in women twice as often as in men, although a higher proportion of men seek help for this disorder.

When Does Social Phobia First Occur?

The disorder typically begins in childhood or early adolescence and rarely develops after age 25. Social phobia often runs in families.

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 has shown 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 antidepressants such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs), as well as drugs known as high-potency benzodiazepenes. Some people with a form of social phobia called performance phobia have been helped by beta-blockers, which are 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 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 and depression. To try to reduce their anxiety and alleviate depression, people with social phobia may use alcohol or other drugs, which can lead to

addiction. Some people with social phobia may also have other anxiety disorders, such as panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder.