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Social Anxiety: Information for Youth



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Summary: Many people feel shy or stressed in social situations. But when you feel so anxious that it's hard to go out and take part in everyday activities, you might have social anxiety disorder (sometimes called "Social Phobia"). The good news is that there is a lot you can do to handle anxiety and to reduce it.

What is Social Anxiety Disorder?

Many people feel shy or stressed in social situations. But when you feel so anxious that it's hard to go out and take part in everyday activities, you might have social anxiety disorder (sometimes called "Social Phobia"). People with social anxiety can become very fearful about things like:

- Meeting new people;
- Going somewhere new;
- Speaking in public;
- Eating or drinking in front of others;
- Making phone calls;
- Going to school or work;
- Going shopping;
- Taking the bus.

Many people with social anxiety disorder will avoid these activities altogether, because they cause such anxiety. Avoiding can be a problem, because it can interfere with having friends, going to school, or just doing the things that every person needs to do. It can be isolating, and stop us from doing some really fun and cool things.

How Common is Social Anxiety?

Social anxiety is quite common. 1 out of 20 youth have this disorder. It tends to increase with age.

Understanding Social Anxiety

So, social anxiety is being worried about or fearful of social situations, to the point where you may start avoiding these situations. As humans, we've evolved to avoid or run from the things that scare us. This was really helpful when we lived close to animals that wanted to eat us for dinner. Our body's fear response helped us to run away by increasing our heart rate and breathing. We experience these same feelings when we're afraid today, even though our lives are rarely in danger.

How does anxiety affect me?

Anxiety affects our bodies, thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Gaining back control when we are anxious can be challenging, but it is possible. The first step is to become more aware of how anxiety affects us. Below are just a few examples of how anxiety can affect us.

Anxiety can cause your thoughts to be:

- Negative;
- Repetitive;
- Distracted;
- Narrowly focussed;
- Critical;
- Confused.

In your body, anxiety can cause:

- Racing heart;
- Rapid breathing (and hyperventilation);
- Shaking hands, shaky voice;
- Dry mouth;
- 'Butterflies' in your stomach, nausea;
- Sweating;
- Red blotches on your skin;
- Headache, stomach ache or other pain.

Anxiety can make you feel:

- Nervous;
- Sad, moody;
- Guilty;
- Humiliated;
- Panicked
- Irritable;
- Angry;
- Embarrassed.

Anxiety can cause you to:

- Eat more or less than usual;
- Avoid certain people or situations;
- Procrastinate (put things off until later);
- Self medicate with alcohol or drugs;
- Sleep more or less than usual.

What Causes Social Anxiety Disorder?

There are a few things that contribute to social anxiety disorder. The amount each 'factor' contributes is different for each person.

1. Genetics or Family: Some of us are born with a tendency to be more shy or anxious. Also, if other family members have challenges with anxiety, you are also more likely to have social anxiety disorder. This might be due to the genes your parents gave you or because of some behaviours you might have learned while growing up.

2. Life experiences: You might be more shy or fearful in social situations if you've had a really bad experience in

the past, like being bullied, teased, embarrassed or rejected. This could make you worry about this happening again. Or maybe you haven't had much of a chance to learn how to handle some social situations. If you don't feel confident in your ability to cope with a situation, you can become anxious.

How Can I Cope with my Anxious Feelings?

The good news is that there is a lot you can do to handle anxiety and to reduce it!

- **Check the facts**

Often we can become anxious because we make a false assumptions about a situation or don't know all the facts. For example, we might become anxious and think our friend hates us because he or she hasn't been able to hang out lately. We might be able to check the facts and see that our friend has been extremely busy with exams or just hasn't felt like going out. Knowing this might help reduce your anxiety.

Whenever you notice your stress level going up, check the facts. Take a step back and ask yourself "What bad or scary thing do I think is going to happen? How likely is it that it will happen?" Most of the time, it's really unlikely that your worst fear will happen. Do your best to let your worried thoughts go.

- **Opposite Action**

'Opposite action' is something you can do when you know you're avoiding something. Acting a certain way can actually help you feel differently about things-though it takes practice. If you avoid social situations because you are afraid, your anxiety will likely increase. If you face your fears and do the "opposite action" your anxiety will likely decrease as you see the situation may not be as bad as you first imagined.

- **Build Mastery**

Mastery means getting good at stuff. It's really important to have various types of success: at school, work, with friends, or in other things important to you. Building mastery allows us to feel good about ourselves and gives us a sense of control (which we may not have if we are living with social anxiety disorder).

You can start by planning activities that will help you to build a sense of accomplishment, no matter how big or small. Try to challenge yourself by trying something that is difficult yet possible. It's OK if things don't work out at first-keep trying. If things still don't work out, try something a little easier, then go back to tackle the bigger challenge.

Try:

- Learning a subject inside out;
- Practicing a sport;
- Learn to create art;
- Play an instrument.

- **Relax**

Put relaxation on your daily schedule. It helps lower tension and helps the body rest. This means doing at least one activity that is stress free and brings pleasure (like reading, sports, crafts, or music).

- **Indulge your 5 senses**

Treat all 5 of your senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. Surround yourself with wonderful sights, great sounds or music, fantastic smells, delicious food and comfort from a warm blanket, hoodie or bath.

- **Distract yourself**

Sometimes experiences can be overwhelming. When this happens, it can help to distract yourself from the situation that is making you anxious.

Try:

- ‘Fidget tools’ like stress balls, an elastic or pencil;
- Distraction games, like ‘I spy’;
- Taking a deep breath, and carefully take note of everything you see. Go over the dozens (or hundreds!) of things you notice, saying its name to yourself and its size, shape and colour. Keep taking a slow, deep breath in between each thing you name. Keep going until you notice your anxiety subside.

When to See a Professional

If your anxiety is getting in the way of things, is getting too hard to handle, or interferes with having friends or daily activities, then you might want to tell your doctor, or some other professional.

What Types of Treatment Are There for Social Anxiety?

1. Therapy or counselling

Social anxiety is often treated with Cognitive (thinking) Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This ‘talk therapy’ can be really effective. This type of counselling can help you to:

- Learn to think in more positive ways, which gradually changes the way you feel about things;
- Gradually get more comfortable in situations that are difficult for you;
- Learn and practice skills that will help you in social situations;
- • Solve problems.

2. Medication

In more severe cases of social anxiety, a combination of medication and talk therapy is often very helpful.

Medication helps reduce the impact of your anxiety and makes it easier for you to practice the skills you’re learning. Medications are typically considered when:

- Counselling or therapy alone are not helping;
- The anxiety is so severe that counselling is not possible.

3. Take care of yourself

- **Get enough sleep.** Get into a sleep routine-you need about 8-9 hours each night. Keep distracting things out of your room when you’re trying to fall asleep.
- **Eat well.** Do your best to eat lots of fruit and veggies.
- **Exercise.** You need about an hour a day of physical activity, and it’s best to exercise outside in the sun. Aerobic exercise (exercise that increases the heart rate and breathing) can have an anti-depressant effect.
- **Avoid caffeine** (or cut down as much as you can).

Authors

Reviewed by the Mental Health Information Committee at the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO). Thanks to YouthNet’s Youth Advisory Committee (YAC-CHEO) for reviewing and providing feedback to this fact sheet!

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