

SOCIAL ANXIETY FACT SHEET

What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety is a common emotion that is needed to survive and is experienced by all people. It is most commonly experienced as fear, shyness, worry or stress. Anxiety is useful as it can help us to perform to our best ability. Like most things in life, too much anxiety is not a useful thing.
- People differ in the extent and degree to which they experience anxiety and the types of situations that produce anxiety.
- When an individual experiences anxiety to such an extent that it is impacting on a person's health and happiness, and on their ability to complete everyday activities and achieve life goals, they might consider seeking help.

What is Social Anxiety?

- People who suffer what is often called social phobia or social anxiety disorder are typically highly shy. That is, they worry a great deal about what other people think about them, and often feel that people are thinking negatively or judgementally. People who are socially anxious may feel uncomfortable in any situation where they may be the focus of attention. They worry that they will act in an embarrassing or humiliating way.
- As a result of these worries, people with social anxiety often avoid social activities such as going to parties, attending meetings, giving talks, making telephone calls, being assertive and even writing, drinking or eating in front of others.
- Over time, socially anxious people can develop a restricted and unfulfilling lifestyle, including feeling lonely and isolated. A person may avoid stressful situations which often affect his or her study, career prospects or relationships. As a result, people with social anxiety often suffer from low self-esteem.

Typical situations that people with social anxiety worry about and avoid include:

- Interacting in groups
- Going to parties
- Starting and maintaining conversations
- Meeting new people/dating
- Public speaking and formal presentations
- Being watched while writing, eating, or drinking
- Using the telephone
- Expressing your opinion
- Being the centre of attention
- Being assertive with others
- Interacting with authority figures

The types of common anxiety symptoms people might experience include:

- Shaking or trembling
- Hot or cold flushes
- Blushing
- Heart going fast
- Sweating
- Mind going blank
- Tightness in chest
- Nausea or butterflies
- Shaky or soft voice
- Problems concentrating
- Urge to use the toilet
- Breathe faster

Typical thoughts people might experience:

People with social anxiety also experience negative thoughts when they are nervous. These thoughts include worry about being judged by others or fear that they are doing badly. Some examples include:

- They must think I look really silly
- I am going to blow this
- I look ridiculous
- They are going to laugh at me
- They won't think very much of me
- I won't know what to say
- Everyone can see how anxious I am
- I'll look uncomfortable or awkward
- I'll seem weird or strange
- I'll appear stupid or incompetent
- I'll look embarrassed
- I'll be boring

As a result of your fears, you may do a number of things to try to prevent something bad from happening. These may include:

- Avoiding the situation altogether
- Avoiding similar sorts of situations
- Leaving prematurely
- Focusing on yourself
- Trying not to draw attention to yourself
- Keeping quiet
- Not looking at other people

What drives social phobia?

We all have the fight or flight response which is designed to protect us from harm. When the fight or flight response is activated, adrenaline is released which produces a number of physical sensations, including rapid heart rate and breathing, sweating, shaking, tense muscles and "butterflies" in the stomach. An urge to flee the situation is often experienced.

This fight or flight response occurs whenever we judge a situation to be threatening. In social phobia this threat is a psychological one, as the fear is about not being respected, approved of, or liked. Whilst we all desire to be liked by other people, in social phobia this need for approval is exaggerated and the detection of threat too sensitive.

How common is social anxiety?

The recent national mental health survey has revealed that over 400,000 adult Australians suffer from significant social anxiety problems each year. Unfortunately, only a small number of sufferers seek help.

As for many anxiety disorders, often people with social anxiety are too embarrassed to talk to someone, or they may simply not know where to go. As a result, social anxiety can be life-long if not treated effectively and can also lead to depression and alcohol abuse. On the positive side, social anxiety can be treated, with sufferers often experiencing a significant improvement within a relatively short period of time.

Treatment for Anxiety Problems

The good news is that there are a number of very effective treatments now available for anxiety disorders. These include various medications and psychological treatments. Scientifically, the best-studied and most demonstrated techniques include medications such as tricyclic antidepressants and SSRIs and the psychological techniques often referred to as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

Source:

Macquarie University Anxiety Research Unit - <http://www.psy.mq.edu.au/MUARU/>