

# SOCIAL PHOBIA (OR SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER)

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## What is social phobia?

People who suffer from social phobia feel intense and persistent fear in one or more social or "performance" situations (e.g.: eating with a group, speaking to strangers, speaking in front of an audience, talking to authority figures, etc.). The anxiety is associated with a fear of being negatively judged, ridiculed, or humiliated. Some people also have a fear of exhibiting signs of anxiety (e.g.: blushing or trembling), behaving awkwardly, or feeling shame. Anyone can feel uncomfortable in certain situations, but social phobia is much more overwhelming and intense.

We do not yet know a great deal about the causes, but certain psychological factors are often present: low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, high standards for success, extreme self-criticism, and placing a lot of importance on the opinions of others.

Social phobia sometimes develops as the result of a trauma. Humiliating experiences or persistent rejection and social exclusion during childhood and adolescence may increase the likelihood of developing the disorder.

Some studies have also demonstrated a chemical imbalance in certain areas of the brain involving a number of neurotransmitters (norepinephrine, GABA, serotonin, and dopamine).

The disorder usually appears in childhood or adolescence, and tends to run in families. The numbers vary from study to study, but the disorder affects somewhere between 2% and 13% of the population. People who suffer from social phobia often have other disorders as well (e.g.: generalized anxiety, specific phobia, panic disorder, avoidant personality, and certain mood disorders, including depression).

## Warning signs

The first signs of social anxiety are often discomfort and unpleasant feelings in social situations like the ones mentioned above.

People who suffer from social phobia often feel a great deal of distress and have trouble functioning normally in their daily, professional, and social lives. They may also adopt avoidance behaviours in certain situations, which can significantly diminish their quality of life, and lead to isolation.

This disorder affects different people to varying degrees. Some people start by avoiding activities that they are interested in, and end up isolating themselves from others completely, which can leave them feeling extremely lonely.

## Symptoms

The most common symptoms include palpitations, blushing, trembling, sweating, digestive problems, nausea, inability to speak, mumbling, dry mouth, confusion, and panic attacks.

## Treatment

If the disorder does not take over a number of areas of their life, it is sometimes possible for people to recover on their own with time. However, psychotherapy can offer invaluable support in a number of ways. There are several different therapeutic approaches for learning how to manage anxiety: relaxation techniques, social skills training, and exercises aimed at working on anxiety-related thoughts and beliefs. People can also learn to modify their behaviour in order to face situations rather than run away from them.

Certain medications, such as benzodiazepines and antidepressants, can also be prescribed to help relieve the symptoms. Benzodiazepines can provide temporary relief, and can be used as needed when an

anxiety-causing situation arises, but antidepressants are often prescribed as a more long-term treatment, because they cause fewer dependency and addiction problems than benzodiazepines.

Self-help groups – such as those at Revivre – can help to break the isolation by bringing people who are going through similar situations together. They provide a place where you can share your feelings without fear of being judged. It can also be helpful to hear the stories of other people who have learned to live with the disorder.

## Where to go for help

If you think you have social phobia and you want to learn more about the available treatments, one of the first steps may be to talk to a doctor. For psychological help, you can consult a psychotherapist who is recognized by a professional association, such as a psychologist or a social worker.

## SUPPORT, INFORMATION, REFERRAL

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