

## **SOCIAL ANXIETY**

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September still seems to me like the start of the year, even though I've been out of school for decades. I remember always having mixed feelings of anticipation and anxiety, both looking forward to seeing old friends, while dreading the awkwardness of having to meet new people. Though I didn't know it then, I was suffering from a very common condition: *social anxiety*.

**Social anxiety is when you get nervous or uncomfortable in situations that involve being observed, scrutinized or judged by others**, e.g. meeting new people, or speaking in front of a group. Usually the underlying feeling is worry about being embarrassed or humiliated. It's often confused with shyness, however shy people tend to be more introverted and are uncomfortable in most situations involving interpersonal contact, whether in a group or one-on-one; whereas even people who are normally outgoing may experience social anxiety at times.

The most common scenario for experiencing social anxiety is public speaking (in fact there's an old joke about the fear of speaking in public being even greater than the fear of death – but worst of all is the fear of dying while speaking in public!) Eating, demonstrating an activity or performing a task in front of others are also typical situations that can cause social anxiety.

While almost everyone gets anxious in social situations from time to time, for some people the intensity of the anxious feelings, and/or the frequency of situations where social anxiety occurs, are so great as to interfere with functioning. **Severe social anxiety is known as *social phobia*.**

Typical physical symptoms of social anxiety are heart beating rapidly, shortness of breath, sweating, shaking, blushing, dizziness or nausea. Common thoughts or beliefs that accompany these feelings may include "if I make a mistake, people will think I'm incompetent", "if others see that I'm nervous, that would be awful", or "if I get too anxious, I'll faint."

**Avoidance is the most common behavior related to social anxiety:** people may avoid feared situations completely, or seek to escape from them as quickly as possible. While avoidance is effective in the short term, it's a temporary fix, because most people can't avoid anxiety-producing situations permanently. Also, avoidance keeps the anxiety alive - it reinforces beliefs like "I can't do this", and prevents any opportunity to learn how to survive such situations.

Another common behavior is using alcohol or drugs to calm jittery nerves. In fact, small amounts of alcohol, or prescription sedatives like Valium or Xanax, can help to relieve social anxiety. The risks of this approach are a) using too much, which may create altogether another sort of public embarrassment, and/or b) developing an alcohol or drug dependence.

A more effective and proven approach to dealing with social anxiety is to use a combination of strategies: breathing and relaxation techniques to calm the body; cognitive-behavioral therapy to change negative or self-limiting thoughts and beliefs; and medication if necessary as a back-up.

For more information on overcoming social anxiety, an excellent book is "*Ten Simple Solutions to Shyness*" by Martin Antony, PhD (available at [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com)); or contact me.

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