

Social Phobia Fact Sheet

What is social phobia?

Social phobia is a fear of social situations that involve interactions with other people. If you have social phobia you tend to worry about being judged badly by other people - being criticised, "put down" or embarrassed.

See also www.thiswayup.org.au/clinic for an online treatment course for social phobia.

How common is it?

Social phobia is equally common in men and women and is found across different cultures. Approximately 3 percent of the population suffer from social phobia.

A much larger percentage of the population describe themselves as shy. In addition, many people in the general population report fear associated with public speaking, and anxiety associated with other social situations such as meeting new people and dealing with criticism. Most of these people would not be identified as having social phobia, however, unless the fear and avoidance significantly interfered with their life.

Some people with social phobia fear only a few situations where they might be the centre of attention. Others, suffering from generalised social phobia, fear many situations.

What is Avoidant Personality Disorder?

If you have had generalised social phobia for most of your life you may think that others see you as too quiet or boring. You may avoid meeting other people and not want to risk telling others much about yourself in case they reject you. If you have these sorts of fears, you may have a more severe social phobia, called avoidant personality disorder.

About one-third of people seen at specialist anxiety clinics for treatment of social phobia have avoidant personality disorder. If you have this more severe social



phobia, it is very likely that you will have experienced episodes of depression (see complications).

Coping with severe social anxiety for most of your life may have badly affected your self esteem. You may also have become quite socially isolated. If you have spent many years avoiding social situations or speaking to certain people because of fears about what others think, you need to be aware that it will probably take longer to improve with treatment (see cognitive behaviour therapy).

What causes social phobia?

Regarding possible causes of social phobia, research suggests that both genetic and environmental factors are relevant. The origins of social phobia are multiple. In order to treat your social phobia, rather than focusing on why you have the problem, it is more useful to look at what is maintaining the problem [see cognitive behaviour therapy].

Feared situations:

Some typical social situations feared by people with social phobia include:

- Speaking in a group
- Giving a presentation or speech
- Meeting new people
- Being introduced
- Talking to someone in authority
- Being observed doing an activity
- Eating or drinking in public
- Using the telephone
- Going to a party
- Expressing your opinion
- Returning faulty goods

- Using public toilets
- Being the centre of attention
- Speaking to someone you're attracted to

Main fears:

If you have social phobia you usually worry that others will notice your anxiety because of your blushing, sweating, shaking, or difficulty getting your words out, (for example).

Other fears triggered by social situations include:

- 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

These fears tend to be triggered when just anticipating the social situation. You may also have noticed that, after the event, you often feel bad or worse when thinking about how you "performed". How you actually felt in the situation can play a big role in this "post-mortem".

Physical symptoms:

There are a number of typical physical symptoms experienced by people with social phobia. These include:

- Blushing
- Shaking or trembling
- Heart going fast
- Sweating
- Mind going blank
- Shaky or soft voice

- Problems concentrating
- Urge to use the toilet
- Breathe faster
- Dizziness
- Nausea or vomiting
- Urge to escape

Behavioural symptoms:

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

Complications

Depression

A large number of people with social phobia also suffer depression, a disorder characterised by persistent low mood, loss of pleasure, hopelessness about the future, feelings of worthlessness and a number of physical symptoms, including sleep and appetite disturbance. Sometimes people also experience thoughts of suicide. If you have been having suicidal thoughts or if you have been experiencing a number of these other symptoms you may be clinically depressed and you must see a doctor.

Alcohol problems

People with social phobia often rely on alcohol to cope in social situations. Unfortunately, alcohol use can become a problem in itself. Alcohol abuse is one of the main additional problems for people with social phobia. You may need to talk to a health professional about your alcohol use.

Benzodiazepine dependence

Benzodiazepines such as diazepam have been prescribed for social phobia and other anxiety disorders, however they are not the treatment of choice as they are highly addictive, so withdrawal symptoms are experienced when the drug is stopped. In addition, people rapidly develop tolerance to the drug, so that greater doses are required to achieve the same effect.

Contact Us

THIS WAY UP Clinic

Website: www.thiswayup.org.au/clinic

Email: thiswayupclinic@stvincents.com.au

St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, Australia