Social Anxiety Disorder

Social anxiety disorder, previously known as social phobia, is one of the most common types of anxiety experienced among individuals living in the United States. The National Institute for Mental Health estimates that 15 million (7.1%) U.S. adults have social anxiety disorder. While social anxiety disorder can lead to significant impairment in one's social, academic, or occupational functioning, therapy can help individuals develop insight and skills necessary to manage their difficulties with social anxiety disorder. Read below to learn more about social anxiety disorder and how therapy can help.

What is Social Anxiety Disorder?

Social anxiety disorder is characterized by excessive fear of social situations in which an individual may be scrutinized by others[1]. Examples of these situations include public speaking, meeting new people, having a conversation, disagreeing with others, speaking to authority figures, or being observed, like while eating or drinking in public or using a public restroom. During these situations, individuals with social anxiety disorder tend to worry about behaving in ways that will cause them to be judged by others or embarrassed. This includes worrying about acting in ways that lets others know they are experiencing anxiety, for example, blushing, trembling, sweating, stuttering, or staring. General symptoms of social anxiety include:
- Fear that others will notice that you look anxious
- Fear of physical symptoms that may cause you embarrassment, such as blushing, sweating, trembling, or having a shaky voice
- Worrying about embarrassing or humiliating yourself
- Avoiding doing things or speaking to people out of fear of embarrassment
- Avoiding situations where you might be the center of attention
- Spending time after a social situation analyzing your performance and identifying flaws in your interactions

How Does Social Anxiety Disorder Develop?

Individuals with social anxiety disorder fear being negatively evaluated by others. These fears are linked to the individual's core beliefs. *Core beliefs* are the specific thoughts individuals have about themselves. When these beliefs are negative, they tend to focus on being unlovable, helpless, or worthless[2]. Because of these beliefs, individuals with social anxiety experience social interactions with intense dread or attempt to avoid them altogether. According to Judith Beck, one of the leading scholars in the area of social anxiety, this process consists of five primary elements. First, individuals with social anxiety disorder make negative predictions about what their social interactions will be like based on their assumptions about themselves

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[1] American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596

[2] Beck, J. S. (2020). *Cognitive behavior therapy: Basics and beyond* (3rd ed.). Guilford.

and others in their social environment. This type of thinking is called *anticipatory processing* and usually causes individuals to believe they will perform poorly in social situations. Once in the social situation, socially anxious individuals become overly focused on themselves believing that if they focus enough attention on themselves, they can evaluate and alter how they perform in social situations in order to meet the high standards they have set for themselves. Unfortunately, this often has the opposite effect and instead reinforces or even exaggerates the negative view socially anxious individuals have of themselves.

Anticipatory processing and self-focused attention are the first two elements of social anxiety disorder. The third element consists of safety behaviors. *Safety behaviors* are actions individuals take to control or minimize their anxiety. Examples of safety behaviors include staying quiet in social situations, mentally rehearsing conversations, over-preparing for presentations and meetings, relying on alcohol or recreational drugs, avoiding eye contact, and constantly checking oneself for physical signs of anxiety. While these behaviors may reduce feelings of anxiety in the short-term, in the long-term they worsen social anxiety because they increase self-focused attention, prevent individuals from testing their fears, and lead to self-fulfilling prophesies. Use of safety behaviors over an extended period of time may also result in *anxiety-induced social skill deficits,* which is the fourth element of social anxiety disorder. The final element of social anxiety disorder is *post-event processing,* which is the process of reviewing what happened during an event in order to perform better in the future.

How Can CBT and Mindfulness Help With Social Anxiety Disorder?

CBT for social anxiety focuses on helping you to reframe negative beliefs about your ability to cope with perceived danger in your environment. During therapy, your therapist will teach you how to identify the thoughts and beliefs that lead to your feelings of anxiety, and how to evaluate these thoughts using techniques such as Socratic questioning. Your therapist may also help you learn additional social skills and assign exposure exercises to help you learn to tolerate distress you may experience when confronted with situations that cause you to feel anxious. These exercises may include imagining yourself in situations you typically avoid, or identifying small, incremental steps you can take to actually engage in these situations. These exercises will increase your confidence in your ability to cope with threatening outcomes and reduce your sense of uncertainty.

For additional support, your therapist may also utilize mindfulness exercises. Mindfulness exercises work because they help you shift your focus from yourself to the here and now. Examples of mindfulness exercises include deep breathing and meditation. Breathing exercises help you to be present in the here and now rather than focused on the future. They also reduce stress by making your body feel more like it does when it's already relaxed. For this reason, breathing exercises can be useful when you experience emotional extremes or have difficulty focusing on your thoughts. Similarly, meditation can also help you focus on the present moment by providing a space for you to observe and let go of your negative thinking, while embracing more positive, values-focused thoughts.