



Always Embarrassed:
Social Phobia
(Social Anxiety Disorder)

Easy To Read

National Institute of Mental Health

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES • National Institutes of Health

Social Phobia

Anxiety Disorders

People with anxiety disorders feel extremely fearful and unsure. Most people feel anxious about something for a short time now and again, but people with anxiety disorders feel this way most of the time. Their fears and worries make it hard for them to do everyday tasks. About 18% of American adults have anxiety disorders. Children also may have them.

Treatment is available for people with anxiety disorders. Researchers are also looking for new treatments that will help relieve symptoms.

This booklet is about one kind of anxiety disorder called social phobia. Some people also call it social anxiety disorder. For information about other kinds of anxiety disorders, please see the end of this booklet.



Social Phobia

Social phobia is a strong fear of being judged by others and of being embarrassed. This fear can be so strong that it gets in the way of going to work or school or doing other everyday things.

People with social phobia are afraid of doing common things in front of other people; for example, they might be afraid to sign a check in front of a cashier at the grocery store, or they might be afraid to eat or drink in front of other people. All of us have been a little bit nervous, at one time or another, about things like meeting new people or giving a speech. But people with social phobia worry about these and other things for weeks before they happen.

Most of the people who have social phobia know that they shouldn't be as afraid as they are, but they can't control their fear. Sometimes, they end up staying away from places or events where they think they might have to do something that will embarrass them. That can keep them from doing the everyday tasks of living and from enjoying times with family and friends.

Most people who have social phobia know they shouldn't be as afraid as they are, but they can't control their fear.

This is a list of common symptoms.

People with social phobia:

- **are very anxious** about being with other people.
- **are very self-conscious** in front of other people; that is, they are very worried about how they themselves will act.
- **are very afraid of being embarrassed** in front of other people.
- **are very afraid** that other people will judge them.
- **worry for days or weeks** before an event where other people will be.
- **stay away from places** where there are other people.
- **have a hard time** making friends and keeping friends.
- **may have body symptoms** when they are with other people, such as:
 - blushing,
 - heavy sweating,
 - trembling,
 - nausea, and
 - having a hard time talking.

When does social phobia start?

Social phobia usually starts during the child or teen years, usually at about age 13. A doctor can tell that a person has social phobia if the person has had symptoms for at least six months. Without treatment, social phobia can last for many years or a lifetime.

Is there help?

There is help for people with social phobia. The first step is to go to a doctor or health clinic to talk about symptoms. People who think they have social phobia may want to bring this booklet to the doctor to help them talk about the symptoms in it. The doctor will do an exam to make sure that another physical problem isn't causing the symptoms. The doctor may make a referral to a mental health specialist.

Doctors may prescribe medication to help relieve social phobia. It's important to know that some of these medicines may take a few weeks to start working. In most states only a medical doctor (a family doctor or psychiatrist) can prescribe medications.

Treatment can help people with social phobia feel less anxious and fearful.

The kinds of medicines used to treat social phobia are listed below. Some of these medicines are used to treat other problems, such as depression, but also are helpful for social phobia:

- antidepressants,
- anti-anxiety medicines, and
- beta blockers.

Doctors also may ask people with social phobia to go to therapy with a licensed social worker, psychologist, or psychiatrist. This treatment can help people with social phobia feel less anxious and fearful.

There is no cure for social phobia yet, but treatments can give relief to people who have it and help them live a more normal life. If you know someone with signs of social phobia, talk to him or her about seeing a doctor. Offer to go along for support. **To find out more about social phobia, call 1-866-615-NIMH (1-866-615-6464) to have free information mailed to you.**

Who pays for treatment?

Most insurance plans cover treatment for anxiety disorders. People who are going to have treatment should check with their own insurance companies to find out about coverage. For people who don't have insurance, local city or county governments may offer treatment at a clinic or health center, where the cost is based on income. Medicaid plans also may pay for social phobia treatment.

Why do people get social phobia?

Social phobia sometimes runs in families, but no one knows for sure why some people have it, while others don't. When chemicals in the brain are not at a certain level it can cause a person to have social phobia. That is why medications often help with the symptoms because they help the brain chemicals stay at the correct levels.

To improve treatment, scientists are studying how well different medicines and therapies work. In one kind of research, people with social phobia choose to take part in a clinical trial to help doctors find out what treatments work best for most people, or what works best for different symptoms. Usually, the treatment is free. Scientists are learning more about how the brain works so that they can discover new treatments.



Personal story

“In school I was always afraid of being called on, even when I knew the answers. When I got a job, I hated to meet with my boss. I couldn’t eat lunch with my co-workers. I worried about being stared at or judged, and worried that I would make a fool of myself. My heart would pound, and I would start to sweat when I thought about meetings. The feelings got worse as

the time of the event got closer. Sometimes I couldn’t sleep or eat for days before a staff meeting.”

“I’m taking medicine and working with a counselor to cope better with my fears. I had to work hard, but I feel better. I’m glad I made that first call to my doctor.”

For More Information on Social Phobia and Other Anxiety Disorders

Visit the National Library of Medicine's
MedlinePlus www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus
En Español, <http://medlineplus.gov/spanish>

For Information on Clinical Trials for Social Phobia and Other Anxiety Disorders

NIMH Clinical Trials Web page
www.nimh.nih.gov/studies/index.cfm

National Library of Medicine Clinical Trials Database
www.clinicaltrials.gov

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