



Social Anxiety in Teenagers



Source: <http://teenmentalhealth.org/learn/mental-disorders/social-anxiety-disorder/>

****If you want to watch a social anxiety video please go to the following link above and scroll to the bottom of the page to see the video****

Social Anxiety Disorder (also called Social Phobia) is when certain social or performance situations (e.g., meeting new people or giving a speech) are avoided due to substantial fear of being judged or embarrassed in front of other people. When exposed to a social situation, someone with Social Anxiety Disorder is so afraid of being negatively evaluated or judged that it significantly interferes with his or her ability to live a normal life. This can cause him or her to avoid everyday social situations, like going shopping, speaking up in class, using a public bathroom, or participating in gym class.

It is perfectly acceptable to be anxious occasionally during social situations. This type of anxiety often helps us prepare for that situation. For example: practicing a speech before giving it in class; making sure you have enough money before going out on a date; etc. However, usual, expected, and

normal social situations almost always provoke fear or anxiety in individuals with Social Anxiety Disorder. This fear or anxiety is way out of proportion to the situation. Someone with Social Anxiety Disorder often knows that his or her fears are unreasonable and that other people don't feel the same way. This can make him or her feel really alone and think that no one else can understand how he or she feels, which can lead to feelings of loneliness or sadness.

What causes Social Anxiety Disorder and who is at risk?

Up to about 4% of 15-24 year-old Canadians report having Social Anxiety Disorder. Social Anxiety Disorder is slightly more common in women than in men. For 75% of people with Social Anxiety Disorder, it began when they were between 8 and 15 years old. Social Anxiety Disorder is thought to be caused by a combination of genetics, the environment, and learning (i.e., modeling parental behavior).

How can you tell if someone you know might have Social Anxiety Disorder?*

Social Anxiety Disorder, and other mental disorders, should only be diagnosed by a medical doctor, clinical psychologist, or other trained mental health provider who has spent time with the teenager and has conducted a proper mental health assessment. Diagnoses are complicated with many nuances. Please do not attempt to diagnose someone based on the symptoms you read in magazines or on the internet. If you are concerned, speak to a trained mental health professional.

Someone with Social Anxiety Disorder experiences significant, excessive, and persistent anxiety when in a social situation where he or she might be judged. The person will go to great effort to avoid the anxiety-provoking social situation and if it cannot be avoided, he or she will experience intense fear or anxiety. This fear significantly interferes with the person's ability to live his or her life and is way out of proportion to the actual concern/event.

Someone with Social Anxiety Disorder is mostly worried that he or she will do something that will result in embarrassment and/or rejection. This can be something that the person actually does or even just that he or she might show symptoms of anxiety (e.g., blushing, trembling, sweating, stumbling over one's words, or staring). These feelings can be less intense if experienced around a trusted individual.

For a diagnosis of Social Anxiety Disorder, this fear must last for at least 6 months and not be caused by a substance (e.g., drug, alcohol, medication) or another medical condition.

*In accordance with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition

Remember, you cannot diagnose someone with Social Anxiety Disorder without a proper mental health assessment conducted by a properly trained mental health provider.

What can you do if you're concerned that someone you know might have Social Anxiety Disorder?

Encourage the person to seek help (or take him or her to a trained health professional yourself, if appropriate). Ask the person a few questions to get a better sense of what is going on:

- Are there certain social situations that make you feel really anxious? How do you deal with those situations?
- What are you worried will happen in those social situations?
- How long has this been going on?

How is Social Anxiety Disorder different from normal worrying?

It's important not to confuse typical social anxiety or shyness with Social Anxiety Disorder. It is normal to feel anxious in a new situation – such as meeting a person for the first time or going to a new school. Everyone has anxious feelings in certain social situations. Most people, however, are able to overcome those nervous feelings and with practice, end up being able to confront those situations without anxiety. Young people with Social Anxiety Disorder are unable to overcome their feelings of anxiety, which are considerably more intense than those of teenagers without Social Anxiety Disorder.

Individuals with Social Anxiety Disorder will have anxiety that:

- Is much more intense than usually felt
- Is hard to control using usual methods such as exercise, relaxation, help from friends, etc.
- Interferes with many parts of usual life, which can significantly reduce his or her quality of life

What treatment options exist?

A variety of treatment options exist for Social Anxiety Disorder. The most common treatment for Social Anxiety Disorder is CBT. In certain cases, medication is also used. Determining which course of action is appropriate for each individual should be done with the guidance of a trained mental health professional. Options include:

- **Psychological Treatments:** Psychotherapy or “talk therapy” works by helping your brain better control your thoughts and emotions. The type of psychotherapy that has been found to be most effective for treating Social Anxiety Disorder in teenagers is called *Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)*. CBT helps people learn how to overcome their fears. It includes several components, including Cognitive Restructuring (e.g., changing the way someone thinks about his or her fears) and Exposure (e.g., gradually exposing the teenager to his or her fears while keeping him or her safe and teaching him or her effective strategies for coping with fear). Sometimes this therapy is provided in groups.
- **Medication:** Medication helps the brain correct the functioning of its emotional control circuits. A variety of medications can be prescribed to relieve symptoms of Social Anxiety Disorder. These medications are used in addition to CBT or added if the therapy has not had the expected outcome.
- **School supports:** Sometimes certain adaptations can be made by the school to assist a student in coping with and managing his or her symptoms.
- **Community supports:** Community supports can include peer support groups for teenagers, support groups for families, and other helpful resources.
- **Arousal Decreasing Techniques:** Numerous techniques for decreasing physical arousal (that means: anxious feelings, rapid heart rate, rapid breathing) can help. These include: biofeedback, mindfulness, deep muscle relaxation, meditation, etc.
- **Regular Routine:** Maintaining a healthy, regular daily routine is very important for a person with Social Anxiety Disorder. For help maintaining the kind of healthy lifestyle that should accompany professional treatment for Social Anxiety Disorder.

Help for Educators:

Teaching students with social anxiety disorder (SAD) can be challenging. School can be difficult for students with SAD. If you are a teacher of a student with SAD, knowing how to encourage and foster a good environment for learning is key. Below are some tips to help you structure your classroom in ways that will encourage the student with SAD.

How to Help Student with SAD

- Promote self-esteem by offering praise for small accomplishments and rewarding participation even if the student gives a wrong answer.
- In your interactions with the student, speak softly and calmly.
- Help the student confront feared situations with gentle encouragement.

Promote Relationships in Class

- Pair students for activities rather than allowing students to choose pairs, to prevent the student with SAD from being left out.
- Encourage friendships between students with SAD and with friendly, outgoing classmates.
- Allow the student with SAD to sit with classmates that he/she is familiar with or is friends with.
- Assign a "lifeline" peer to the student who can help answer his/her questions if called upon in a group setting.

Class Rules

- Ensure that you have a zero tolerance rule for bullying and discrimination of any kind.

- Have consequences in place for students who embarrass or humiliate other students to prevent this behavior in the classroom. For example, during speeches, any student who snickers during another student's speech would have marks deducted from his own grade.

Collaborate With Parents

- Regular meetings between parents, teachers, counselors and other school staff are important for planning classroom strategies for the student with SAD.

Special Accommodations

- Allow the student with SAD to arrive late if it makes the transition easier.
- Identify a "safe place" that the student can go to if feeling overwhelmed; have a teacher/student signal and exit strategy for these situations.
- Modify instructional methods if necessary, such as explaining an assignment one-on-one with the student.
- If a student misses a lot of school due to social anxiety, allow gradual reintroduction at a pace that the student is comfortable with.
- Have a pre-set time each week that the student can talk with an adult about how he is feeling and his fears.

<http://socialanxietydisorder.about.com/od/copingwithsad/a/teachingstudents.htm>