



GLASGOW ANXIETY & DEPRESSION
SUPPORT SERVICE

SOCIAL ANXIETY AND SOCIAL PHOBIA

What is Social Anxiety/Social Phobia?

We all experience anxious periods now and again. Like Everyday Anxiety Information Sheet highlighted, some anxiety, worry and/or nervousness is 'normal' and can even act as a motivator sometimes (e.g. deadlines at work).

However, when we begin experiencing excessive, continuous and/or distressing levels of constant anxiety worry and/or nervousness, particularly in relation to social situations, social events or being around other people, then it is possible that we may be experiencing a condition called Social Anxiety or Social Phobia. These terms are often used intermittently, so some will refer to it as 'Social Anxiety' and others may refer to this as 'Social Phobia'.

Social Anxiety/Phobia is a long-lasting and overwhelming fear of social situations. It can be very distressing and have an impact of many areas of your life. Social Anxiety/Phobia can also involve the fear of being judged and evaluated negatively by other people, leading to feelings of inadequacy; worthlessness; inferiority; incapacity; 'stupidness'; weakness; self-consciousness; embarrassment; humiliation; and depression. If the person frequently becomes (irrationally) anxious in social situations, but seems better when they are alone, then Social Anxiety/Phobia" may be the problem.

Social Anxiety/Phobia can be either general or specific. General Social Anxiety/Phobia is experienced by most people with Social Anxiety/Phobia. This is characterised by, for instance: worry; depression/low mood; sense of inferiority; anticipatory anxiety about social situations/events; indecisiveness; fear of embarrassment and humiliation; and self-blame (over their fear of social situations and seeming inability to control this). Individuals experiencing this are likely to feel distress, anxiety or discomfort in almost all social situation.

Specific Social Anxiety/Phobia, however involves anxiety, fear and distress over a specific event/situation/setting. One example might be the fear of speaking in front of groups of people only. Some other examples might include visiting supermarkets; parks; travelling on the bus/train with other people; tea-break at work.

According to the NHS, Social Anxiety/Phobia is more than shyness. It's an intense fear that doesn't go away and it affects many everyday activities, is distressing and impacts on the individual's self-confidence, relationships and work or school life (and, of course, their social life). Social Anxiety/Phobia often leads to the person avoiding or escaping situations that cause distress, nervousness, anxiety or discomfort. While this may provide some short-term relief, in reality, such escape and avoidance serves only to perpetuate and worsen the anxiety over time.

Signs and Symptoms of Social Anxiety Phobia

Some of the signs and symptoms to look out for include:

- Panic attacks (where you have an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety, usually only for a few minutes)
- Turning red/blushing/flushing of the face
- Fear or worry about meeting people in authority
- Fear or worry about being introduced to/meeting new people
- Fear of being teased, criticised, embarrassed or humiliated by other people/in public
- Avoiding or worrying lots about social activities, e.g. eating out with others; group conversations; parties/social gatherings; meetings; being in the company of unfamiliar people etc.
- Fear about being the centre of attention
- Feeling self-conscious in social situations/settings
- Worrying you have nothing interesting or worthwhile to contribute to conversations
- Fear of being seen as boring, stupid, silly or annoying by others
- Finding it difficult to do things when others are watching (although you may feel like you're being watched and judged all the time)
- Worrying about other people's judgements, views of approval of you. Fear that others will think badly or negatively of you.
- Avoiding speaking to people when you can
- Dreading everyday activities e.g. meeting strangers, starting conversations, speaking on the phone, working or shopping
- Worrying you will look and sound stupid when you talk to other people
- Staying quiet in social or group situations so not to make a fool of yourself
- Drinking alcohol/taking drugs before a social situation for courage

- Experiencing uncomfortable or distressful physical symptoms when thinking about social situations or when you are actually in them. These include: feeling sick/nausea; sweating, trembling/shaky; fast/pounding heartbeat (palpitations); muscle tension; headaches; clammy palms; blurred vision; feeling dizzy or light-headed.

Remember, we are all different and some of us will notice the physical symptoms more while others might be more bothered by the emotional or cognitive effects of Social Anxiety/Phobia.

Whatever your symptoms might be, anxiety over a long period of time can lead to many other problems and have a significant impact on our physical and mental health. Take action before it's too late and you become ill with anxiety. If you recognise elements of these signs and symptoms in yourself, it might be time to talk to someone about it. We are here to support you.