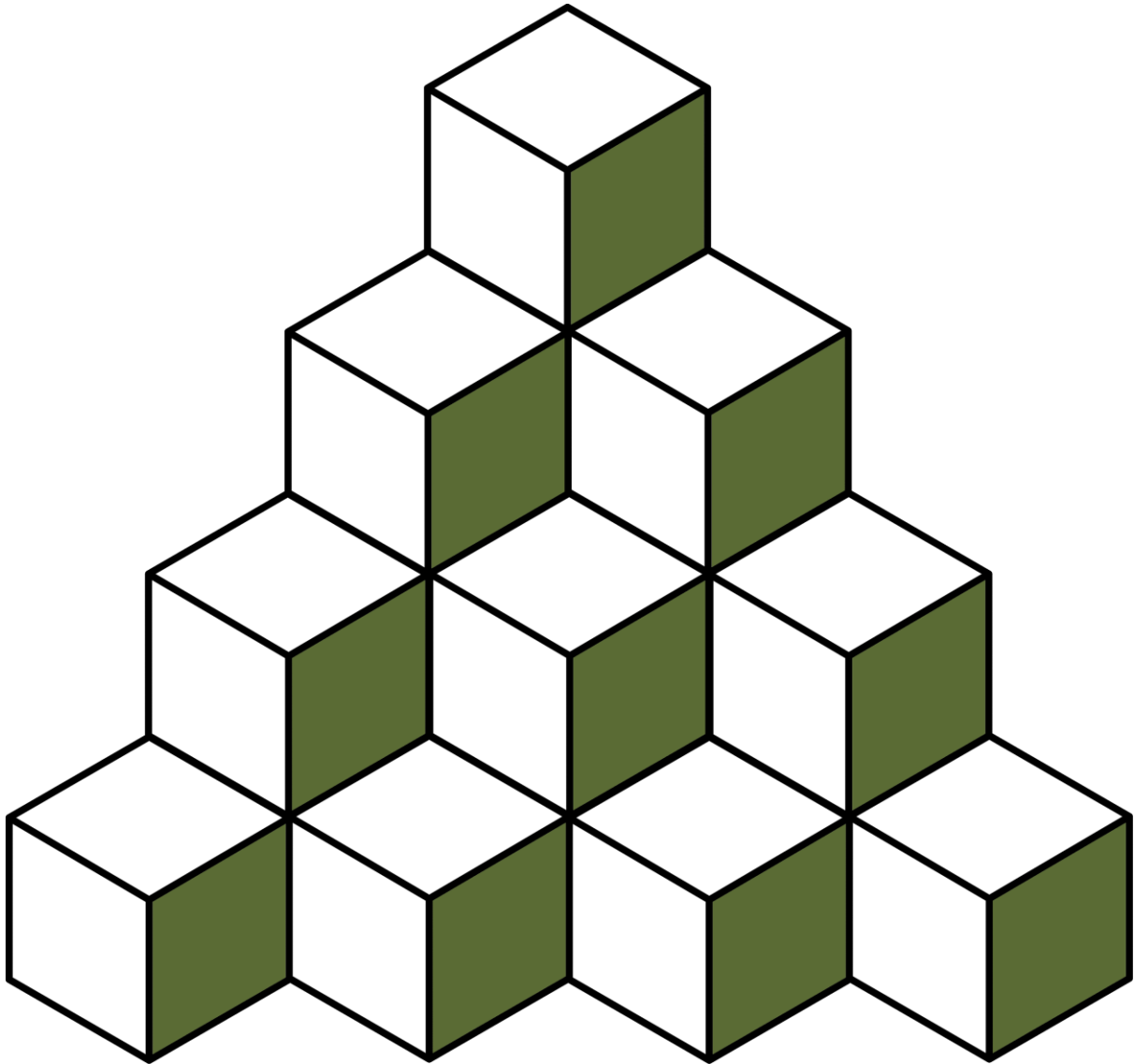


SOCIAL ANXIETY



INFORMATION SHEET

SOCIAL ANXIETY

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What is social anxiety?



Many of us worry a little before meeting new people, yet can soon relax and enjoy new situations.

However, some people become very anxious in social situations. They just can't relax and may try to avoid being with people.

Social anxiety is a persistent fear of social or performance situations in which we face unfamiliar people and the possibility of scrutiny or judgement by others.

A person with social anxiety typically fears they might do something that would be embarrassing or humiliating.

This fear can provoke anxiety, maybe even panic. Realising the fear is irrational makes little difference. Feared situations might be avoided entirely or endured with stress and anxiety.

Although most people probably feel a little anxious before meeting new people or when making a presentation or a speech, in social anxiety the anxiety or avoidance is so strong that it interferes with people's lives. A person's routine, work, social life or relationships can be affected. They may live in fear of having to face a situation in which they might be judged or fear becoming the 'centre of attention'.

For a diagnosis of social anxiety, this fear, anxiety, or avoidance must have been present for more than six months.

About social anxiety (social phobia)

The socially-anxious person may feel very anxious if they have to make 'small talk' with others or interact in a group. The anxiety becomes worse if they fear that they are going to have to speak out, if they think they're going to be singled out, or if they think they're going to be being ridiculed, criticized, embarrassed or belittled in some way. This type of anxiety is often worse when the person feels the centre of attention or under the scrutiny or gaze of others.

People with social anxiety can find it terrifying to interact with unfamiliar people, give a presentation, or even simply 'stand out' in some way.

The person with social anxiety is sometimes seen as 'quiet', 'shy' or 'introverted'. They may be concerned that other people will notice their anxiety and that they will be humiliated or embarrassed as a result. They may come to fear the common signs of anxiety; the quaking voice, the trembling hands, the blushing, and the sweating.

Some people affected by social anxiety have jobs that are beneath their capabilities because they fear job interviews, or fear being in a position where there is too much public contact, or fear being promoted to a position where they would feel more 'exposed' or judged.

If socially-anxious people isolate themselves and manage to avoid work and friends, their social circle can shrink until they may have almost no contact with other people at all. For people with social anxiety, fears concerning social situations exert an undue influence over their thoughts and behaviour.

Thinking about social situations is stressful and sufferers may spend a good deal of time thinking about how awful social situations will be - we call this 'anticipatory anxiety'.

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To escape the anxiety, some people turn to alcohol or recreational drugs to help them cope – ‘solutions’ which can become problems in their own right. So commonplace is 'binge drinking' in some cultures that people may find they can hide behind it, preferring to be appear drunk than admit to their social anxiety.

'Specific' social anxiety



A 'specific' anxiety affects people in a clearly defined area of their lives. For example, fear of public speaking (glossophobia) commonly affects people who have to perform or speak in front of others.

Salesmen, actors, musicians, teachers or union representatives may all suffer from glossophobia, either regularly or from time-to-time.

They may find they can socialise quite easily. However, when they have to talk in front of others, they may become very anxious or 'dry up'. Some people find their throat 'closes up', making speaking very difficult.

Even experienced public speakers can be affected. At its worst, it can make it almost impossible for the sufferer to speak in public. Some people experience a painful 'lump in the throat' when they're anxious that makes talking difficult or painful - this is sometimes known as 'globus hystericus' or simply 'globus'.

Other common specific social anxieties include paruresis or 'shy bladder syndrome' (an inability to urinate in public); the inability to eat in public (sometimes called 'sitophobia') and severe 'stage fright' or performance anxiety.

Social Anxiety, Agoraphobia and Panic Disorder

People with panic disorder have intermittent high levels of anxiety together with physical symptoms that may lead them to think they have a physical health problem.

Socially-anxious people have intermittent high levels of anxiety in social situations that lead them to avoid people and situations because of the anxiety it causes. They don't usually think the anxiety is caused by a medical condition.

Unlike people with social anxiety, people with panic disorder and agoraphobia are often very sociable, and will, in the right circumstances, seek out the company of other people.

The term 'agoraphobia' was coined by the German psychiatrist Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal, from the Greek for 'large public square' or 'marketplace'.

Agoraphobia and social anxiety are different in that people with agoraphobia may avoid situations because of the fear of panic attacks, not because of the fear of social interaction.

Continued avoidance can stem from social anxiety as people continue to cut themselves off from others due to the fear of social interaction, not from the fear of having a panic attack.

It is possible for a person to have the symptoms of multiple anxiety disorders, although one will often prevail. For example, a person with panic disorder may also be socially-anxious concerning different life situations, such as fear of public speaking and fear of being judged by others. It is also possible for a person with one of the anxiety disorders to develop another disorder at a different time during their life.

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It can be seen how diagnosing an anxiety disorder can be quite complex and is best left to a trained professional.

Symptoms of social anxiety

Social anxiety is probably the most common of all the anxiety disorders. We might get a dry mouth, sweat a lot, have palpitations (the feeling that the heart is beating very fast or irregularly) and want to use the toilet. Other people might be able to see some of the signs of this anxiety, such as blushing, stammering or trembling. The idea that other people can see the symptoms and might be judging us is acutely embarrassing, and some people 'implode' into shame and painful self-recrimination.

Sometimes we may breathe too fast, which can cause feelings of numbness or 'pins and needles' in our fingers and toes. This might feel quite alarming and can make our anxiety even worse.

The social anxiety triad

The experience of social anxiety can be thought of as comprising **cognitive** components - what we think and remember; **physiological** components (how we feel in the body) and a **behavioural** dimension - what we do (see figure 1).

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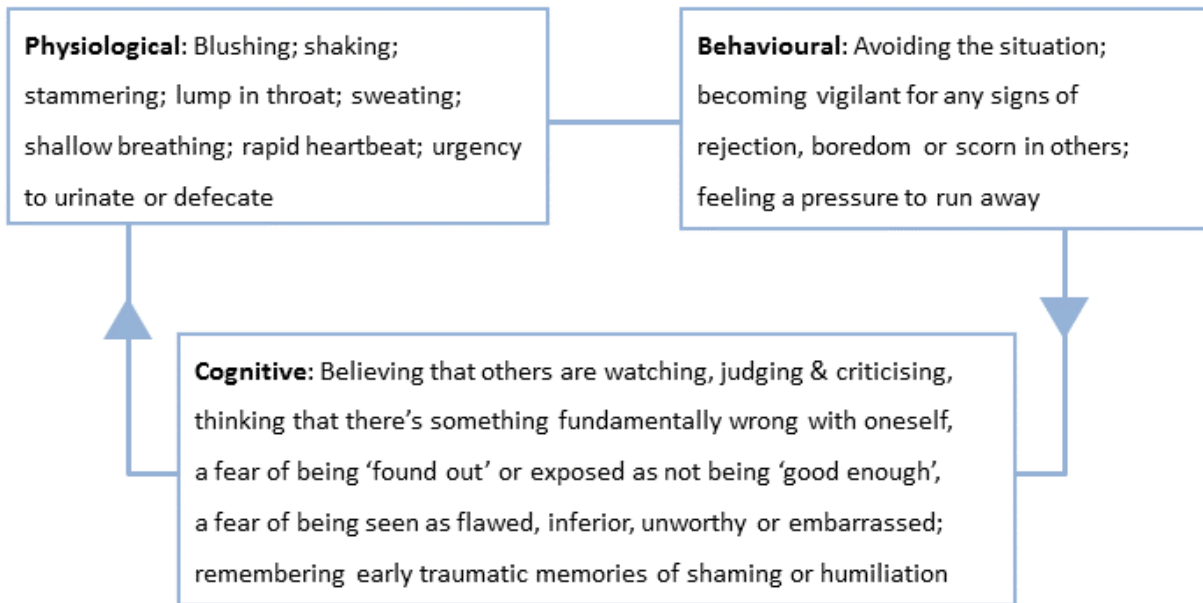


Figure 1

What causes social anxiety?

We don't know for sure, but it's likely to be a combination of things. Our genes, our life experiences, life circumstances and our outlook on life all play a part.

The roots of social anxiety can sometimes be found in the experiences we have had in our early childhood or adolescence.

What early experiences did you have that might have contributed to the way you think and feel about yourself? Take a bit of time to jot down a brief description of those experiences.

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People with social anxiety can find their mood lowered and their self-confidence being eroded if they lose contact with people and become excluded from community, social and work events. Depression can result.

A person can develop social anxiety if they are bullied or intimidated at work, are in an abusive relationship, experience prolonged stressful life events, traumatic events, or have life-altering illnesses or injuries.

Have you had any of the above experiences that might have negatively affected how you see yourself?

Social anxiety and other challenges

Social anxiety can be a problem in its own right and, for some people, can lead to or exacerbate other problems – it can increase the risk of depression, eating disorders and low self-esteem.

If you think your anxiety is caused by, or is causing other problems such as low self-esteem or depression, or if it's leading you to avoid work or social commitments, it's best to seek a professional opinion.

Recovery from social anxiety

The first appointment with your GP can feel difficult, especially if you view social anxiety as a 'weakness' (which it isn't!) so it can be helpful to write down what you want to talk about before you go. Make a note of any questions or worries you might have. Some people find it helpful to take a friend or family member along.

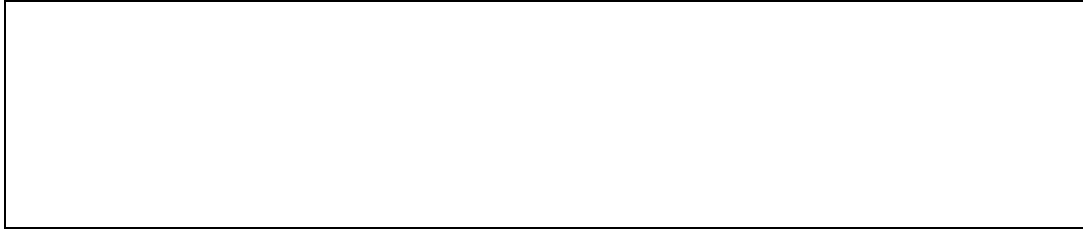
Social anxiety can make us feel alone and frightened, and it can be hard to summon the courage to get help. A quick 'phone call to your GP can get things moving and start you on the road to recovery.

Things that can help you recover

Acting opposite

Social anxiety makes us want to avoid people or situations. It can be very hard, but facing our fears and staying with people is very helpful. Remaining in work or returning to work might be very hard too, but can help us keep a sense of control. Keeping a normal daily routine is usually much better than withdrawing. We might feel like shutting ourselves away, but doing so can make things worse.

When we avoid a situation, it's harder to gain control over our fear. Ask yourself, 'if I were to act opposite to how I feel, what would I do'? Make a note of your answer below.



Talking therapies

There are many different types of talking therapy; the most effective for social anxiety is probably cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT). In CBT we learn about the ways in which our thoughts can make us more anxious. Your CBT therapist can help you learn new skills to deal with social anxiety and help you face up to things you might have avoided.

Other treatments are available for social anxiety, such as mindfulness, analytic therapies or counselling. Ask your health professional for advice, or choose a therapy that feels right and that works for you. Sometimes telephone or counselling via video link can help lead to seeing a therapist face-to-face.

Dealing with things

Putting off problems can make them mount up. Are there things in your life you're putting off dealing with? Might an advocate or some extra support help? The Citizens Advice Bureau can help with a range of issues from housing to money worries. Doing things to address our problems helps relieve the burden and allows us to feel 'in control' again.

Ask yourself, 'what small thing could I do today that would help me begin to feel better about myself?' Make a note of your answer below.

Gratitude

Gratitude is about expressing appreciation for what we have, as opposed to focussing on what we want. Studies show that when we deliberately attend to the things we are grateful for, we can increase our well-being and happiness. Gratitude is associated with increased energy, optimism, and empathy for others. The benefits build over time when we repeatedly notice the things for which we can be grateful.

Ask yourself, 'What might I be able to feel grateful for today?' Make a note of your answer below.

Repairing or changing relationships

If you're struggling with a difficult relationship or if social anxiety is causing problems in your relationship, you can contact [Relate](#), or speak to your GP about other types of relationship counselling. If there's someone whose behaviour frightens you, read our 'anger' information sheet.

Avoiding alcohol and drugs

Alcohol is a depressant – it lowers the mood. Other non-prescribed drugs can have similar effects and are best avoided. If you live in the UK and you think alcohol or drug use might be a problem, you can contact Alcoholics Anonymous on 0800 917 7650 or Narcotics Anonymous on 0300 999 1212.

There are several different ways of dealing with social phobia. These may be used on their own or together, depending on our needs.

What we know doesn't work well

- Avoiding situations
- Blaming ourselves
- Thinking the worst
- Trying to hide the problem
- Feeling ashamed
- Focussing on our symptoms

What we know does work well

- Facing up to our fears
- Learning mindfulness and physical relaxation
- Accepting ourselves as we are
- Remembering and building on our successes
- Turning our attention outwards

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Turning attention outwards

People with social anxiety tend to concentrate on their own experiences. They tend to focus on their anxiety symptoms, e.g. shaking, sweating, blushing or stammering. We intensify what we notice, so we need to:

- Pay close attention to what is happening around us
- Really concentrate on what is being said by other people
- Don't accept all the responsibility for keeping conversations going
- Remember that other people may be feeling anxious too

Checking our thinking

There are several ways of thinking which can make the symptoms of social anxiety worse. It's often quicker and easier to change our thoughts than to change how we feel. Checking and changing our thoughts can be difficult but helps us feel better in the long run. Persistence and practice are important.

Am I mind-reading? People with social anxiety can assume other people are judging them. We might assume other people think we're boring, weak, stupid, ugly, unworthy or incompetent. Instead of finding out what the other person really thinks, we might 'project' our own negative views of ourselves onto other people, assuming they have a low opinion of us.

Am I fortune-telling? It's easy to forget about our successes and achievements and instead predict that something will turn out badly: 'It will be awful, I won't know what to say, I'll go red, sweat and stammer, I'll wish the ground would swallow me up'. Far from protecting ourselves from anything bad happening, we simply make ourselves more anxious.

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Am I personalising? A form of grandiose thinking, if something happens we assume it's because of us. If we're out and hear people laughing our first thought might be: 'they're laughing at me'. We immediately become alarmed or defensive and may want to run away rather than share the joke.

Am I focusing on failure? Do I 'over-notice' the bad stuff? When we're anxious we automatically notice things that we perceive as threats. This is an important survival mechanism – we need to pay some attention to the things that threaten us. However this process goes too far when we recall and dwell on the bad things to the exclusion of our victories and successes.

Self-help resources

If you're a naturally introverted or quiet person, you might find it helpful to join a self-confidence or assertiveness course at an adult education centre. Relaxation exercises may also help you feel generally less anxious - you can get details of these from G.P. surgeries or your local leisure or community centre.

Social skills training helps to make people feel more relaxed and confident in company. It does this by teaching some of the 'social skills' that we tend to take for granted, like how to start a conversation with a stranger and how to make new friends.

Graded exposure involves helping a person to relax while in the situation that they find frightening. It can be done in stages, each time making the situation a little more challenging. We need to stay in the situation that causes our anxiety until our anxiety levels have dropped by at least half to help 'desensitise' ourselves.

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Cognitive behaviour therapy we can make ourselves more anxious by the way we think about things. CBT helps people change the way they think about themselves and other people and helps support new behaviours which test out and challenge our fears.

Beta-blockers are mostly used to treat high blood pressure. In low doses they can help control the rapid heartbeat and physical shaking which can be a symptom of social anxiety - they can be taken shortly before meeting people or before speaking in public. They shouldn't be taken by people who have asthma.

Antidepressants such as SSRIs have been found to be helpful in social phobia, but can sometimes cause headaches and dizziness in the first few weeks.

Anxiolytics like diazepam (Valium) were used in the past to treat all sorts of anxiety. We now know that they're addictive and don't help much in the long term. They shouldn't usually be used to treat people with a social phobia, except perhaps for very short periods of time. Newer drugs are much less addictive and many people find them very helpful. Your G.P. can advise you.

Support online several helpful online communities support people with social anxiety, such as those at [SAUK](#) (Social Anxiety UK). They can be very supportive as a 'stepping stone' to greater social contact.

Books can help. Your GP, practice nurse or primary care mental health practitioner will be able to recommend from a range of excellent and helpful material. Voluntary services such as [Mind](#) have a number of valuable resources, look up your local Mind service on the Internet and give them a ring.

Act now!

The sooner you make progress, the sooner you'll feel better. If you've been affected by anything you've read here, contact your GP now. Don't delay in seeking help.

Speak with your GP or a health professional for extra information or to get on the road to recovery today.

Diagnosing social anxiety



These questions won't give you a diagnosis – that's something only a qualified professional can do – but they will give you an idea about your symptoms. Don't worry about the privacy of your results, they are confidential to you.

If you have read this far you probably already have a pretty good idea! Use the SPIN questionnaire to find out more.

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Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN)

Please indicate how much the following problems have bothered you during the past week. Mark only one box for each problem, and be sure to answer all items.

0 = Not at all 1 = A little bit 2 = Somewhat 3 = Very much 4 = Extremely

1	I am afraid of people in authority	<input type="radio"/>
2	I am bothered by blushing in front of people	<input type="radio"/>
3	Parties and social events scare me	<input type="radio"/>
4	I avoid talking to people I don't know	<input type="radio"/>
5	Being criticized scares me a lot	<input type="radio"/>
6	Fear of embarrassment causes me to avoid doing things or speaking to people	<input type="radio"/>
7	Sweating in front of people causes me distress	<input type="radio"/>
8	I avoid going to parties	<input type="radio"/>
9	I avoid activities in which I am the centre of attention	<input type="radio"/>
10	Talking to strangers scares me	<input type="radio"/>
11	I avoid having to give speeches	<input type="radio"/>
12	I would do anything to avoid being criticized	<input type="radio"/>
13	Heart palpitations bother me when I am around people	<input type="radio"/>
14	I am afraid of doing things when people might be watching	<input type="radio"/>

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15	Being embarrassed or looking stupid is among my worst fears	
16	I avoid speaking to anyone in authority	
17	Trembling or shaking in front of others is distressing to me	
Total score =		

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Severity	None	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Very Severe
Score	Less than 20	21 - 30	31 - 40	41 - 50	51 or more

The SPIN is a 17-item self-rating scale for social anxiety disorder (social phobia). The scale is rated over the past week and includes items assessing each of the symptom domains of social anxiety disorder (fear, avoidance, and physiologic arousal).

Privacy - please note - this form does not transmit any information about you or your assessment scores. These results are intended as a guide to your health and are presented for educational purposes only. They are not intended to be a clinical diagnosis. If you are concerned in any way about your health, please consult with a qualified health professional.

Disclaimer

This material is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. We have used all reasonable care in compiling the information but make no warranty as to its accuracy. We recommend you consult a doctor or other health care professional for the diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions, or if you are at all concerned about your health.

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Written by: SC

Written on: 08-05-15

Last updated on: 28-04-2022

Checked by: AS

Checked on: 28-04-2022

Date for review: April 2025

Flesch Reading Ease Score: 53.9

