

Social Anxiety Disorder:

More Than
Just Shyness



National Institute
of Mental Health

Are you afraid of being judged by others? Are you self-conscious in everyday social situations? Do you avoid meeting new people due to fear or anxiety? If you have been feeling this way for at least 6 months and these feelings make it hard for you to do everyday tasks—such as talking to people at work or school—you may have social anxiety disorder.

Social anxiety disorder is an intense, persistent fear of being watched and judged by others. This fear can affect work, school, and other daily activities. It can even make it hard to make and keep friends. The good news is social anxiety disorder is treatable. Learn more about the symptoms of social anxiety disorder and how to find help.

What is social anxiety disorder?

Social anxiety disorder is a common type of anxiety disorder. A person with social anxiety disorder feels symptoms of anxiety or fear in situations where they may be scrutinized, evaluated, or judged by others, such as speaking in public, meeting new people, dating, being on a job interview, answering a question in class, or having to talk to a cashier in a store. Doing everyday things, such as eating or drinking in front of others or using a public restroom, also may cause anxiety or fear due to concerns about being humiliated, judged, and rejected.

The fear that people with social anxiety disorder have in social situations is so intense that they feel it is beyond their control. For some people, this fear may get in the way of going to work, attending school, or doing everyday things. Other people may be able to accomplish these activities but experience a great deal of fear or anxiety when they do. People with social anxiety disorder may worry about engaging in social situations for weeks before they happen. Sometimes, they end up avoiding places or events that cause distress or generate feelings of embarrassment.

Some people with the disorder do not have anxiety related to social interactions but have it during performances instead. They feel symptoms of anxiety in situations such as giving a speech, competing in a sports game, or playing a musical instrument on stage.

Social anxiety disorder usually starts during late childhood and may resemble extreme shyness or avoidance of situations or social interactions. It occurs more frequently in females than in males, and this gender difference is more pronounced in adolescents and young adults. Without treatment, social anxiety disorder can last for many years, or even a lifetime.

What are the signs and symptoms of social anxiety disorder?

When having to perform in front of or be around others, people with social anxiety disorder may:

- Blush, sweat, or tremble.
- Have a rapid heart rate.
- Feel their “mind going blank,” or feel sick to their stomach.
- Have a rigid body posture, or speak with an overly soft voice.
- Find it difficult to make eye contact, be around people they don’t know, or talk to people in social situations, even when they want to.
- Feel self-consciousness or fear that people will judge them negatively.
- Avoid places where there are other people.

What causes social anxiety disorder?

Risk for social anxiety disorder may run in families, but no one knows for sure why some family members have it while others don’t. Researchers have found that several parts of the brain are involved in fear and anxiety and that genetics influences how these areas function. By studying how the brain and body interact in people with social anxiety disorder, researchers may be able to create more targeted treatments. In addition, researchers are looking at the ways stress and environmental factors play a role in the disorder.

How is social anxiety disorder treated?

If you're concerned you may have symptoms of social anxiety disorder, talk to a health care provider. After discussing your history, a health care provider may conduct a physical exam to ensure that an unrelated physical problem is not causing your symptoms. A health care provider may refer you to a mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or clinical social worker. The first step to effective treatment is to get a diagnosis, usually from a mental health professional.

Social anxiety disorder is generally treated with psychotherapy (sometimes called “talk therapy”), medication, or both. Speak with a health care provider about the best treatment for you.

Psychotherapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a research-supported type of psychotherapy, is commonly used to treat social anxiety disorder. CBT teaches you different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to situations to help you feel less anxious and fearful. CBT also can help you learn and practice social skills, which is very important for treating social anxiety disorder. CBT has been well studied and is the gold standard for psychotherapy.

Exposure therapy is a CBT method that focuses on progressively confronting the fears underlying an anxiety disorder to help you engage in activities you have been avoiding. Exposure therapy is sometimes used along with relaxation exercises. CBT delivered in a group therapy format also can offer unique benefits for social anxiety disorder.

Another treatment option for social anxiety disorder is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). ACT takes a different approach than CBT to negative thoughts and uses strategies such as mindfulness and goal setting to reduce your discomfort and anxiety. Compared to CBT, ACT is a newer form of psychotherapy treatment, so less data are available on its effectiveness. However, different therapies work for different types of people, so it can be helpful to discuss what form of therapy may be right for you with a mental health professional.

For more information on psychotherapy, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/psychotherapies.

Medication

Health care providers may prescribe medication to treat social anxiety disorder. Different types of medication can be effective in treating this disorder, including:

- Antidepressants, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)
- Beta-blockers
- Anti-anxiety medications, such as benzodiazepines

SSRI and SNRI antidepressants are commonly used to treat depression, but they also can help treat the symptoms of social anxiety disorder. They may take several weeks to start working. Antidepressants may also cause side effects, such as headaches, nausea, or difficulty sleeping. These side effects are usually not severe, especially if the dose starts off low and is increased slowly over time. Talk to your health care provider about any side effects that you may experience.

Beta-blockers can help control some of the physical symptoms of social anxiety disorder, such as rapid heart rate, sweating, and tremors. Beta-blockers are commonly the medication of choice for the “performance anxiety” type of social anxiety disorder.

Benzodiazepines, which are anti-anxiety sedative medications, are powerful and begin working right away to reduce anxious feelings. These medications can be very effective in rapidly decreasing anxiety, but some people build up a tolerance to them and need higher and higher doses to get the same effect. Some people even become dependent on them. Therefore, a health care provider may prescribe them only for brief periods of time if you need them.

Both psychotherapy and medication can take some time to work. Many people try more than one medication before finding the best one for them. A health care provider can work with you to find the best medication, dose, and duration of treatment for you. People with social anxiety disorder usually obtain the best results with a combination of medication and CBT or other psychotherapies.

For basic information about these and other mental health medications, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/medications. Visit the Food and Drug Administration’s website (www.fda.gov/drugsatfda) for the latest warnings, patient medication guides, and information on newly approved medications.

Support Groups

Many people with social anxiety find support groups helpful. In a group of people who all have social anxiety disorder, you can receive unbiased, honest feedback about how others in the group see you. This way, you can learn that your thoughts about judgment and rejection are not true or are distorted. You also can learn how others with social anxiety disorder approach and overcome the fear of social situations.

Support groups are available both in person and online. However, any advice you receive from a support group member should be used cautiously and does not replace treatment recommendations from a health care provider.

Both psychotherapy and medication can take some time to work. A healthy lifestyle also can help combat anxiety. Make sure to get enough sleep and exercise, eat a healthy diet, and turn to family and friends who you trust for support. To learn more ways to take care of your mental health, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/mymentalhealth.

How can I support myself and others with social anxiety disorder?

Educate Yourself

A good way to help yourself or a loved one who may be struggling with social anxiety disorder is to seek information. Research the warning signs, learn about treatment options, and keep up to date with current research.

Communicate

If you are experiencing social anxiety disorder symptoms, have an honest conversation about how you're feeling with someone you trust. If you think that a friend or family member may be struggling with social anxiety disorder, set aside a time to talk with them to express your concern and reassure them of your support.

Know When to Seek Help

If your anxiety, or the anxiety of a loved one, starts to cause problems in everyday life—such as avoiding social situations at school, at work, or with friends and family—it's time to seek professional help. Talk to a health care provider about your mental health.

Are there clinical trials studying social anxiety disorder?

NIMH supports a wide range of research, including clinical trials that look at new ways to prevent, detect, or treat diseases and conditions—including social anxiety disorder. Although individuals may benefit from being part of a clinical trial, participants should be aware that the primary purpose of a clinical trial is to gain new scientific knowledge so that others may be better helped in the future.

Researchers at NIMH and around the country conduct clinical trials with patients and healthy volunteers. Talk to a health care provider about clinical trials, their benefits and risks, and whether one is right for you. For more information, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/clinicaltrials.

Finding Help

Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

This online resource, provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, helps you locate mental health treatment facilities and programs. Find a facility in your state at <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>. For additional resources, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp.

Talking to a Health Care Provider About Your Mental Health

Communicating well with a health care provider can improve your care and help you both make good choices about your health. Find tips to help prepare for and get the most out of your visit at www.nimh.nih.gov/talkingtips. For additional resources, including questions to ask a provider, visit the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality website at www.ahrq.gov/questions.

If you or someone you know is in immediate distress or is thinking about hurting themselves, call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** toll-free at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You also can text the **Crisis Text Line** (HELLO to 741741) or use the Lifeline Chat on the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline website at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>.

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