Social Anxiety Disorder

SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER

What is Social Anxiety?

All types of situations in which you are amongst people are social situations. Not only situations in which you socialise for example parties, dinner with friends, but also situations such as public speaking, entertaining people, meetings, exams, going to restaurants, writing in front of others, using public toilets, dating and speaking on the telephone are a sample of the various situations referred to by the word 'social'.

"Anxiety" refers to a mental or emotional state of apprehension and fearfulness, which may range from a feeling of unease to acute panic or terror. Prolonged or intense anxiety may lead to physical symptoms such as sweating, a racing or pounding heart, blushing, trembling, nausea, or feeling dizzy. Anxiety generally occurs as a response to a feared situation and is exacerbated by negative or fearful thoughts.

Social anxiety is a fear of social situations or situations that involve social interaction or possible evaluation by other people. Many people experience anxiety, feel self-conscious and shy in certain social situations for example, when meeting new people, attending a job interview or speaking in public. However, the anxiety is usually temporary and subsides after the event has passed.

What is Social Anxiety Disorder

For people with social anxiety disorder (or social phobia), social situations bring feelings that go far beyond simple anxiety or

nervousness. The anxiety may be so extreme and disabling that it interferes with their daily life, work and/or education, family and social life. People with social anxiety disorder may often avoid feared situations or endure them with intense distress. For people with social anxiety disorder the key element is severe anxiety and worry about social interactions due to a persistent fear that people are thinking about them in a negative way, or fear of behaving in a way that may cause feelings of embarrassment or humiliation. The anxiety is experienced in situations where the person believes that he/she is being scrutinised or observed by others. For some people the fear and anxiety can lead to panic-like symptoms, and usually triggers fearful thoughts about the social situations and contributes to a person's distress and difficulty performing in such situations.

Thoughts and beliefs which are commonly associated with social anxiety disorder include – "I look out of place" – "I sound stupid" – "I don't fit in" – "I'm making a fool of myself" – "I'm inferior to other more talkative people" – "People will notice that I am blushing and look nervous".

A person with social anxiety disorder recognises that the social fears and anxiety are excessive and unreasonable, however, he/she feels unable to change or control the feelings or behaviour because of the overwhelming fear and anxiety.

Living with social anxiety disorder usually has an adverse affect on a person's self-esteem. People often experience feelings of inferiority, a hypersensitivity to criticism, negative evaluation, or rejection, and find

it difficult to be assertive. It is also common for people to fear indirect evaluation for example in test or exam situations.

For some people, social anxiety disorder may be selective - they may have an intense fear of public speaking, for example, but be comfortable in other social or performance situations. These specific social phobias involve a particular area of fear, discomfort and avoidance. Other people may experience a more generalised social anxiety and have several social phobias about a variety of social or performance situations in which they may be observed.

The Impact of Social Anxiety Disorder

Social anxiety disorder can have a significant impact on a person's life. For some people it can limit performance and choices at school and work or make it difficult to develop and maintain friendships and relationships. People may often find themselves making decisions about their life on the basis of avoiding feared situations. Many people with social anxiety disorder also develop depression and some may misuse alcohol, drugs or medication to help reduce the anxiety and cope with difficult situations.

What is it Like to Live with Social Anxiety Disorder?

Social anxiety disorder affects literally millions of people – up to 13% of the population may experience social anxiety disorder at sometime in their lives......very few people understand the agonising depth of this problem...

A man finds it difficult to walk down the street because he's self-conscious and feels that people are watching him from their windows. Worse, he may run into a person on the sidewalk and be

forced to say hello to them. He's not sure he can do that. His voice will catch, his "hello" will sound weak, and the other person will know he's frightened. More than anything else, he doesn't want anyone to know that he's afraid. He keeps his eyes safely away from anyone else's gaze and prays he can make it home without having to talk to anyone.

A woman hates to stand in line in the grocery store because she's afraid that everyone is watching her. She knows that it's not really true, but she can't shake the feeling. While she is shopping, she is conscious of the fact that people might be staring at her from the big mirrors on the inside front of the ceiling. Now, she has to talk to the person who's checking out the groceries. She tries to smile, but her voice comes out weakly. She's sure she's making a fool of herself. Her self-consciousness and her anxiety rise to the roof.

Another person sits in front of the telephone and agonises because she's afraid to pick up the receiver and make a call. She's even afraid to call an unknown person in a business office about the electric bill because she's afraid she'll be "putting someone out" and they will be upset with her. It's very hard for her to take rejection, even over the phone, even from someone she doesn't know. She's especially afraid to call people she knows because she feels that she'll be calling at the wrong time the other person will be busy and they won't want to talk with her. She feels rejected even before she makes the call. Once the call is made and over, she sits, analyses, and ruminates about what was said, what tone it was said in, and how she was perceived by the

other person....her anxiety and racing thoughts concerning the call prove to her that she "goofed" this conversation up, too, just like she always does. Sometimes she gets embarrassed just thinking about the call.

"I would freeze up every time I had to meet someone in authority...."

A man hates to go to work because a meeting is scheduled the next day. He knows that these meetings always involve co-workers talking with each other about their current projects. Just the thought of speaking in front of co-workers raises his anxiety. Sometimes he can't sleep the night before because of the anticipatory anxiety that builds up. Finally, the meeting is over. A big wave of relief spills over him as he begins to relax. But the memory of the meeting is still uppermost in his mind. He is convinced he made a fool of himself and that everyone in the room saw how afraid he was when he spoke and how stupid he acted in their presence. At next week's meeting, the boss is going to be there. Even though this meeting is seven days away, his stomach turns raw with anxiety and the fear floods over him again. He knows that in front of the boss he'll stammer, hesitate, his face will turn red, he won't remember what to say, and everyone will witness his embarrassment and humiliation.

"He has seven miserable days of anxiety ahead of him, to think about it, ruminate over it, worry about it, over-exaggerate it in his mind...over and over again..."

A student won't attend her university classes on the first day because she knows that in some classes the professor will instruct them to go around the room and introduce themselves. Just thinking about sitting there, waiting to introduce herself to a roomful of strangers who will be staring at her makes her feel nauseous. She knows she won't be able to think clearly because her anxiety will be so high, and she is sure she will leave out important details. Her voice might even quaver and she would sound scared and tentative. The anxiety is just too much to bear -- so she skips the first day of class to avoid the possibility of having to introduce herself in public.

"I'm the only one in the world who has these horrible symptoms...."

Another young man wants to go to parties and other social events -- indeed, he is very, very lonely -- but he never goes anywhere because he's very nervous about meeting new people. Too many people will be there and crowds only make things worse for him. The thought of meeting new people scares him -- will he know what to say? Will they stare at him and make him feel even more insignificant? Will they reject him outright? Even if they seem nice, they're sure to notice his frozen look and his inability to fully smile. They'll sense his discomfort and tenseness and they won't like him – there's just no way to win –

"I'm always going to be an outcast," he says. And he spends the night alone, at home, watching television again. He feels comfortable

at home. In fact, home is the only place he <u>does</u> feel comfortable. He hasn't gone anywhere in twelve years.

"It's just easier to avoid social situations."

The good news is that social anxiety is not only treatable, but the treatment is also successful. Social anxiety no longer needs to be a life-long, devastating condition.

It is these automatic "feelings" and thoughts that occur in social situations that must be met and conquered in therapy. Usually these feelings are tied to thoughts that are intertwined in a vicious cycle in the persons' mind.

Overcoming Performance Anxiety

Fear of public speaking is said to be the number one fear reported in surveys of adults, topping such fears as the fear of flying, financial ruin, sickness, and even death!

You may have heard the joke that many people would prefer to be in their own coffins rather than giving a eulogy at someone else's funeral. While this may be an exaggeration for most, there are many people who feel as though they would rather die than give a speech or presentation. These people often go to great lengths to avoid speaking in front of groups if there is any way to get out of it.

Similarly, many performers experience feelings of terror when faced with giving performances in public.

While most people feel some degree of nervous apprehension when preparing to speak up or perform in front of a group, there are many people who are filled with feelings of dread and panic when facing such a situation. For many, these symptoms arise not only in situations of formal presentations or performances, but also in other situations where the person might be the centre of attention, such as with group introductions in a class or work setting, participation at meetings, interviews, auditions, making a toast at a wedding, or doing a reading in church.

When a person experiences such a high level fear of speaking or performing in front of others, their primary worry becomes one of embarrassing him or herself in front of others. People with social phobia related to speaking or performing fear that their anxiousness will show and that they will be judged harshly by others. The characteristics of someone with this type of social phobia include:

✧ an immediate surge of intense anxiety when you learn that you will need to speak or perform in front of others;

✧ avoiding giving presentations or performances if you can get out of doing them;

✧ a lot of anxious anticipation about your presentation or performance ahead of time (known as anticipatory anxiety);

✧ worrying about embarrassing yourself in front of others and of looking like a fool if people see how anxious you are;

- ✧ symptoms of panic before or during a presentation or performance, such as heart palpitations; rapid breathing or shortness of breath; shaking or trembling; sweating; feeling dizzy, unsteady or lightheaded; feelings of nausea or abdominal distress; feelings of detachment; and feeling a loss of control over oneself; and
- ✧ a lot of inner turmoil or missed opportunities.

The fear of public speaking or performing may strongly affect an individual's professional life and possibilities for career advancement. Some people quit school, leave a job, or pass up a promotional opportunity if it calls for more public speaking or performing. Many others suffer a silent terror as they push themselves to speak or perform despite the intense fear and dread. Those in higher level positions who have this fear often delegate speaking assignments to those they manage or supervise to avoid the possibility of exposing themselves to being "found out".

Many who have this fear are accomplished and successful people, and they are often confident and outgoing. These are the people who you would never imagine suffer from this fear. Others are more timid and shy, and may suffer from more general social anxiety as well.

Many who suffer from performance anxiety consider themselves perfectionists and have exceedingly high expectations of themselves, and sometimes of others. They are often uncomfortable with the idea of exposing any flaws or vulnerability to others. They often feel that

they have to be strong and in control, and become very anxious at the thought of showing any weakness.

This fear takes a big toll on the person's self-confidence and self-esteem, as many people feel embarrassed and ashamed to have such a fear. Many people keep their fear a secret from others and some have not even shared this with their spouse, friends, or family. Many people are especially fearful that their symptoms of panic will be detected by others and they are fearful of what others will think. They often fear negative evaluation and judgment by others.

They may look at those who seem comfortable speaking or performing in public and feel badly about the level of fear and discomfort they have compared to others. They know that their terror is "irrational," but they can't seem to get control over their emotions when it comes to speaking or performing. This often leaves them feeling confused and frustrated, and they are often very angry and disappointed with themselves over it.

TAKING STEPS TO OVERCOME THIS FEAR

For those who suffer from performance anxiety, learning to improve your presentation or performance skills is generally not enough to substantially reduce the fear. While practice and preparation are helpful, they usually do not substantially reduce the high level of fear and dread for those who suffer this fear.

For this group, the approach has to go much deeper to address and revise the negative perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, images and predictions related to public speaking or performing. It is often

helpful to uncover the deeper fears related to being seen and heard by others, showing others any vulnerability, and of being seen as less than perfect. Coming to accept yourself and not feeling you have to prove yourself to others is at the root of healing from this fear.

Cognitive-behavioural methods to change your way of thinking and stop the cycle of avoidance behaviour are critical to overcome this fear. While the avoidance provides immediate relief from the discomfort associated with facing your fear, the long-term consequence is that it deepens and reinforces the cycle of fear. This further erodes confidence and trust in yourself and continues to reinforce feelings of helplessness over this problem.

Before any progress can take place, you must be willing to slowly let go of the avoidance behaviour as you learn new skills to reduce and manage your fearful feelings. As you do this, a new-found belief and trust in yourself develops. It is an incredibly empowering feeling to face your fear and master it rather than to run from it! In facing your fear, it becomes possible to overcome performance anxiety and to find a whole new level of comfort and ease in expressing yourself in front of others.

The following are some general tips for reducing stage fright:

- ✓ Take the focus off yourself and your fear and put it on your true purpose, which is to contribute something of value to your audience.

- ✓ Stop scaring yourself with thoughts about what might go wrong. Instead, focus your attention on thoughts and images that are calming and reassuring.

- ✓ Refuse to think thoughts that create self-doubt. Instead, practice "self-talk" that builds confidence and trust in yourself.

- ✓ Practice methods to calm and relax your mind and body, such as deep breathing, relaxation exercises, yoga, or meditation.

- ✓ Practice healthy lifestyle habits, such as exercising and eating healthy. Stay away from caffeine, sugar and alcohol.

- ✓ Visualise your success. Always focus on your strengths and your abilities to handle other challenging situations.

- ✓ Prepare ahead of time. Practice aloud so you hear your own voice and are confident you know your material.

- ✓ Make connections with your audience. Smile and greet people, treating the audience as friends rather than enemies.

- ✓ Stand or sit in a self-assured, confident posture. Remain warm and open and give your audience eye contact.

- ✓ Give up trying to be perfect and know that it is okay to make mistakes. Be natural. Be yourself.

Some people choose to use medication to help reduce their symptoms of performance anxiety. Other people prefer not to take medication, but instead may choose to use a herbal remedy to help

calm their nervous system. It is important to talk with your physician if you do choose to take a medication or herbal product to be sure you are choosing something that is safe and effective for you. It is advisable that you also learn skills to reduce and manage your fear and anxiety, and not resort to using medication or herbal products alone.

Social Anxiety Disorder Support Group

The Social Anxiety Support Group provides a safe and supportive environment for people to share their thoughts and experiences with others who have social anxiety disorder. The group aims to encourage and assist people with social anxiety disorder to take an active role in their recovery. It provides information and resources about social anxiety disorder, self-help and treatment options to assist people to manage and reduce the impact of social anxiety disorder in their lives. The group also facilitates and encourages social networks between group members and provides a positive outlook for recovery by the presence of members who have recovered from social anxiety disorder.

ARCVic Services:

Support & Social Groups	Information Kits & Publications
OCD & Anxiety HelpLine	Library
Newsletters	Community Education Seminars
Recovery Programs	School Education Program
Professional Education & Consultation Programs	Early Intervention
Advocacy	Research

In addition to this booklet, a comprehensive range of literature on anxiety disorders and strategies for recovery is available from ARCvic on request.

Please phone the OCD and Anxiety Helpline on (03) 9830 0533 or 1300 269 438 and a Helpline volunteer will arrange for a kit to be mailed to you.

The ARCvic library is open during office hours and includes a wide range of books which you may read in a comfortable, quiet setting. ARCvic members are also able to borrow books and DVDs from the library for up to two weeks.

Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria

ARCVic is a state-wide community mental health organisation, providing support, recovery, early intervention and educational services to people and families living with anxiety disorders. Education, training and consultation services are provided to professionals and agencies to promote wider availability of services for people with anxiety disorders. ARCVic is a charitable, non-profit organisation, funded by the Department of Human Services, and supported by membership, donations and sponsorships. ARCVic is the business and promotional name of the Obsessive Compulsive & Anxiety Disorders Foundation Victoria (OCADF Vic). The OCADF Vic was established in 1987. OCADF Vic is an incorporated association under the Associations Incorporations Act, governed by a committee of management. The Committee of Management includes people with anxiety disorders, family members, carers and professionals.

ARCVic's core functions encompass the following areas: support, self-help, recovery, skills, education, training and advocacy. Services include: telephone counselling HelpLine; support, self-help and social groups; recovery programs and workshops; family and carer support and education programs; community education; information & library services; advocacy; counselling; early intervention programs; professional education and training programs.

ARCVic's mission is to foster the emotional, mental and social well-being of people living with anxiety disorders; and to empower people with support, knowledge and skills that will build resilience and recovery, and reduce the impact of anxiety disorders on people's lives.

Disclaimers

Views expressed in personal stories do not necessarily reflect the views of the ARCVic Committee of Management. The printing of stories of people's personal experiences of anxiety disorders and recovery stories does not indicate that ARCVic endorses any treatments or coping strategies suggested. People with an anxiety disorder should not consider any information or stories in this Publication as personal advice regarding treatment. Such advice should be obtained directly from a clinician.

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