

What You Should Know About Social Anxiety Disorder

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a condition that causes overwhelming anxiety and self-consciousness in social or performance situations. It is twice as common in women as in men and usually begins during childhood or early adolescence. Social anxiety disorder is the most common anxiety disorder, and one of the most common mental disorders in the United States, affecting approximately 10 million people aged 18 to 54 every year.

Deanna Hayes suffers from SAD. Right now she is feeling extremely anxious about an important business meeting she must attend. She knows that she will be expected to mingle with the other attendees and even worse, that she will have to stand at the front of the conference table and present her department's projected income figures. Deanna is well prepared for the meeting, but that doesn't help. She has lost sleep for a week worrying about whether she'll make a mistake during her presentation. She knows that her voice will shake, that she'll forget something important, and that everyone will see how terrified and stupid she is. Her heart is racing, and now her stomach is starting to churn. Unable to cope with her fear and anxiety, Deanna picks up the phone and calls in sick.

What is SAD?

Social anxiety disorder is intense anxiety about being judged and evaluated negatively by other people in normal social or performance situations. People with SAD live with a constant fear of being embarrassed or humiliated. A child with SAD may not be able to stand in front of her classmates to present a book report. An adult may not be able to eat in front of others. Some people with SAD cannot attend any sort of social gathering. Adults with SAD usually recognize that their fear is excessive or not warranted, but they cannot control it.

What causes SAD?

No one knows exactly what causes SAD. Doctors think it may be caused by a combination of factors, both biological and environmental. For example, SAD appears to run in families; people with relatives who have SAD are more likely to have the disorder than people who do not have relatives with SAD. Researchers think that a certain part of the brain may not work properly in people with SAD. Currently, there are studies being done to see if hormones have an affect on SAD. Other researchers are looking into whether intense anxiety and fear of embarrassment or humiliation is a behavior that results from observa-

tional learning, called "social modeling," whereby a child acquires his or her fear by watching someone else's behavior and its consequences.

What are the physical symptoms of SAD?

Social anxiety disorder can cause physical symptoms, including:

- Blushing
- Racing heart
- Dry throat/mouth; difficulty swallowing
- Trembling
- Sweating
- Nausea and/or diarrhea
- Confusion
- Muscle twitches.

What are the behavioral signs of SAD?

Because people with SAD have persistent fears of being judged and found wanting by other people, they often display certain behaviors, including:

- Sensitivity to criticism and rejection
- Difficulty asserting oneself
- Fear of speaking in public or to strangers
- Fear of meeting new people
- Fear of performing certain activities, such as eating, drinking, or writing, in public.

What are the warning signs in children and adolescents?

Social anxiety disorder usually starts in childhood and adolescence. Children with SAD are often lonely, have fewer friends than other children their age, and show symptoms of depression, such as changes in sleep patterns, persistent sadness, or changes in appetite. In most cases, SAD impairs a child's

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Social Anxiety Disorder

performance in school. And when the onset occurs during adolescence, it significantly damages the development of healthy relationships with people outside of the family environment. If left untreated, SAD can increase the risk for depression and substance abuse. That is why it is very important that parents and teachers recognize the warning signs of social anxiety.

In addition to the physical symptoms just discussed, younger children with SAD may display behavioral signs such as:

- Excessive shyness
- Clinging
- Temper tantrums
- Refusing to speak.

Signs to recognize in school-age children include:

- Difficulty in reading aloud
- Avoidance of eye contact
- Mumbling or very quiet speech
- Appearing isolated from groups
- Sitting alone in the library or cafeteria
- Hanging back from the group at meetings or on class trips
- Reluctance or refusal to start conversations with peers or invite friends to his/her home
- Reluctance or refusal to call peers on the telephone for homework
- Excessive concern about negative evaluation from teachers or peers.

How is SAD treated?

There are two effective ways to treat SAD: medications and a form of psychotherapy called cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Medications.—The medications most often used for the treatment of SAD are antidepressant medications called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. Both sertraline (Zoloft) and paroxetine (Paxil) have been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration for the treatment of SAD. Other antidepressant drugs such as venlafaxine (Effexor) and drugs called monoamine oxidase inhibitors are also used to treat SAD, as

are drugs known as high-potency benzodiazepines (Xanax, Ativan). Some people who have a specific form of SAD called performance phobia have been helped by beta-blockers, which are drugs commonly used to treat high blood pressure.

All of these medications have side effects, and some can be addictive.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy.—

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy that is very useful in treating SAD. There are two aspects of CBT: cognitive and behavioral. During the cognitive aspect, a trained psychologist or psychiatrist meets regularly with the person with SAD and helps her to identify the specific negative thoughts that trigger her anxiety and make it worse. The therapist and patient then work together to counter these triggers with more optimistic thoughts. The therapist also helps the person with SAD to develop anxiety-reducing skills such as visual imagery, relaxation techniques, and controlled breathing.

The behavioral aspect of CBT involves exposure therapy, during which the person with SAD is gradually exposed—or rather exposes herself—to feared situations. This process often involves three stages:

1. Introducing the person with SAD to the feared situation
2. Increasing the risk for disapproval in that situation so the person with SAD learns that they can accept and effectively manage rejection or criticism
3. Teaching the person with SAD ways to help them cope with disapproval.

For a person like Deanna, who could not cope with her anxiety about speaking before a meeting of her peers, exposure therapy might mean first going out to dinner with informed and understanding friends, then making a minor announcement to a small group, then giving a toast at a larger celebration for a friend, and finally, delivering an address at a major professional meeting.

Another important aspect of treatment is called cognitive restructuring. This involves helping people with SAD to become more realistic about the likelihood of danger in social situations.

Supportive therapy, such as group or family therapy, is also helpful in treating SAD.

What other illnesses happen with SAD?

People with SAD may also suffer from:

- Depression
- Alcohol and drug addiction, resulting from efforts to reduce anxiety and relieve symptoms of depression
- Other anxiety disorders, such as panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Why is treatment so important?

Without treatment, SAD usually becomes progressively worse. Symptoms that were once manageable can become debilitating, keeping people with SAD from going to work or school, and making it hard for them to make and keep friends.

Fortunately, in most cases, treatment for SAD is very effective. And early treatment may aid in early recovery.

Resources

Anxiety Disorders Association of America

<http://www.adaa.org>

National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

National Women's Health Resource Center

<http://www.healthywomen.org>

Social Anxiety Institute

<http://www.socialanxietyinstitute.org>

Social Phobia/Social Anxiety Association

<http://www.socialphobia.org>