

## **Social Anxiety Disorder (formerly Social Phobia)**

**Definition:** Social Anxiety Disorder is more than just about shyness and can be considerably disabling. A diagnosis requires that a person's fear or anxiety must be out of proportion, in duration and/or frequency, to the actual situation. The symptoms must be persistent, lasting six months or longer. The person must suffer significant distress or impairment which interferes with his/her ordinary routine in social settings, work, school, or during other everyday activities.

**Symptoms:** Physical symptoms of Social Anxiety Disorder may include blushing, profuse sweating, trembling, nausea, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, dizziness, headaches, and feelings of detachment and loss of self-control. People with this disorder have an intense fear of being scrutinized or being negatively evaluated by others in social situations. Some literally feel sick with fear in seemingly non-threatening situations. In children, the symptoms may include severe, prolonged crying or tantrums, becoming physically immobilized or shrinking away from other people, extreme clinging, and not being able to speak in social situations. These behaviors can be in response to people the child knows or to strangers.

**Causes:** Like many other mental health conditions, Social Anxiety Disorder likely comes from a complex interaction of environment and genes. Anxiety disorders tend to run in families but it isn't clear how much is due to genetics or learned behavior. Social Anxiety Disorder often starts in adolescence, usually centered on a fear of scrutiny from others which leads to an avoidance of social situations. Children who have been bullied, teased, rejected or ridiculed may be more prone to the disorder.

**Treatment:** Social Anxiety Disorder is treatable and the majority of people can be helped with professional care. Treatment may be complicated if they also suffer from depression or substance abuse. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is effective in treating the disorder either in an individual or group setting. The therapy seeks to change thought patterns and physical reactions to anxiety-inducing situations. Medications such as anti-depressants or anti-anxiety drugs are often used in conjunction with therapy.

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