Social Anxiety

- Do you find yourself avoiding social situations or activities?
- Are you fearful or embarrassed in social situations?

If you answered "yes" to the above two questions, you may suffered from Social Anxiety Disorder (formerly known as Social Phobia).

Social Anxiety Disorder is one of the most common anxiety disorders. Researches indicated that around 12% of adults will have Social Anxiety Disorder at some point in their lives. It is a chronic condition but treatments such as psychological counseling, medication and learning coping skills can help you gain confidence and improve your ability to interact with others.
What is Social Anxiety Disorder?
Worries about some of the public situations are common in the general population. For example, meeting new people or giving a public speech can make anyone nervous. However, people with Social Anxiety Disorder have much stronger fear and tend to:

- Be very anxious about being with other people and have a hard time talking to them, even though they wish they could.
- Be very self-conscious in front of other people and feel embarrassed.
- Be very afraid that other people will judge them.
- Worry for days or weeks before a social event, and would continue to worry even after the event.
- Stay away from places where there are other people. If they cannot avoid social situation, it is endured with intense fear or anxiety.
- Blush, sweat, or tremble around other people.
- Feel nauseous or sick to their stomach when being with other people.
- Have a hard time making friends and keeping friends. Performance at work or school may be impaired.

Typical situations that provoke anxiety in people with Social Anxiety Disorder:

- Meeting people; starting conversations
- Talking in meetings or in groups
- Talking to authority figures
- Being observed while working, eating or drinking
- Using public toilets
- Performing in public, e.g., public speaking

Social anxiety can be limited to one situation (e.g., talking to people, writing on a blackboard in front of others) or it can be so broad (e.g., generalized social anxiety) that the person experiences anxiety in almost any social situation.
Personal Story

“In any social situation, I felt fearful. I would be anxious before I even left the hall, and it would escalate as I got closer to a class, a party, or whatever. I would feel sick in my stomach - it almost felt like I had the flu. My heart would pound, my palms would get sweaty, and I would get this feeling of being removed from myself and from everybody else.”

Coping that may worsen the situation

Self-medication such as drinking of alcohol, use of substance to reduce anxiety would not help to alleviate social anxiety, but would have high risk of developing into substance use or drinking problems and cause more anxiety in the long run.

Treatment

When you are concerned that you may have Social Anxiety Disorder, seek professional help as soon as possible for further assessment and treatment. Social Anxiety Disorder is generally treated with psychological counseling, medication, or both.

Psychological Counseling

Student Counselors and clinical psychologists can provide counseling to help people with Social Anxiety problems. The most commonly used psychotherapy approach is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which is especially useful for treating Social Anxiety Disorder and is regarded as the first-line treatment for Social Anxiety Disorder. It teaches a person different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to situations that help him or her feel less anxious and fearful. It can also help people learn and practice social skills.

Medication

The most commonly prescribed medications for Social Anxiety Disorder are anti-anxiety medications and antidepressants, which could be prescribed by psychiatrists. Anti-anxiety medications may begin working right away, yet they should not be taken for long periods. Antidepressants are also helpful for social anxiety, however, they may take several weeks to start working. Some may have side effects such as headache, nausea, or difficulty sleeping. Communicate closely with your doctor when you first start taking antidepressants for possible side effects.
Self-help
You can try some self-help techniques to handle situations likely to trigger your symptoms. First, identify situations that cause the most anxiety. Choose the situations that are not too overwhelming in the beginning. Set realistic goals, begin with small steps. Gradually practice the following activities until you are less anxious:

- Making eye contact and returning greetings from others, or being the first to say hello.
- Showing an interest in others, e.g., ask about their homes, hobbies or travels.
- Prepare for conversation, e.g., read the newspaper to identify an interesting story you can talk about.
- Practice relaxation exercises. You may refer to our website on understanding emotions and stress management: http://counsel.ust.hk/emotion.html
- Focus on personal qualities you like about yourself.
- Giving someone a compliment.
- Calling a friend to make plans.
- Eating with a close relative, friend or acquaintance in a public setting.
- Asking a retail clerk to help you find an item.
- Pay attention to how often the embarrassing situations you are afraid of actually take place. You may notice that the scenarios you fear usually don’t happen.
- When embarrassing situations do happen, remind yourself that your feelings will pass, and you can handle them gradually.

Professional Help-seeking
The University provides professional counseling services for undergraduate and postgraduate students. You may check out the profiles of our Student Counselors on our webpage and make an appointment with them online. Two weeks’ advance booking is allowed. Please be reassured that all sharing and discussion during counseling sessions will be strictly confidential.

Acknowledgment: Reference from the National Institute of Mental Health & Mayo Clinic

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Meet Our Counselors