

Social Phobia (social anxiety disorder)

- An example case –
(Student is sitting in the bus, his head is bowed down. He is sweating, excited, and very worried since he thinks that everybody is looking at him and judging him to be a peculiar person....)

1) What is social phobia?

There are always more or less self-confident or socially skilled persons and we consider it as 'normal' if individuals are socially shy or even avoidant.

Social Phobia is in difference to general fears or shyness an excessive anxiety in social situations which can affect the person negatively in his routine life. It can cripple one's ability in dealing effectively in social situations fearing to receive negative criticism from others. They avoid completely certain feared situations (for example conversing on the phone) or undergo the same with severe distress. To fulfill the diagnosis of Phobia it has to be chronic, pervasive and disabling one's routine life to a certain critical level.

2) Prevalence?

According to studies approximately 13% of the population may meet the criterias of social Phobia. It is one of the most common anxiety disorders in adults and affects about 1% - 9% of children/adolescents. It occurs in females nearly twice as often as in males.

The onset is typically between 11 and 19 years of age and is rare after the age of 25. Thus it appears to be a problem that typically emerges in pre-adolescence.

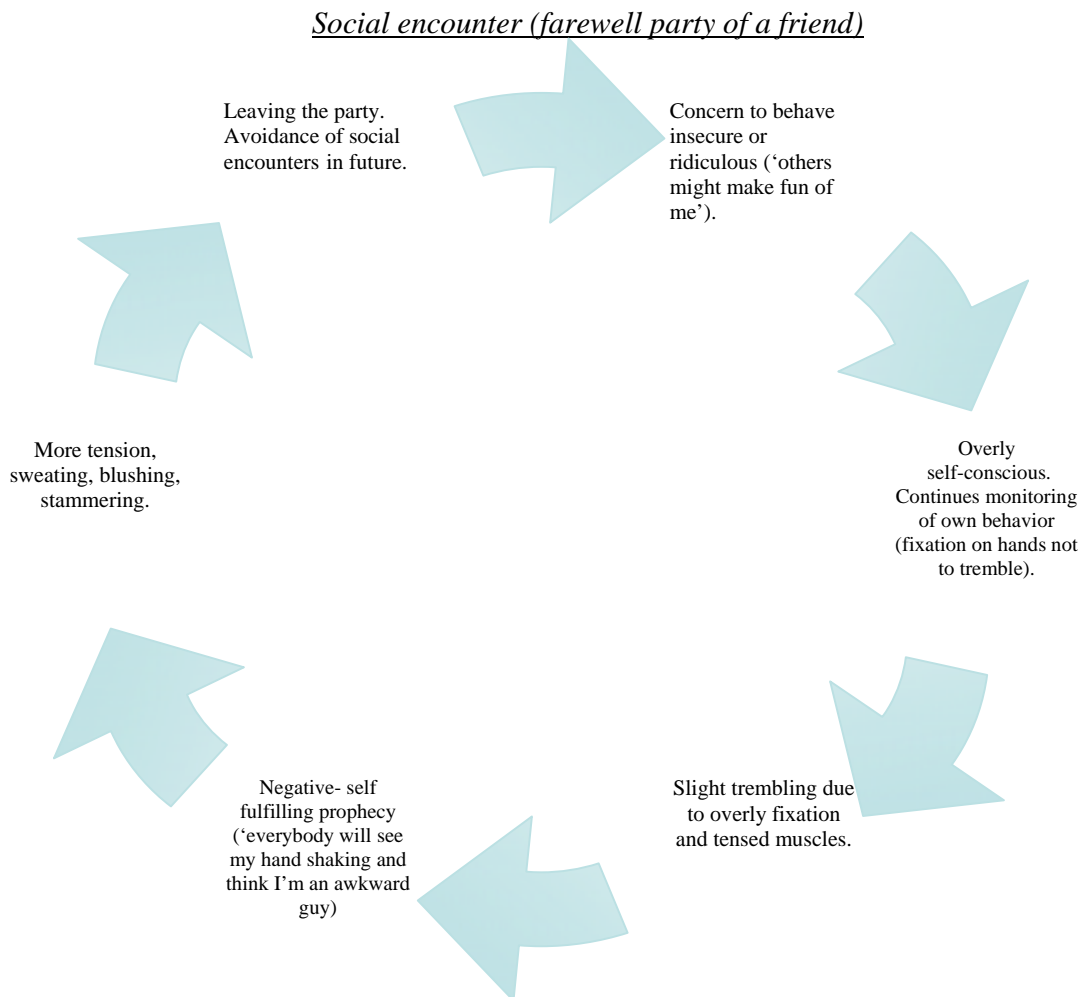
3) How does it show?

Symptoms of social anxiety disorder (social phobia):

- Fear to act in ways that are considered as embarrassing.
 - Extreme fear of being watched or judged by others as concerns over being humiliated or embarrassed.
 - Excessive self-consciousness and anxiety in everyday social situations.
 - Intense worry for days, weeks, or even months before certain upcoming social situations.
 - Fear that others will notice that he/she is nervous.
 - Avoidance of situations to a degree that limits her/his social functioning.
- The individuals suffering by social phobia might have a variety of fears/concerns which can cripple the person remarkably. Some primary examples of concerns:
- *saying something embarrassing*
 - *going blank*
 - *trembling in front of others*
 - *stammering*
 - *sweating heavily*
 - *blushing*
 - *showing other signs of anxiety that will be noticed by others.*

4) How does it develop and what impact does it have on one's life?

There are genetically and environmental factors influencing the development of social anxiety and making the individual vulnerable. One negative social experience can then trigger the development of Social Phobia. Facing social encounters -or even imagining it- can trigger a circle of effects.



- The main concern is to make a poor impression on others or to be evaluated negatively!
- Shame is the important component of their anxiety!
- As result the individuals avoid the situations as much as possible!

Before the social event:

It is very typical that the individuals have high performance standards for themselves and feel like losers when they don't meet them. As result they are highly distressed facing a performance situation.

Or they anticipate negative outcomes (as to behaving in an embarrassing manner) which increase the anxiety, distress and motivation to face the situation.

At the social event:

Overly self-conscious with fixation on the feared behavior. Continues monitoring of own behavior.

As an example: during the presentation the person may stutter a word upon which he worries that other people significantly noticed and thinks that they will consider him a terrible presenter. This cognitive thought increases the caution not to stutter again which may lead to further stuttering, sweating and will effect his performance negatively.

After the social event:

They tend to pay as well a high self attention after the activity by reviewing anything that may have possibly been abnormal or embarrassing and have the perception they performed unsatisfactorily or embarrassing. These thoughts do not just terminate soon after the encounter, but may extend for weeks or longer.

Even neutral or ambiguous conversations get often interpreted negatively. Studies confirm that socially anxious individuals stress more on negative memories and remember those better.

5) Social Phobia in children?

While adults are aware of their discomfort and fear in social situation and react deliberately with avoidance, children might just react less deliberated with a tantrum when facing a social encounter, refuse to play with friends, or complain about physical illness.

Young people with social Phobia are frequently preoccupied with negative views of themselves. They are afraid to be rejected by peers, to fail publicly when performing school tasks or just speak or act foolishly. In new environments or while puberty children and adolescents often experience temporary social awkwardness which is not to be mistaken with Social Phobia. The symptoms of Social Phobia in children generally last more than 6 month and should encompass the above mentioned criteria's.

6) Need to distinguish from similar problems?

We need to distinguish the Social Anxiety Disorder from Separation Anxiety Disorder or selective mutism.

Older children are more likely to refuse school attendance or have an intensive anxiety due to Social Phobia while younger ones usually have Separation Anxiety Disorder.

Anxiety is very common in children with selective mutism but there are frequently other preliminary problems to be focused on as to learning problems, language problems, coordination problems or bed wetting.

7) Is there a help out?

Certainly! Many people suffering from Social Phobia don't consult professionals for help as this in it self is an anxiety inducing situation for them and they rather avoid it. Thus it is important to support and encourage the individuals taking the first step to go for professional help.

8) How to help?

As first aid you can consult a Counselling Centre or a counsellor with experience in this field.

In case of severely impaired ability to function in some areas of daily life we highly recommend a referral to a psychologist/ psychotherapist or psychiatrist. There are various methods in psychotherapy such as Exposure Therapy or cognitive behavioral methods which can successfully been applied by professionals (psychologist/ psychotherapist). There are further medications which are sometimes given temporary by a psychiatrist.

What you can do:

- Try to understand the child with its fears even if it appears petty to you.
- Suggest moving forward in small steps. Support the child to build upon successful social experiences (It is better to foster for a play date with one or two preferred friends as a goal to work toward than planning to attend a large birthday party).
- Encourage the child to help develop interventions (With their consensus you can reach the necessary motivation and successful outcome as well as foster their ability to problem solving).
- Praise the child's efforts of addressing the fears (Even if the improvements appear irrelevant or small to you, it deserves to be praised and will as result encourage them for further steps).
- After completing the task you should reflect on it together and evaluate it (It is very common that children with Social Phobia have a negative outlook or remember foremost failures. A sincere and balanced feedback from your side is important to help building a positive self-assurance).

9) Could it reappear again even after a successful intervention / prevention?

There is always a risk of recurrence of social anxiety **if** the person continues avoiding social situations. He/ she will build up again new barriers of fear since there is no reassuring situation experienced anymore.

After developing skills to overcome the problem it is needed to practice further until the person feels almost comfortable with facing the situation.

Thus the best prevention is to confront social situations repeatedly and to develop a positive self- assurance.

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Mojgan Shadbash