

HEALTH AND FITNESS

The Unknown Fear

Afraid to go out for a simple drink with friends, go to the cinema or even pick up the phone? All this with no explainable reason.

What is this unknown adversary that affects nearly half of us, restricting our social lives and limiting our ability to interact confidently with friends and even family?

Mark Shields takes a closer look...

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According to research carried out in the United States, Social Anxiety Disorder is the third most common psychiatric disorder after depression

and alcoholism; however, due to its very nature it is relatively unknown in the public domain.

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANXIETY?

Social Anxiety Disorder is a fear of social situations with people and interaction with them. It can spark feelings of self-consciousness, judgment, evaluation, and inferiority.

Can you think of anyone you know or a family member that always puts you off when invited for dinner or a night out. Can you hear yourself thinking "they won't come, they never do, or, I bet she's ill on the day and will cancel? Even worse, why are we never invited around for dinner?"

It is common for sufferers to keep this condition to themselves sometimes not even knowing what is wrong. They simply suffer with terrible nerves whenever they have to commit to a social engagement even if it is going for dinner with friends they have known for years.

Everyday tasks that we take for granted such as talking on the telephone, shopping, socializing or working can create deep routed feelings of humiliation, inadequacy and embarrassment.

Physical symptoms such as shaking, blushing or sweating can be experienced and the sufferer is likely to pre-empt any public contact if at all possible. If it is out of their control to avoid they are likely to build up their anxiety surrounding the given event or meeting and once passed they would relive it over and over again.

There are two forms of Social Anxiety Disorder they are:

Performance social anxiety - these feelings only occur in a few specific situations such as public speaking, eating in public or dealing with authority figures

Generalized social anxiety - this affects most, if not all areas of the sufferer's life. The latter is the most common type, affecting around 70% of SA sufferers.

Here is an idea of the situations that spark off people with this disorder....

"I used to sit in front of the telephone and agonize because I was afraid to pick up the receiver and make a call. I was even afraid to call the customer service desk about the electric bill because I was afraid I would be "putting someone out" and they will be upset with me. I was especially afraid to call people I knew because I felt that I would be calling at the wrong time — the other person will be busy — and they won't want to talk to me. I felt rejected even before I had made the call. Once the call is

made and over, I would sit, analyze, and ruminate about what was said, what tone it was said in, and how I was perceived by the other person....my anxiety and racing thoughts concerning the call would prove to me that I had "goofed" this conversation up, too, just like I always did. Sometimes I would get embarrassed just thinking about the call".

"Every time I used to go into work I would dread hearing the voice of my boss calling out to me at my desk outside her office. As soon as I heard her call my heart would start pounding and a thousand thoughts would run through my head of how I was going to respond to her".

"I didn't want her to notice how nervous I was as I needed this job and wanted to work my way up to the next level".

"Once in front of her with the desk between us I could feel the lump in my throat and my facial muscles tighten. By the time I got back to my desk and she had finished telling what she needed I could never remember what had been asked of me. Why was it that I felt so intimidated by people of an authoritative nature?"

"I wish I didn't get so nervous at the thought of having to go out at the end of next week. What if I can't sleep the night before or I am ill on the day?"

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES?

I believe there are numerous contributors to social anxiety from neurological causes, to simply falling out of the habit of life. Bad past social experiences and work related stress can also have an impact.

What is often overlooked is that this is a very common issue and one that can affect up to half of us at some time in our lives. Just think it is only a very fortunate few that enjoy standing up at a sales conference and presenting to two hundred people. Yet most people would avoid this at all costs.

I find from our clinics common causes often involve individual comfort zones. It is common as we get older to restrict ourselves in what we do, where we go, and how we generally live our lives. Often without even realizing it, we withdraw and live and experience life in a very different way to how we once did.

For example think of the young mum who was used to work and interact daily with colleagues and friends.

A year later she is a mother and housewife. What would have once seemed routine now appears almost impossible. Calling out a washing machine repair man, or going to nursery school function takes on a whole new meaning and challenge.

It is the same for retirees who one day are working hard and challenged and the next find themselves with little to do.

Many of us suffer at some point in our lives and you will undoubtedly know someone close that may come to mind.

HOW TO WIN AGAINST THIS UNKNOWN ADVERSARY

So what help is available to sufferers? Well, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has been proven to tackle this crippling state of fear and anxiety and it can work within a few sessions as well.

This type of therapy splits the issue into three:

- What's happened?
- How Do We Feel About It?
- What Do We Do About It?

With CBT we accept we can't change what's happened, and subsequently our thought patterns directly influence our feelings. What we think and focus on today, determines how we feel tomorrow. Therefore we focus in on helping the sufferer change their thoughts which in turn will change how they feel.

In addition a gradual exposure to the fast lane again taking things one step at a time helps sufferers regain lost confidence and overcome their fears. Setting and monitoring achievable but equally challenging goals is also a sensible strategy in overcoming social anxiety.

It is also important for sufferers to research and understand their condition, and there are now many websites and books available to help the researcher understand that they are far from being alone.

In fact two books that have been renowned to help those that experience social anxiety are: *Feel The Fear and do it Anyway*, by Susan Jeffers, and *Hope and Help with your Nerves* by Claire Weeks. Charlene Moulin has had first hand experience and states "these books are excellent and have really helped me understand and overcome any issues with nerves. I think they would really help other people.

TO CONCLUDE

From my experience the most important thing to recognize is that you are not alone and many other people are in exactly the same situation.

It is recognized and accepted that an element of anxiety keeps us on our toes and appropriately challenged.

The majority of people overcome or outgrow this condition with the appropriate support and understanding from friends and family. It is a process we have simply "learned" over time and we can "un-learn" it in exactly the same way.

If you would like further details on available support contact Mark Shields direct on 01462 451473 or visit www.lifepractice.co.uk.