

# what is **social anxiety?**

Almost everyone gets a little anxious or embarrassed in front of other people now and then, though some of us are more shy than others. Sometimes, though, the anxiety can be so intense that it stops us from doing the things we enjoy, or starts interfering in our daily lives. If this sounds familiar to you, this information sheet can help to give you a better idea of what *social anxiety* is.

**Social anxiety** is used to describe feelings of anxiety and fear that occur in response to social situations. Even the most confident of people can get a little anxious before a presentation, or when they're meeting new people, but in social anxiety this distress can be so overwhelming that it feels as though it's difficult to cope. Often, that overwhelming anxiety is experienced when just thinking about the situation or remembering a previous event. You may also have heard the term "social phobia" used to describe these feelings.

Perhaps you feel highly anxious and distressed only in some specific situations, such as presenting to a group of people, or perhaps you feel this anxiety across most situations that generally involve other people. Do you feel extremely anxious in any of the following situations?

- Being the center of attention
- Meeting new people
- Talking to people in authority
- Presentations or talking in front of people
- Parties and social gatherings
- Being watched while doing something, such as signing your name, eating, or drinking

These situations commonly cause distress for people with social anxiety, though there are certainly others. Whatever situation you might feel anxious in, there are a number of symptoms that you may feel in response to social situations.

## **Thoughts**

Do you worry a lot about what other people think, or worry that you will do something embarrassing in front of others? Perhaps you really want other people to like you, or you want to do the right thing by others, and become really worried that you'll "mess it up". You might focus on other people's reactions, wondering how you look or what they are thinking about you. People with social anxiety are often very concerned that other people will think negatively of them and are especially worried about situations where they may be evaluated, criticised or embarrassed.

## **Physical**

When you are in particular social situations, or thinking about social situations, you may experience a number of physical reactions. Perhaps you are sitting at work one day and your boss asks you to sit in on a meeting with some new clients. Your anxiety increases and all of a sudden, you become flustered; you start to feel warm, your breathing becomes irregular, your heart beats faster, you feel a little lightheaded and you have to close your eyes to try and settle yourself down. You may recognise some of these symptoms in relation to your own response to social situations.

- Heart palpitations, or racing and pounding heart
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath or a choking feeling
- Chest pain or a tightness in your chest
- Nausea
- Lightheadedness, dizziness, or feeling faint
- Chills or hot flushes
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Blushing
- Dry throat and mouth

## **Avoidance**



You may have been in a few social situations where you've wanted to hide away from everyone. As a result, you may have avoided these types of situations for some time – trying to escape from as many as you can, and feeling intense distress during the situations you can't avoid.

**If you can relate to these symptoms, then social anxiety might be a problem in your life. Talk to your doctor or mental health professional about the kinds of symptoms that you get in social situations, and let them talk to you about what you can do to ease your anxiety.**