

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Is Social Anxiety Disorder?



Description

It's common to feel a bit of anxiety around other people from time to time. If the anxiety is more severe than regular shyness, and interferes with an individual's ability to live their life, they may be suffering from social anxiety: one of the most common anxiety disorders. It is thought that between 2 and 7 people out of every 100 experience social anxiety disorder every year. The good news is that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is an effective psychological treatment for social anxiety disorder.

The *What Is Social Anxiety Disorder?* information handout is designed to help clients with social anxiety understand more about their condition. It includes:

- A summary of the most common symptoms of social anxiety.
- Descriptions of what it can feel like to have social anxiety.
- A description of why social anxiety might not get better by itself, derived from the Clark & Wells (1995) cognitive model of social anxiety.
- A brief overview of evidence-based psychological treatments for social anxiety.

Instructions

Our 'What Is ...?' series is designed to support your clients:

- **Reassure and encourage optimism.** Many clients find it hugely reassuring to know there is a name for what they are experiencing, and that there are evidence-based psychological models and treatments specifically designed to help.
- **Scaffold knowledge.** The handouts are perfect during early stages of therapy to help your clients understand how their symptoms fit together and make sense.
- **Signposting.** If you're just seeing a client briefly for assessment, or you have a curious client who wants to know more, these resources can be a helpful part of guiding them to the right service.

References

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What Is Social Anxiety Disorder?

You feel self-conscious and anxious in social situations where you might be exposed to scrutiny by other people.

You worry what other people think of you.

You fear that you will behave in a way that will be judged negatively by other people.

You avoid social situations, or endure them with great difficulty.

Do you ever feel anxious when you're around other people, or if you might have to be the center of attention? Do you worry that other people will notice something about you – or how you behave – and judge you for it?

Social anxiety is the name for feeling these kinds of fears in social situations. Psychologists think that between 2 and 7 people out of every 100 experience significant social anxiety every year.

The core of social anxiety: your self-impression

We all have an impression in our minds of how we come across to other people. This is your *self-image* or *self-impression*. If you have social anxiety, you are likely to hold an impression of yourself that is very negative. As a result, you may worry that other people will think negatively of you as well. Put into words, your self-impression might sound like:

I'm shaking and I look anxious.



I'm boring and people won't like me.



People will think I'm disgusting.



Your negative self-impression can get stuck in place for a few reasons:

Self-focused attention

If you pay attention to how you think you are coming across to other people, you might focus your attention inwards – toward your own body feelings, thoughts, feelings, and judgments about your performance.

Self-consciousness is the opposite of a performance enhancer (ask any sports-person). Worse, it gives you a biased impression of how you are really coming across to people.

Unhelpful thinking

Negative automatic thoughts that people with social anxiety have in social situations include:

- Predictions: "They will think I look anxious."
- Worries: "What if I say something and nobody replies?"
- Judgements: "I'm making such a mess of this."
- Doubts: "I'll never be able to do this."

Avoidance and safety behaviors

Do you ever avoid situations that make you feel anxious? Or do you do things to control how you come across to other people?

Avoidance and safety behaviors are well-intended, but they can lead to a lot of problems:

- They prevent you from learning the truth.
- They heighten your self-focus.
- They sometimes lead to the result that you were trying to prevent.
- They can make you appear unfriendly or uninterested.

Treatment for social anxiety

The psychological treatment for social anxiety which has the strongest research support is individual (one to one) cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) specifically designed for social anxiety. This is sometimes called cognitive therapy for SAD, or CT-SAD. Medications for social anxiety disorder are typically recommended as a second-line treatment if you don't want to try CBT, or if you haven't found CBT helpful.

Psychology Tools develops and publishes evidence-based psychotherapy resources. We support mental health professionals to deliver effective therapy, whatever their theoretical orientation or level of experience.

Our digital library encompasses information handouts, worksheets, workbooks, exercises, guides, and audio skills-development resources.

Our tools are flexible enough to be used both in-session and between-session, and during all stages of assessment, formulation, and intervention. Written by highly qualified clinicians and academics, materials are available in digital and printable formats across a wide range of languages.



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