

FACT SHEET:

Social Phobia and Social Anxiety Disorder

by Dr. Michael Van Ameringen

Social phobia is a common anxiety disorder, affecting approximately 12 per cent of the North American population. People with social phobia/social anxiety disorder have persistent fear of social and performance situations. The concern in these situations is that the person will say or do something that will lead to embarrassment or negative evaluation by others. Social phobia has an early age of onset, typically during adolescence and tends to have a chronic and unremitting course. Social phobia is associated with significant impairments including problems with school and work performance, family functioning and an overall reduced quality of life.

An abnormality in processing fear and emotional information is thought to be involved in the development of anxiety disorders. People with social phobia have persistent negative thoughts, including a negative perception of themselves and their surroundings. It has been suggested that people with social phobia may perceive situations and people as excessively threatening or dangerous which can in turn lead to anxiety symptoms.

The amygdala is a brain structure that is involved in the processing of emotions, particularly fear. Brain imaging techniques such as magnetic resonance imaging, can be used to identify functional abnormalities of neural structures associated with a disease. Previous brain imaging studies of children and adults with social phobia have consistently found abnormalities in amygdala function (that is, greater activation of the amygdala in people with social phobia, compared to those without social phobia). Abnormalities of other neural structures involved in emotion processing such as the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, medial prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex and hippocampus have also been reported in patients with social phobia. Increased activity of this emotion-regulating neural system could result in misinterpretation of social cues leading to social phobia symptoms.

The development of social phobia is thought to involve a complex interaction of biological and environmental factors. Alterations in brain chemicals involved in mood and attention are thought to be involved in the development of social phobia. Research demonstrating the benefits of antidepressant medications such as selective-serotonin reuptake inhibitors, in the treatment of social phobia has suggested that levels of the brain chemical serotonin may be altered in people with the disorder. Studies have also found abnormalities of other brain chemicals such as dopamine to be associated with social phobia.

Genetic and family studies have consistently shown that social anxiety traits are heritable. Findings from family studies have found that first degree relatives and children of people with social phobia are at an increased risk of developing the disorder. The influence of genes in the development of social phobia has also been well established, however, further research is required to identify the specific genes that increase the risk of developing this disorder. Recent studies have reported that certain gene sequences are associated with anxiety traits and the development of social phobia. Although several studies have identified different genetic variations that are associated with social phobia, no single gene is responsible for the development of the disorder. It is more likely that multiple genetic variations combined with environmental factors contribute to the development of social anxiety.

Several psychological factors have also been implicated in the development of social phobia.

Personality traits such as shyness and a subtype of temperament known as behavioural inhibition have been found to be associated with social phobia. Behavioural inhibition refers to a temperament style that can be observed in early childhood, where children react aversively to unfamiliar situations, have decreased exploratory behaviour and behave in a fearful manner to novel stimuli. Behavioural inhibition is thought to be a childhood precursor for some people with social phobia. Studies that have followed behaviourally-inhibited children over the course of time have found that these children are more likely to develop social phobia in adolescence or adulthood compared to noninhibited children. Family environment is also thought to be an important factor in the development of social phobia. People with social phobia felt that their parents were overprotective and less affectionate and recalled that their parents emphasized concern over the opinion of others.

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