

# Social Anxiety: A common mental health concern in youth

Dr. Paulomi M Sudhir, Additional Professor, Dept of Clinical Psychology, NIMHANS



Social anxiety disorder is not just about shyness

Social phobia also known as social anxiety is the extreme and persistent fear of social situations or performing in situations such as an interview, or public speaking, situations in which persons fear they will be viewed or evaluated negatively or behave in ways that may be humiliating or embarrassing. This can result in intense anxiety symptoms like palpitations, sweating, blushing and tremors. There is often significant avoidance of these situations.

## Situations

- Public speaking
- Meeting new people
- Being the center of attention, speaking up in a meeting, performing on stage.
- Being watched while writing, eating, talking, etc
- Talking to a member of the opposite sex, going on a date.
- Using public toilets/restrooms
- Taking examinations
- Attending parties, social gatherings
- Talking to authority, 'important' people

## Range of symptoms

- Anticipation, or intense worry for days, weeks, or even months before an upcoming social situation.
- Extreme fear of being watched or judged by others, especially less familiar people
- Excessive self-consciousness and anxiety in everyday social situations.
- Fear that one may act in ways that will embarrass or humiliate oneself
- Fear that others will notice one's anxiety.
- Avoidance of social situations to a degree that limits activities or disrupts social, work and family life

How Common

Social phobia is the third most common mental illness after depression and substance dependence, with life time prevalence of 3%-16%. In India, community studies show that nearly 19.5% report significant social anxiety (Shah & Kataria, 2010). It is equally prevalent among men and women.

Social phobia usually begins around adolescence. It is sometimes reported after a significant life event (such as an episode of failure in an important event). Social phobia is often accompanied by depression, alcohol use, and other anxiety disorders. Yet, social phobia is not well understood or recognized.

## What helps

- Psychological interventions are available which use techniques of gradual exposure, skill enhancement, or changes in thinking patterns

## How to help

- Encourage professional help seeking
- Avoid stigmatizing
- Provide opportunities for step by step or graded exposure to anxiety provoking situations
- Appreciate efforts and small gains