

SUFFERING IN SILENCE WITH SOCIAL ANXIETY

By Terri Phillips, MFT

All of us at one time or another have experienced some anxiety prior to or during a social situation. Maybe we have to do a speech in class in front of classmates or a presentation at our job and we feel that “butterflies in the stomach” feeling. Some experience this on a daily basis and even for what most would consider very minor social contacts. When the fear of social situations becomes extreme it can cause panic attack like symptoms, an intense desire to avoid the social situation and severe internal distress thinking about the social situation. When fear reaches these proportions, it may be diagnosed as Social Anxiety or Social Phobia.

Adults and children can have these experiences and it may be even just attending a class or work function – even attending a family reunion or speaking to the teller at the bank. These unrealistic fears of pending doom can be debilitating and severely limit one’s participation in their own life experiences. In children, sometimes this anxiety is expressed as tantrums or crying. In adults the symptoms can be racing heart, sweating, facial redness, stomach distress or no visible symptoms at all. Often those with the diagnosis of Social Anxiety feel they suffer in silence. Others may not even be able to observe what is happening to them as they try to maintain even the smallest social contacts.

Web MD reports that “Social anxiety is the most common anxiety disorder and the third most common mental disorder in the U.S. after depression and alcohol dependence. An estimated 19.2 million Americans have social anxiety disorder.” With these staggering statistics, chances are you have someone in your family who suffers or certainly someone you know who suffers from this anxiety disorder.

The good news is that the outlook is good for these sufferers. The key is to get help. There are certainly some things you can do at home to make sure you are managing your stress as best as possible. Make sure you get enough rest at night as anxiety symptoms are much more difficult to control if you are tired. A healthy diet and regular eating is important as well, your brain needs to be well nourished in order to function at its best. Exercise and going outside in the sunlight is important for optimum functioning. Research demonstrates that doing things you enjoy can help alleviate stress whether that is reading book, watching a movie, hanging out with your children, or a round of golf.

Breathing exercises are easy to learn and can be used anywhere when you feel stressed. I suggest starting with 3 deep breaths – completely in and completely out-then breath regularly counting each breath to 10 then starting again as necessary.

Sometimes focus on our breathing can remove the focus from the object of our anxiety.

If these self techniques are not enough to help with Social Anxiety, it may be time for professional intervention. A mental health professional can help evaluate your symptoms and discuss with you a plan for treatment. One option with **significant** results in helping the socially anxious is that of **neurofeedback**. This is a way for your brain to learn to be calm, alert and focused. In a trained professional's office, you are connected to a computer system at the scalp area, training your brain to be in this zone. It is easy and non-invasive!

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