



# Northern Psychology Centre

## FACT SHEET

### Social Phobia

Social Phobia is a fear that other people are thinking negatively about you. A person with Social Phobia worries about saying or doing something embarrassing, making mistakes, not looking right or not behaving as they think they should. They also worry a-lot about looking anxious or nervous, for example sweating, having a trembling voice, shaking or blushing.

Difficult situations include public speaking, parties, writing or signing ones name when other people are watching, standing in line, speaking on the phone with other people around, eating or drinking in public, using public toilets and travelling on public transport.

A person with Social Phobia either puts up with the feared situation with intense anxiety and discomfort, or just avoids it. Sometimes they use alcohol or drugs to help them relax in the difficult situation.

#### WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL PHOBIA?

Social Phobia has an enormous impact on the person. Obviously self esteem, how much you respect and value yourself, is terribly affected. It's difficult to feel positively about yourself if Social Phobia is limiting what you can and can't do.

Avoiding situations such as those listed above can affect promotion at work, for example if you decide not to pursue or take a promotion because it may involve an interview, or having to present reports in a new position. Career choice can be determined based on avoiding feared situations. Performance at university may suffer if speaking up in tutorials is difficult. At times people leave university because it is just too difficult to attend tutorials or lectures. Developing friendships and intimate relationships can be impossible if you can't get out socially to meet people, or you're too nervous when in a social situation to connect with people. If you do have a close relationship there may be tension if you prefer to stay home because socialising is too difficult.

Social Phobia can feel like an overwhelming problem. It's not surprising then that 70 percent of people with Social Phobia develop depression. The feelings that come with depression, such as feeling very low, enjoying little, having little energy and motivation to do anything, compound the problems of Social Phobia. If you use alcohol, medications such as tranquillisers, or illegal drugs such as marijuana to cope, you can wind up with other problems as well.

#### HOW DOES SOCIAL PHOBIA DEVELOP?

We don't really know what causes Social Phobia. It's most likely that there's more than one factor that contributes to the development of Social Phobia. It may be a combination of a

person's innate nature, or personality, and other factors such as family relationships and early friendships. It is also likely that the precise reasons for the development of this problem vary from person to person.

#### HOW DO YOU TREAT SOCIAL PHOBIA?

The research suggests that Cognitive Behaviour Therapy or CBT is most useful to overcome Social Phobia. CBT has been around for approximately 50 years. Very simply, this type of therapy focuses on how a person's thinking (cognition) influences their feelings and behaviour. For example, if you worry and go over and over an anticipated social situation you're probably going to feel fearful about going along to the event, and may in fact decide not to go.

There are three important elements to manage Social Phobia:

- Learn to control the anxiety and panic so that symptoms don't become very distressing. This also involves learning how to tolerate anxiety symptoms and not try to hide them.
- Examine and challenge things that you're saying to yourself that aren't helping you.
- Gradually face the situations that you fear, or learn to be more relaxed in situations that at present you simply endure with great distress.

Individual work with a psychologist is helpful to learn to manage Social Phobia. Research also suggests that group work is very helpful. An obvious advantage of group work is the opportunity to meet and talk with other people who have similar difficulties. Group work is also important because it exposes you to what is a challenging situation, in a very supportive atmosphere.