

SAFEGUARDING - Social Anxiety

Social anxiety disorder, also called social phobia, is a long-lasting and overwhelming fear of social situations.

It's a common problem that usually starts during the teenage years (but can manifest itself at primary age).

For some people it gets better as they get older, although for many it does not go away on its own.

It can be very distressing and have a big impact on your life, but there are ways to help you deal with it.

Symptoms of social anxiety

Social anxiety is more than shyness. It's an intense fear that does not go away and affects everyday activities, self-confidence, relationships and work or school life.

Many people occasionally worry about social situations, but someone with social anxiety feels overly worried before, during and after them.

You may have social anxiety if you:

- dread everyday activities, such as meeting strangers, starting conversations, speaking on the phone, working or shopping
- avoid or worry a lot about social activities, such as group conversations, eating with company and parties
- always worry about doing something you think is embarrassing, such as blushing, sweating or appearing incompetent
- find it difficult to do things when others are watching – you may feel like you're being watched and judged all the time
- fear criticism, avoid eye contact or have low self-esteem
- often have symptoms such as feeling sick, sweating, trembling or a pounding heartbeat (palpitations)
- have panic attacks, where you have an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety, usually only for a few minutes

Many people with social anxiety also have other mental health issues, such as depression, generalised anxiety disorder or body dysmorphic disorder.

When to get help for social anxiety

It's a good idea to see a GP if you think you have social anxiety, especially if it's having a big impact on your life.

It's a common problem and there are treatments that can help.

Asking for help can be difficult, but a GP will be aware that many people struggle with social anxiety and will try to put you at ease.

They'll ask you about your feelings, behaviours and symptoms to find out about your anxiety in social situations.

If they think you could have social anxiety, you'll be referred to a mental health specialist to

have a full assessment and talk about treatments.

You can also refer yourself directly for psychological (talking) therapies on the NHS without seeing a GP.

Things you can try to overcome social anxiety

Self-help probably will not cure your social anxiety, but it may reduce it and you might find it a useful first step before trying other treatments.

The following tips may help:

- try to understand more about your anxiety – think about what goes through your mind and how you behave in certain social situations to help you get a clearer idea of the problems you want to tackle
- replace your unrealistic beliefs with more rational ones – for example, if you feel a social situation went badly, think if there are any facts to support this or if you're just assuming the worst
- do not think too much about how others see you – pay attention to other people instead and remember that your anxiety symptoms are not as obvious as you might think
- start to do activities that you'd normally avoid – this can be tough at first, so start with small targets and work towards more feared activities gradually

You may find it useful to read an [NHS self-help guide for social anxiety](#) for more detail.

You can listen to a helpful [podcast about controlling anxiety](#) from a leading anxiety specialist.

You can also find mental health apps and tools in the [NHS Apps Library](#).

Working together to keep our children safe and happy.

Halina Rooney

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