

Shyness and Social Phobia

Most of us know what it is like to feel shy. Although it may seem as if everyone else in the room is feeling confident, social anxiety is a nearly universal experience. In a classic study in the 1970s, Philip Zimbardo found that more than 80% of people questioned reported that they were shy at some point in their lives, while over 40% described themselves as currently shy. About 4% described themselves as extremely shy in that they felt shy all the time, in all situations, and with virtually all people. Thus, shyness appears to exist on a continuum with most of us feeling shy in some specific situations and a small percentage struggling with severe shyness in all situations. Zimbardo found that strangers and members of the opposite sex were the most likely people to make us feel shy while close friends and family members were the least likely. The situations in which people were most likely to experience shyness were being the center of attention in a large group (such as giving a speech) or being in social or new situations.

What are Signs of Shyness?

When someone is experiencing shyness, they experience feelings, physical symptoms and their behavior may change in predictable ways. Self-consciousness, feelings of embarrassment, insecurity and inferiority all go along with feeling shy. Someone who is feeling shy may experience physical symptoms of anxiety such as "butterflies in the stomach", blushing, sweaty palms, and an increased heart rate. Shyness is also evident in people's behavior. Someone feeling shy may be hesitant to talk at all and when they do talk, it may be in a quiet voice with little or no eye contact. The person seems to want to disappear into the floor.

What is Social Phobia?

Sometimes considered an extreme form of shyness, *Social Phobia* is an intense fear of becoming humiliated in social situations, specifically of embarrassing yourself in front of other people. If you suffer from social phobia, you tend to think that other people are very competent in public and that you are not. Small mistakes you make may seem to you much more exaggerated than they really are. Blushing itself may seem painfully embarrassing, and you feel as though all eyes are focused on you. You may be afraid of being with people other than those closest to you. Or your fear may be more specific, such as feeling anxious about giving a speech, talking to a boss or other authority figure, or dating. The most common Social Phobia is a fear of public speaking. Sometimes Social Phobia involves a general fear of social situations such as parties. More rarely, it may involve a fear of using a public restroom, eating out, talking on the phone, or writing in the presence of other people, such as when signing a check.

It often runs in families and may be accompanied by depression or alcoholism. Social Phobia often begins around early adolescence or even younger.

Shyness vs. Social Phobia

Although Social Phobia is often thought of as shyness, the two are not the same. Shy people can be very uneasy around others, but they don't experience the extreme anxiety in anticipating a social situation, and they don't necessarily avoid circumstances that make them feel self-conscious. In contrast, people with Social Phobia may not feel shy in all situations. They can be completely at ease with people most of the time, but particular situations, such as walking down an aisle in public or making a speech, can give them intense anxiety. Social Phobia disrupts normal life, interfering with career or social relationships. For example, a worker can turn down a job promotion because he can't give public presentations. The dread of a social event can begin weeks in advance, and symptoms can be quite debilitating.

People with Social Phobia are aware that their feelings are irrational. Still, they experience a great deal of dread before facing the feared situation, and they may go out of their way to avoid it. Even if they manage to confront what they fear, they usually feel very anxious beforehand and are intensely uncomfortable throughout. Afterwards, the unpleasant feelings may linger, as they worry about how they may have been judged or what others may have thought or observed about them.

Treatment

About 80 percent of people who suffer from Social Phobia find relief from their symptoms when treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy or medications or a combination of the two. Therapy may involve learning to view social events differently; being exposed to a seemingly threatening social situation in such a way that it becomes easier to face; and learning anxiety-reducing techniques, social skills, and relaxation techniques.

(The above information about Social Phobia was condensed from a public domain brochure produced by the National Institute of Mental Health. For the full text of the brochure, visit the NIMH website at www.nimh.nih.gov.)

Need Additional Help?

North Idaho College counseling services offer free group and individual counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for NIC students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, stop by Student Health & Counseling Services (2nd floor of SUB) or call 769-7818. All appointments are strictly confidential.