

Social Anxiety Disorder: What is it?

Everyone can relate to feeling anxious before giving a presentation, asking someone out, or going on a job interview. Butterflies in your stomach, sweaty palms, pounding heart—all of these are normal feelings in a new or intimidating social situation. Social anxiety, however, manifests as *extreme* self-consciousness in everyday social situations that others would find non-threatening: having a conversation, ordering food, or making a phone call. When anxiety occurs in situations like these, and results in significant distress, avoidance, overwhelming anxiety, and excessive self-consciousness in everyday social or performance situations, it is possibly social anxiety disorder. According to Anxiety & Depression Association of America (ADAA), about 15 million American adults struggle with social anxiety. If your feeling of anxiety is persistent and intense to the point it interferes with your functioning (social, occupational, academic) or negatively influences your self-esteem, it is probably beneficial to talk with a professional. Diagnosed or undiagnosed, the good news is there are steps you can take to make sure it does not define your college experience.

Some common symptoms of Social Anxiety Disorder:

- Feelings of being visibly nervous in front of others.
- Intense fear of being judged, negatively evaluated, scrutinized.
- Intense fear of being embarrassed or humiliated in front of others.
- Extreme anticipatory anxiety about social interactions and performance situations, such as speaking to a group.
- Fear of not knowing what to say.
- Avoiding face-to-face interactions by depending on technology.
- Fear of eating in public.
- Using alcohol or marijuana to function in social situations.
- Physiological signs such as sweaty palms, feeling a lump in the throat, increased heart rate, and nausea.



How to manage on college campus?

The college experience and environment in and of itself can be a triggering experience for some. Being in an unfamiliar environment, often with unfamiliar people, and confronting a daily dose of new situations can elicit anxious thoughts and feelings. The college environment tends to favor extroverts, which combined with social anxiety can make college feel overwhelming. Learning your triggers and being intentional with some basic coping mechanisms can help reduce the impact of the social anxiety experience:

Academic Life

Develop relationships with your professors:

Introduce yourself after class, or visit professors during office hours. Creating dialogue about your classroom experience helps you create an ally in the classroom. You do not have to bring anxiety into the conversation in order to reap the benefits. If you struggle with active participation in the classroom, these efforts demonstrate your interest and knowledge, even if it does not garner participation points. Nevertheless, it can't hurt!

About those participation points: Being an active learner in a classroom can be complicated for those with social anxiety. You think (and over think) about what to ask or how to answer until you finally make your move...followed by thinking (and overthinking) about how your comment sounded, what others thought of your answer and often assuming they think the worst. Some coping for this comes in the preparation. Read the assignment before class. Identify some key

areas and formulate a thoughtful question in advance. Write it down! This will help you feel confident with the question if you start to freeze. Asking a question is sometimes less threatening than answering questions. Talk with your faculty about alternative or creative ways to participate.

Presenting in front of groups: You will likely encounter class presentations or speeches along the way. Even contributing to organization meetings can feel like "public speaking." Working on self-talk and relaxation skills is important. Your counselor can help identify strategies that will be uniquely beneficial for you.

Group Projects: This can be challenging for students with or without social anxiety, but extra trying perhaps for those with. Group projects are not going away anytime soon, and you will likely encounter them in the work force as well. Identify what it is you don't like; waiting to be 'picked' for a group, feel like you are doing most of the work, others' procrastination that might enhance your own anxiety are a few common experiences. Pick the most stressful element and make a strategy. This might include improving assertive communication, using your delegation skills, 'volunteering' for a task before you are assigned the grunt work.

Fellow students: Similar to your professor, it is helpful to establish an ally in the classroom. Make an effort the first day of class to establish contact with another student. This might be anxiety provoking, but will help establish a foundation for the rest of the semester. Nod, smile, make eye contact, say hello, and the dreaded small talk (about class, homework, weather, anything!) can prove valuable.

Social Life

So let's establish that not all people who are shy are introverts, and not all introverts are shy...and not all socially anxious individuals fit easily in these categories! Many people dealing with social anxiety feel a conflicted need for alone time that clash with a desire for some sense of social affiliation. Please know these can co-exist. We do not all fit into easily defined boxes, and what fits your needs one day might trigger you the next. Self-awareness is your friend!

Live in a residence hall? Try to challenge yourself to engage with people at least a couple times a day. You can do this passively by studying in the lounge, or leaving your door open and saying hello to people. You can also take some social risk, be more assertive and initiate contact with others: inviting someone to watch a movie, for example, takes the pressure off small talk. Or ask a friend to grab a coffee before class; this gives you an automatic end time. If it goes well, you can do something else later. And if someone invites you? You might feel wonderfully affirmed and panic stricken at the same time. It is okay to smile and say "thanks, let me get back to you" and take a minute to consider your needs. Reacting to panic and saying no immediately is likely not the best in the end. If you are unable to join, perhaps offering an alternative will keep the door open for more invites later.

Live off campus? It is easy and sometimes very comfortable to retreat off campus. If you feel like you are missing out, try staying on campus a few hours a week, even if this means simply studying in a common area (AMU, Student Life Center, Davis). This will assist in lessening isolation and gives you an opportunity for informally meeting others in a low-risk setting. It is also okay to know your needs; sometimes

you might just prefer to be alone in a quiet environment to decompress and not feel "on." No apologies necessary! Balancing alone time and social connectedness needs in an intentional way will likely give you a better sense of control and reduce overall stress level. A bit of both is probably necessary.

Friendships: If you have social anxiety, you have likely dealt with a precarious balancing act of caring for yourself and not alienating your friends. Sometimes others might not understand what triggers your anxiety, or how draining it might be for you to be in social environments. If you find your friends personalizing your anxiety (getting upset when you choose not to go out, or rejecting invitations to uncomfortably large social scenes) you may choose to discuss this with them. Once your friends understand your triggers, it might just keep them from dragging you into situations that exacerbate your anxiety. Having said that, not everyone will understand, and that is okay too. Over time it is important to find a social ally, much like the academic allies discussed earlier.

There should
be a weather app
for people
with social anxiety,
like,

"Today, Walmart
will be partly
crowdy with
a 70% chance
of people you
know".

Brain your aims

How to overcome SA

Confront Distorted Thinking

All of us have some tendencies to be stuck in our thinking from time to time, perhaps giving too much airtime to negative self-talk. Those with social anxiety tend to have a few prominent thinking traps that perpetuate the anxiety and elevate distress. Personalizing situations, negatively interpreting events, magnifying the importance of a situation, and being hypersensitive to criticism and rejection are a few common ones. Working with a therapist will help you identify your traps and explore strategies to change. You can start by identifying one or two that sound all too familiar to you, increasing your awareness of how frequently these thoughts show up.

Practice Daily

Have you ever heard the phrase “practice makes permanent?” It is likely that your experience of anxious thoughts has been “practiced” (unintentionally) for quite some time. After recognizing your thinking traps, it takes daily, intentional effort to bring about changes in our thought patterns. Identify one new skill/behavior or a comforting thought/mantra and practice every day, multiple times a day. When this becomes more comfortable or routine, and then add another.

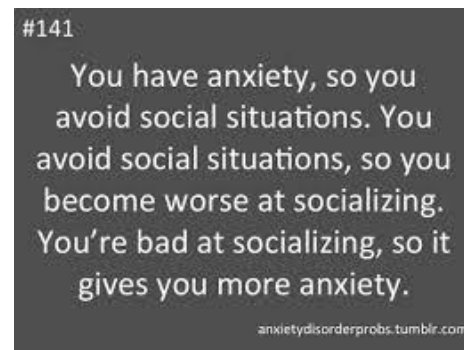
Try Out New Social Skills

As with most phobias, one of the best strategies is exposure. As awkward and uncomfortable as it might feel, challenge yourself to try new skills and expose yourself repeatedly to situations that cause some anxiety. Making comfortable eye contact, saying hello to people you pass, practicing phone calls, and raising your hand in class are all strategies that increase social skills,

improve skill-confidence, and aid in reducing anxiety over time. Start with the lowest risk and work your way through new skills. You might be surprised the benefit you can get from making intentional “wrong number” phone calls, or asking the store clerk to help you find an item.

Avoid Avoidance

A common response to uncomfortable anxious feelings is to avoid those things that make us anxious. Although this seems like a solution when we are in the moment, this has some long-term implications that are not helpful. Avoidance reinforces the fear response. At some point, our brain interprets this not as “I choose” but as “I can’t”. The more we avoid things, the more our world shrinks and our anxiety seems to loom even larger. Think of things like making phone calls. You might choose to use technology instead of calling, but over time, actually making a call becomes more intensely anxiety provoking.



Learn Relaxation & Self-care

Find some effective means of self-care that works for you. Yoga, deep breathing, and calming music are all helpful in reducing the physiological impact of anxiety. Meditation or “mindfulness” practices provide benefit. Cardio exercise helps reduce cortisol levels, the hormone responsible for that stressed-out

feeling. If you can't "people" and don't feel like going to the gym, run the stairs of your residence hall, do jumping jacks in your room, plug in your earbuds and focus on a mantra. There are wonderful apps for mindfulness, guided relaxation, and meditation. Relaxation is not just for *reacting* to stress and anxiety. Make this a proactive part of your daily routine to increase your resilience to anxiety.

Know your risks

Some things to consider. Having any mental health condition unfortunately can make us more vulnerable for other mental health conditions. Unmanaged/untreated anxiety increases the vulnerability for depression. About 50% of those with depression have a pre-existing anxiety disorder. (hercampus.com)

Another risk is alcohol and other drug use. More so than other college students, those with social anxiety are particularly susceptible to using alcohol to facilitate social situations. While it might seem effective in the moment it can lead to greater situational and health problems. An estimated 20% of adults with social anxiety disorder also suffer from alcohol abuse or dependence (hercampus.com). Healthy coping is key.

Consider Treatment

We understand that seeking help can be an anxiety trigger in and of itself. Sometimes socially anxious people, by very nature of fearing embarrassment and humiliation, put off getting the needed professional support. ADAA estimates that 36% of those with social anxiety had symptoms for ten or more years before

seeking treatment. In spite of being highly treatable, only about one-third seek treatment. Seeking help for mental health problems is **not** a sign of weakness. If you feel this way, throw that idea out the window! Seeking help is taking charge and working to get your life back! Professional help exists for a reason. When you are ready, help is available. This is a free student service at University of Findlay. Why wait?

On Campus Resource

University of Findlay Counseling Services
(Free, Professional, Confidential)
307 Frazer Street
By appointment: 419-434-4526
Walk-in time: Tuesdays 3:00-4:00 pm, Fridays
9:00 am-11:30 am

Self Help Resources

Anonymous screening:
<http://screening.mentalhealthscreening.org/OILERS>
Oiler Nation web site Keyword: counseling
(self-help)

Content adapted from the following sources:

<https://adaa.org>
<https://socialanxietyinstitute.org>
<https://www.hercampus.com>