

## **SOCIAL ANXIETY**

“Does your child feel anxious while meeting someone new?”, “Does your child decline events because of anxiety?”, “Does s/he afraid of public speaking?” “Does s/he get stressed out to choose his/her words while talking to a stranger?”, “Does s/he prefer staying at home instead of going out with friends?” “Does s/he often avoid making eye contact with others?” “Does s/he have difficulties while starting a conversation or ordering food in a restaurant?”

If your answer is “yes” to these questions, your child might have a compelling sense of social relations. Before thinking that this situation will change as your child grows older, it is important to understand whether these behaviors are related to what is called “social anxiety” or “social phobia” as commonly used in the psychology literature.

Social anxiety is a psychological disorder where a person has an evident and continuous fear of being judged or negatively evaluated by other people, and of embarrassing or humiliating themselves in social environments. The tasks that are regular and easy when performed alone become a struggle when people are around.

What others say and think is constantly in their focus. Although they recognize that their fear is excessive or unreasonable, they have difficulties in preventing it. In order to cope with this intense fear and anxiety, they often try to avoid social environments or activities.

### **Types of Social Anxiety**

- A) Common type: Fear and anxiety is seen in almost all social situations.
- B) Uncommon type: Fear and anxiety are limited to one or more social situations (eating, speaking in front of others, etc.).

### **Prevalence of Social Anxiety**

Social anxiety is one of the most common anxiety disorders. According to the studies about the prevalence of social anxiety, the rate is between 2-13%. The age of onset of social anxiety is quite early; typically it begins in childhood (0-5 years) or early puberty (11-13 years). While 40% of those with social anxiety have an age of onset before 10 years of age, approximately 95% of them start before 20 years of age.

### **Social Anxiety or Shyness?**

All anxiety, fear and shame experienced in social environments do not defined as social anxiety. What distinguishes social anxiety from shyness is the excessive frequency of symptoms, the severity of the impairment of functioning in a person’s daily life, and especially the level of avoidance. While people experiencing social anxiety often avoid social environments in order to cope with their disturbing emotions, shy people do not restrict their social activities even if they are worried.

### **Symptoms of Social Anxiety**

Social Anxiety has physiological, emotional and behavioral symptoms. Physiological symptoms include palpitations, sweating, tremor, muscle tension, dry mouth, abdominal pain. In the meantime, physical reactions are often accompanied by thoughts such as “I am weak, inadequate, disliked, not worthy of being loved, ugly, not good enough, I should not show that I am anxious, I should seem comfortable” etc. In the behavioral dimension, the most common behaviors are not entering the stressful environment, leaving the existing environment, avoid making eye contact or losing eyes.

### **Effects of a Social Anxiety on Peoples’ Life**

Social anxiety, which can be seen in the early years, affects peoples’ development, self-perception and quality of life negatively in many areas of life such as school, work, family and social life.

Students who have social anxiety may have difficulties in attending classes, making speeches in the class, making presentations, writing on the board, communicating with teachers, participating in social activities or interviews, expressing opposing thoughts or communicating with peers during breaks. As a result, they show avoidance behaviors. Staying away from socialization and learning processes affects students' development negatively. Even, as anxiety increases, some students may experience reluctance to go to school, sleep problems, and nausea, headache, sore throat without physiological origin. If not treated properly, the individual may experience similar processes during his/ her work life in the future.

Events such as sports, performance shows, competitions and interviews are also very challenging for individuals who have social anxiety. In such cases, the individual's attention and performance may be adversely affected since s/he thinks that other peoples’ attention focused entirely on him/herself.

Interactions such as shopping alone in the daily life, asking something to a stranger on the street, going to the restaurant and giving orders can also cause intense unrest in individuals who are socially concerned. They are afraid of the emergence of physical or behavioral symptoms in the social environment and to be noticed by those around them. This fear increases their anxiety level, which in turn triggers physiological symptoms. As a result they might be convinced that “these environments necessarily create these symptoms”.

Avoidance behaviors that people exhibit in order to be freed from the fear of being rejected by others, negatively affect their functionality and other peoples’ efforts to communicate with them. Moreover, people with social anxiety often focus on problems in a social environment that will confirm their fear and anxiety. This reinforces the vicious cycle of anxiety by preventing them from making realistic assessments about their experiences. For example, the social attraction of a person, who stays distant and avoids communicating with others because of his/her anxiety, will gradually decrease over time. As a result, his/her surroundings will also behave more distantly towards him/her. However, the individual will take this as an evidence of his/her beliefs about “being undesirable”, rather than as a reaction of her avoiding behaviors.

People who enter the vicious cycle can turn the avoidance behavior into their way of life. This might lead to loneliness, decreased self-confidence, avoidance of romantic relationships, inability to perform daily life functions, and harm peoples' quality of life. Therefore, recognizing and treating social anxiety is of great importance for an individual to live a healthy life.

### **Suggestions to Support an Individual with Social Anxiety**

- It is very important to pay attention to the language you communicate with your child, to become a model for him/her, and to avoid the perfectionist approach and critical language.
- Comparing your child with others may cause him/her to feel inadequate and worthless. S/he may become withdrawn. Avoiding benchmarking and encouraging his/her own achievements will make him/her more willing to improve themselves.
- Giving your child age-appropriate tasks that s/he can accomplish, providing opportunity to express him/herself, and supporting his/her progress in the field of social skills with realistic feedback will contribute to the development of self-confidence and reduce avoidance behaviors.
- If parents try to solve any problem that their child faces, this will prevent the development of his/her problem solving skills and it triggers avoidance behaviors in situations where child have to struggle by him/herself. It would be more beneficial to help your child to examine the situation from different angles, to encourage multi-faceted thinking and to give him/her time to implement solutions instead of solving the problem.
- If your child has difficulty to find friends at school, organizing after-school or weekend activities with peers will help him/her to make friends and improve socializing skills.
- Activities such as sports (especially team sports) and arts will provide a basis for your child to meet with peers who share similar interests and develop their social skills.
- Learning and regularly practicing physical activities such as sports, breathing exercises, relaxation techniques, meditation and yoga will help your child to regulate emotions and reduce anxiety.
- If social anxiety is not treated, it disrupts peoples' functionality and restricts their life. For this reason, it is important to talk to a psychologist/psychiatrist and support your children in collaboration with school and therapist.