

how to manage

SOCIAL ANXIETY

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling of fear or distress caused by perceived imminent disaster. It's a normal emotional response to danger, and can be both healthy and unhealthy.

The healthy type of anxiety is usually brought on by a task you are trying to complete such as an exam or a job interview. It only lasts a day or so and it might not affect your health or day-to-day life. In many ways, a certain amount of anxiety is good for us as it gets us hyped up to perform our best. Anxiety can be part your genetic and biochemical make-up, as well as part of your personality.

Anxiety becomes unhealthy though when it begins to negatively impact our health or impacts our behaviour in an ongoing way.

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANXIETY?

Social anxiety is common and refers to feelings of fear or distress related to your interactions with other people. You can often experience social anxiety when you speak to someone of the opposite sex, to people in authority such as teachers, managers or in front of a group. You may be so anxious that you spend a lot of time and energy trying to avoid these people or situations.

In every case they have symptoms in common:

Worrying thoughts
Feelings of panic
Mind racing

Mind goes blank
Fear of losing control
of your mind

Other symptoms of general anxiety that you might experience with social anxiety include:

Not doing so well at work/study
Changes in your relationships with family and friends
Having trouble falling or staying asleep
Feeling restless, keyed up or on edge

Being forgetful, losing concentration
and being easily distracted
Avoiding activities or places
(due to the fear of feeling anxious or overwhelmed)

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WHAT DO I DO IF I AM EXPERIENCING SOCIAL ANXIETY?

When social anxiety starts to impact many areas of your life, it's best to deal with it immediately because it can evolve into more serious anxiety and depressive disorders. Whatever type of anxiety you are experiencing – if it's interfering with areas of your day-to-day life, such as schoolwork, dealing with employers, managers or teachers or impacting relationships with friends – you probably need some help to get back on track. A good place to start is with your doctor, who can help you find the best way to manage it and refer you to someone who specialises in anxiety disorders.

Be proactive. Be in charge of your thoughts rather than letting them or your situation control you. Recognise that anxiety is a part of you not all of you!

Be realistic. What's the absolute worst thing that can happen when your mind goes blank when speaking to someone? By thinking of the worse possible outcome, you can help you put your anxiety into perspective and may realise that it's not as bad as you originally thought.

Relax. There are many ways you can help yourself relax. You could try going for a walk, doing a class like yoga or Tai Chi, learning to meditate or playing footy with a friend. Learn some deep breathing exercises

to help calm your mind and body, so when you feel anxious you can take a few deep breaths before you speak.

Talk it out. Bottling things up is likely to keep your anxiety levels high. If possible, talk to a friend about the things that are making you feel anxious and see if they can be sorted out. Your friend can provide you with a more balanced appraisal. For example, if you feel highly anxious about speaking to someone, you might be worried that it shows and you're afraid of making a fool of yourself. Ask a trusted friend for some feedback; what you might think to be a "disaster" may hardly be noticeable to others. This can help you gain a more realistic picture of how you come across to others.

Practice. If you are anxious about a speech, job interview or presentation (or asking for a first date) practice in front of a mirror! It might seem awkward at first but it is a helpful technique because it gives you confidence and helps reduce your anxiety levels in real situations. Also, anticipate questions that you might be asked and prepare some answers. If your mind goes blank under pressure, you are more likely to recover and think of a response if you've prepared ahead of time.

NEED HELP?

SALVOS COUNSELLING

salvos.org.au/more/get-help/social-anxiety

All information on this page is provided by professional counsellors, but is not a substitute for face-to-face professional help. If you or someone you know is struggling with this issue, please seek help as soon as possible.