

Social Anxiety

By Evelyn Goodman, Psy.D.

Social anxiety has its roots in our very nature as social beings. Humans have the unique capability of self-consciousness, an awareness of ourselves in contrast to others. Many people are greatly concerned about how they appear to others. A national poll taken in the late 1980s concluded that more people feared public speaking than they feared death. The common concern, or fear, regarding how we stand in relation to others may in part explain why social anxiety is so prevalent. People with social anxiety/phobia disorders suffer greatly with disabling fear and demoralization. Fears of being judged as anxious, imperfect, or somehow not up to par with others, leads to fears of embarrassment, humiliation, or shame. Avoidance of those possibilities creates a life that is limited by fear, anxiety, and often depression.

Having treated socially anxious and phobic people for over 20 years, I have learned that there are certain beliefs that socially anxious people hold that are not helpful, and add to the problem. An important part of overcoming social anxiety disorder is identifying the underlying, sometimes hidden, beliefs, ideas, or attitudes that make life difficult. I will present a few of these in the following examples.

▣ "Anxiety is a weakness."

"Don't let them see you sweat," the commercial says. Everyone likes to look cool, calm, and collected. However, people with social anxiety believe that if people see their anxiety, no one will like or respect them; they will be judged as defective human beings, worthy of rejection. The reality is that everyone experiences high anxiety at times, and people tend to be understanding and supportive when they see someone else anxious. Fear and anxiety is a part of the human experience - everyone can relate to it!

▣ "Perfection is possible."

The socially anxious person tends to have high standards of what it means to be human. He/she may be terrified of making mistakes, either in behavior, speech, or appearance, because he expects people to be disapproving or rejecting. Yet this same person doesn't demand perfection of others. The irony here is that the real mistake the socially anxious person makes is that in fearing he may not appear as perfect, he/she sets himself up to be anxious, which makes him more vulnerable to mistakes! It's a vicious cycle. Instead of perfection, I recommend that people consider being just "good enough" because that usually is good enough.

▣ "People are critical and judgmental."

The socially anxious person believes that other people, usually those she/he doesn't know well, will be critical and judgmental of her/him. When I ask my clients about how many people have actually been critical and rejecting of them in their lifetime, the answer is usually one or two, sometimes three, people that they can remember. Very often these were family members or other important people in their lives. This experience led to the overgeneralization that all people are critical and rejecting in nature. It's often helpful to do a reality check here. Test it out: be less than perfect and see what happens.

▣ "Feeling embarrassment is intolerable."

One of the core themes of the socially anxious is the avoidance of feeling embarrassment, humiliation, or shame. Granted, no one I know wants to have to experience any of these feelings. They are such uncomfortable feelings that many societies use embarrassment and shame to control people's behavior. This is the predominant way parents socialize their children, shaming them into conforming to rules. Socially anxious people believe embarrassment is an emotion they cannot tolerate, very much the way a person with panic disorder believes he cannot tolerate high anxiety states. A more likely reality is that the feeling of embarrassment is very short-lived; it

is the memory of having felt embarrassed that lingers on. Recovery from social anxiety requires an acceptance and tolerance of occasional feelings of embarrassment. Like any other emotion, it is an inevitable part of being human and being alive.

You may have noticed by now that these beliefs are overlapping. People tend to be fearful of making mistakes and being seen as less than perfect if they believe others are critical and rejecting. Accepting oneself with anxiety makes one less likely to be so anxious, and less prone to feelings of embarrassment about being seen as anxious. Letting go, or changing, any one of these beliefs will loosen the grip of social anxiety on your life.

About the Author

Evelyn Goodman, Psy.D. has been in private practice in West Los Angeles since 1979. Goodman has been a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist since 1983. Goodman specializes in assisting people recover from severe anxiety conditions. Education includes U.C. Berkeley, California State University, Northridge, and American Behavioral Institute, Los Angeles. Most recently, received certification as a specialist in Health Psychology from American Behavioral Institute. To learn more about Evelyn Goodman visit <http://www.camft.org/Therapists/EvelynGoodman>