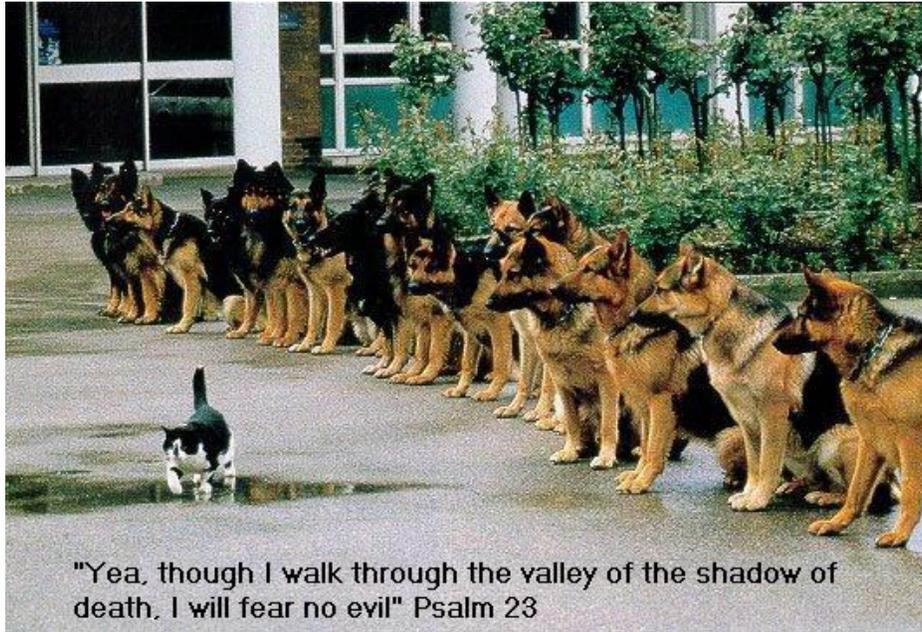


Healthy Happenings: Managing Social Anxiety



"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" Psalm 23

Social situations can be joyous occasions for some, while painstaking for others. After a stressful week of work, one may find a great release in going out with friends or even mingling with strangers at a bar or restaurant. Some people find that going home and reading a book or watching a movie, alone, is the best therapy. There is another group of people who not only find social interaction unappealing, but become mentally paralyzed by the mere thought of it. This EZINE article aims to define social anxiety/phobia and provide coping skills for those who experience severe shyness or social anxiety.

There is a difference between shyness and social anxiety/phobia. General shyness may result from a lack of social skills, interpersonal experience or personality style. Shyness can result in a lack of confidence in social exchanges and feelings of awkwardness in group settings. Social anxiety/phobia is a mental disorder that incorporates the following symptoms:

An irrational fear of being judged in public

The feeling of being scrutinized by others in social situations

The general fear of humiliation or embarrassment in public

An irrational fear of being judged as stupid, crazy, weak, anxious, etc.

Some typical fears of social anxiety include but are not limited to the following: blushing in public, choking, vomiting or spilling food in public, using public toilets, test-taking, being watched and one of the most common fears-public speaking (Bourne, 2007).

Social anxiety/phobia is a form of anxiety; therefore people can also experience accompanying symptoms of generalized anxiety, such as: panic attacks, obsessive thoughts, rumination, catastrophic thinking and physical symptoms of anxiety such as problems breathing, sweating, heart palpitations, hot flashes, feeling faint, weak, etc.

There are varying theories of why social anxiety exists. There is always the question of nature vs. nurture. Is it a genetic component, or did something in the environment trigger the problem? Mental health research tends to support both theories. Clinical trials have proven that there is a correlation between anxiety disorders and genetic transmission. Ecological factors, such as trauma, family issues, environmental stressors, etc. can also cause problems with anxiety (NIMH, 2012).

People who experience social anxiety have various barriers to manage. Job interviews can be so intimidating that one avoids seeking employment. Others may find socialization so painful that they become isolated and lonely. College students may not be able to complete their degree due to the discomfort of public speaking, or parents may not be able to attend their children's extracurricular events.

Social anxiety exists on a spectrum from mild to severe. A person can struggle with negative thinking about social situations, but be able to function throughout the day, whereas a person with severe social anxiety may not be able to leave home for weeks. It is important to define two terms. "Interpersonal" is the ability to understand, relate and effectively communicate with others. "Intrapersonal" is the ability to utilize emotional intelligence and self-awareness so that we may understand our own thoughts, feelings and behavior. As you can imagine, a person may possess an extremely high level of interpersonal ability, as they may be able to "work a room" and effectively listen and communicate with others (think of a smooth sales person), yet he/she may completely lack intrapersonal ability due to a lack of self-awareness. On the other hand, a person who experiences social anxiety may freeze up during a group conversation and not be able to articulate an idea; however, this person may have a high level of emotional intelligence and could write a 200 page dissertation on why a particular social issue is important to them.



Before we begin to discuss the clinical symptoms and intervention strategies of social anxiety, I would like to challenge you to think about the strengths that a person with social anxiety may have. The media in the United States is fascinated with portraying a vogue and desirable lifestyle... Those traits are usually supported by images of youth culture, airbrushed beauty and outgoing and happy people. Our culture also emphasizes the need to have high levels of self – esteem, which is often portrayed as having a high level of social interaction.

The current literature provides us with a lot of information on “introverts” and “extroverts.” The strengths of Introverts are also being acknowledged by various professions. Shyness or a pensive demeanor is no longer always viewed as a weakness. We are also learning that an extrovert is not always associated with a confident person, as an outgoing person may be inwardly anxious. Strengths of shy people may include, but are not limited to: intuitiveness, sensitivity, intelligence, strong active listening skills and creativity. We can learn a great deal from others if we are non-judgmental and approach diversity with an open mind. It is also important to be empathetic toward people who experience social anxiety and respect their boundaries as unique individuals.



The following are intervention strategies that can help individuals cope with social anxiety:

1. Exercise 30 minutes or more 3x a week.
2. Practice meditation, progressive relaxation and guided imagery.
3. Practice deep belly breathing daily (at least 50 breaths).
4. Avoid stimulants (caffeine, nicotine, etc. when possible).
5. Do not use alcohol or drugs to self-medicate, once the high wears off you will be even more anxious. This can evolve into a very painful cycle.
6. Identify the most severe triggers for social anxiety and use self-talk that you can manage them. Some mantras may include: "I know I can cope with this." "I have survived this anxiety before and it did not kill me." "This feeling will pass in a few minutes." "Just because I have anxiety, does not mean I do not have strengths in other areas of life."
7. Use the buddy system. Inform a friend that you become socially anxious and ask this person to accompany you on social outings. Don't be embarrassed, everyone has issues they need to manage in life and anxiety is not the worst thing to have!
8. Slowly desensitize yourself from stressful situations. For example, if crowds disturb you, only go in a crowd for a few minutes, then increase the time increments little by little each time until you are able to stay in a crowd for a few hours.
9. Document your accomplishments them daily as "evidence" that you can manage anxiety.
10. Remember that the worst part of anxiety is the "fear of the fear" ...meaning that the more anxious you become about worrying about something, the more likely it is to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is important to remember that your thoughts and emotions are trying to play tricks on you and you must remind yourself to stay in your "rational mind."
11. Seek therapy from a licensed mental health professional to assess and treat symptoms of social anxiety.
12. Remember-the good news about being an anxious person is that you care about things and have sensitivity about yourself and those around you. This is a wonderful human trait!

Helpful resources for social anxiety include:

www.adaa.org

www.algy.com/anxiety

www.healingwell.com/anxiety

www.fairlite.com/ocd