

PSYCHOLOGY WORKS Fact Sheet: Social Anxiety

What is Social Anxiety?

It is completely normal to feel some anxiety in social situations from time to time. Most of us experience anxiety when we are interviewing for a job, meeting someone new, or speaking in front of a group. We all want to make a good impression and feel accepted. For individuals with social anxiety, however, these situations can feel very overwhelming and distressing. Social anxiety involves an intense fear of being judged, embarrassed, or rejected by others. People with social anxiety often worry they will do or say something embarrassing, and others will think badly of them. They tend to be self-conscious and may feel as though they are “on stage” constantly being observed or evaluated.

Social anxiety can show up in many different ways. Some people feel anxious across a wide range of social situations, such as:

- Meeting new people
- Attending parties or social gatherings
- Participating in school or meetings
- Starting or maintaining conversations
- Being the centre of attention
- Asking for help
- Ordering food in public
- Phoning or texting
- Posting or commenting on social media

Others may only experience anxiety in specific situations like public speaking.

When faced with feared social situations, individuals with social anxiety often experience:

- **Thoughts:** Self-critical thoughts and anticipatory worries, such as:

“I’ll say something stupid.”

“I’ll look anxious.”

“I won’t have anything interesting to say.”

They may also fear others’ reactions, such as:

“People won’t like me.”

“My classmates will think I’m weird.”

“My colleagues will think I’m boring.”

- **Feelings:** Anxiety, fear, nervousness, embarrassment, and shame.
- **Physical sensations:** Sweating, blushing, trembling, shaking, racing heart, upset stomach, nausea, dizziness, light-headedness, dry mouth, or choking sensations.



- **Behaviours:** Avoiding social situations altogether, such as skipping events or declining invitations. They may also rely on *safety behaviours*, which are actions used to try and prevent feared outcomes from occurring, but actually maintain fear in the long term. Examples include:
 - Avoiding eye contact
 - Staying silent or saying very little
 - Rehearsing what to say
 - Avoiding expressing opinions
 - Using alcohol or drugs to cope

When Does Social Anxiety Become a Problem?

Social anxiety can become a problem, or is considered a disorder, when it feels intense, happens frequently, causes significant distress, and interferes with daily life. It can impact many areas of life including:

- **Work and school:** Difficulties might include missing work or classes, struggling to participate in meetings or class discussions, underperforming at work or school, avoiding certain career or academic paths, and difficulty speaking with supervisors, co-workers, teachers, or classmates.
- **Relationships and friendships:** Social anxiety can make it hard to form or maintain close relationships. People might avoid dating, have trouble speaking up, or struggle to connect with others.
- **Recreational activities and hobbies:** Individuals might avoid trying new things or participating in group activities such as going to the gym, taking a class, or joining a club.
- **Everyday activities:** Even routine daily activities can feel overwhelming, like grocery shopping, ordering food at a restaurant, making phone calls, asking for help, and using public transit.

Who Has Problems with Social Anxiety?

Anyone can experience social anxiety, and it is not always visible from the outside. Someone may appear confident while struggling on the inside. When social anxiety becomes very distressing and makes it hard for someone to live their daily life, it is called **Social Anxiety Disorder**. This is one of the most common anxiety problems. In Canada, about 7% of people deal with social anxiety disorder each year, and 8-12% of people are diagnosed with it at some point in their lives.

Research shows that both your family genetics and your life experiences can play a role in the development of social anxiety problems. Social anxiety tends to run in families, which means if someone in your family has an anxiety problem you may be more likely to have one too. Certain life experiences – like being teased or bullied – can play a role. Social anxiety problems can develop slowly over time, often starting in elementary school or early teenage years, or after a very stressful or embarrassing event.

What Treatments Help People with Social Anxiety?

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is the gold standard psychological treatment for social anxiety disorder. Scientific research shows that **CBT** is very helpful for people with social anxiety. In CBT, people



learn new ways of thinking (cognition) and acting (behaviour) that can lower their anxiety. A typical CBT program lasts about 12 to 20 one-hour long sessions.

People with social anxiety often overestimate how threatening social situations are and underestimate their ability to handle them. CBT teaches people how to notice and challenge unhelpful thoughts and beliefs. This helps reduce anxiety and makes it easier to take part in social activities.

Many people with social anxiety also try to avoid situations or people that make them feel nervous. Avoidance may help in the short term – like feeling less anxious by skipping a party – but it can make the problem worse later. When people use avoidance to cope with feelings, they miss opportunities to connect with people and to learn that they can handle social situations.

A CBT therapist helps people **face their fears gradually**, a process called **exposure**. Exposure helps people learn, through real experience, that social situations are usually safer than they think and that they can cope with them.

Other types of therapy, like **Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBI)** and **Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)**, can also help, though they may not be as effective as CBT.

- **MBIs** teach people to pay attention to their thoughts, feelings, and surroundings in the present moment without judging them. Mindfulness helps people pay less attention to their worries and focus more on what's happening around them right now. It also teaches them to see anxious thoughts and feelings as temporary.
- **IPT** focuses on understanding and improving relationships with others.

The good news is that **most people with social anxiety disorder get better with psychotherapy**. It can take several weeks or months to notice changes, so it's important to stick with it.

Medication can also help some people with Social Anxiety Disorder. It may take time to find the right one, so patience is key. Talk to your **family doctor** or **psychiatrist** about what options might work best for you.

How Can Psychologists Help People with Social Anxiety?

Psychologists play an important role in helping people understand, manage, and overcome social anxiety. Their support can include:

- **Education:** Psychologists help people understand what social anxiety is, what causes it, and how it can be managed.
- **Assessment and treatment planning:** Psychologists talk with people to understand their experiences and create a plan to help them manage their social anxiety.
- **Evidence-based therapy:** Psychologists use proven treatments like Cognitive Behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT helps people notice and change unhelpful thoughts, slowly face feared situations, and build confidence.
- **Research:** Psychologists study social anxiety to learn more about it and find better ways to treat it.



- **Advocacy and access:** Psychologists raise awareness about social anxiety and work to make sure people can get the right help. Many Canadians still have trouble finding effective treatment – but psychologists are working to change that!

Where Can I Go for More Information?

You can find additional **information and free self-help resources** on social anxiety at:

- <https://cmha.ca/>
- <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/infosheet/anxiety-disorders>
- <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/looking-after-yourself/social-anxiety>
- <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/social-anxiety-disorder>
- <https://www.anxietycanada.com/> (available until March 2026)

You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology may make available a referral list of practicing psychologists that can be searched for appropriate services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

This fact sheet has been prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Dr. Melanie Badali and Dr. Kristin Buhr, Registered Psychologists at the North Shore Stress and Anxiety Clinic.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the **PSYCHOLOGY WORKS** Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

Canadian Psychological Association
1101 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 230
Ottawa, Ontario K2C 3W7
Tel: 613.237.2144
Toll free (in Canada): 1.888.472.0657

