



PSYCHEDUP
with Dr. Diane McIntosh

Social Anxiety Disorder



What Is It

Social anxiety disorder, also known as social phobia, is much more than simple shyness. It's a mental illness that causes intense fear of being judged, humiliated, or scrutinized in social situations.

For people living with social anxiety disorder, even everyday interactions, like meeting someone new, answering a question in class, or attending a social event, can feel unbearably distressing. The fear of embarrassment or rejection often leads to avoidance, causing individuals to miss out on meaningful experiences, opportunities, and relationships.

To be diagnosed, symptoms must persist for at least six months and be disproportionate to any real threat. People with this illness often know their fear is excessive but feel powerless to control it.

Recognizing Symptoms

Social anxiety disorder involves intense emotional, physical, and behavioural symptoms that significantly interfere with daily life.

What you might feel or think

- Persistent fear of social or performance situations
- Excessive worry about being judged or rejected
- Negative thoughts like:
 - “I’ll look anxious and stupid.”
 - “People will think I’m weird.”
 - “Everyone is judging me.”
 - “I’ll say something wrong and embarrass myself.”

These thoughts often lead to avoidance of social situations and missed opportunities for connection and personal and professional development.



What you might feel physically

- Blushing or feeling flushed
- Sweating or clammy hands
- Trembling or shaking
- Dry mouth
- Racing heartbeat or chest tightness
- Stomach aches, nausea, or dizziness
- Muscle tension or feeling “frozen”

Some may even have **panic attacks**, feeling suddenly detached from reality or overwhelmed, like they’re having a heart attack, dying or must escape, with intense emotional and/or physical symptoms.

How you might behave

- Avoiding new people, whether at social gatherings, parties, or meetings
- Declining invitations or stop initiating contact
- Avoiding public speaking or contributing in groups
- Avoiding making eye contact
- Staying quiet or overly agreeable to avoid drawing attention

This avoidance can seriously impact **school, work, and personal relationships**, leading to lost opportunities, isolation, or dropping out of activities altogether.

Treating Social Anxiety Disorder

Social anxiety disorder is treatable. With the right combination of therapy, lifestyle changes and in some cases, medication, most people can manage their symptoms, regain confidence, and reconnect with life.



Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

CBT is the most effective talk treatment for social anxiety. It helps people understand their unhelpful thoughts and change their behaviours that fuel anxiety. A key part of CBT is exposure therapy, gradually and safely facing feared situations rather than avoiding them. Over time, this process teaches the brain that these situations are not as dangerous as they seem and anxiety naturally decreases.



Managing Physical Symptoms

Therapy often includes techniques to calm the body's stress response, like controlled breathing, mindfulness, and progressive muscle relaxation to reduce symptoms such as a racing heart, trembling, or shallow breathing.



Medication

When symptoms are severe or significantly interfere with daily life, medication can help:

Beta blockers can be used as needed for specific situations, like public speaking, to manage some physical symptoms, like trembling or a shaky voice.

Antidepressants are often prescribed for ongoing anxiety and can significantly reduce symptoms when taken regularly.

Benzodiazepines should be reserved for very short-term or situational use.

It's important to know that cannabis, especially THC, should not be used to manage any anxiety disorder. In fact, when used to manage anxiety, the amount required often escalates and discontinuing cannabis use can promote worsening anxiety.



Recovery and building strength

Lifestyle habits play a key role in recovery. Regular exercise, getting enough sleep, a healthy diet, limiting alcohol and avoiding recreational drug use and supportive relationships all help to reduce anxiety. Support groups and mindfulness-based therapy can also strengthen coping skills.

With time and the right help, most people with social anxiety disorder experience meaningful improvement.

[See our episode on Resilience](#)



Support Organizations

[The Center for Addiction and Mental Health](#)

[Canadian Mental Health Association - British Columbia Division](#)

[Mental Health Commission of Canada](#)

[Canadian Psychological Association](#)

[Psychologists' Association of Alberta](#)

[Anxiety Canada](#)

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