

Social Anxiety: How to Help Yourself or a Friend



Expert review by Janine Domingues, PhD

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANXIETY?

Social anxiety is when you worry so much about being judged by others that you stop doing things you need to (and want to) do for fear of embarrassing yourself or being rejected.

But what does social anxiety look like? How is it different than feeling stressed or overwhelmed? Signs that you, or your friend may be struggling with social anxiety include:

1. Constantly worrying about being judged
2. Avoiding meeting new people
3. Avoiding parties or dates
4. Avoiding eating in front of others
5. Dreading giving presentations or talking in front of groups of people
6. Panicking and sweating, shaking, or having shortness of breath when you're in a situation you dread or try to avoid

TIPS FOR MANAGING SOCIAL ANXIETY

1. **Don't avoid things:** Avoiding situations that make you anxious may help in the short run, but it makes you feel more anxious in the long run. Do the opposite — step toward the anxiety — and over time it will fade.
2. **Push yourself:** When you leave your comfort zone and do the things that make you feel anxious, the anxiety weakens and becomes more manageable.
3. **Practice:** To do something that makes you nervous, start with small steps. The more you practice, the easier it will get, because you are expanding your ability to handle a challenging situation. For example, if you are worried about going to a party because you may not know anyone, you can prepare by giving yourself the goal of staying for 30 minutes and talking to one person, and having a friend on call who can encourage and support you by text or call.
4. **Acceptance:** Anxiety is definitely uncomfortable, but if you accept that anxiety is okay and you are strong enough to tolerate discomfort in small doses, this can give you the courage to keep trying.
5. **Practice self-care:** Reduce stress by eating healthy food, exercising, getting regular sleep, engaging in mindfulness practices, avoiding alcohol misuse, etc. Use your own support network by reaching out to people you trust when you need support or spending time with friends or family.
6. **Get help:** If your anxiety is seriously interfering with your life, it's important to talk to your parents, or another trusted adult who can help you connect with a mental health professional. You may not feel confident that you can change, but a professional who's worked with many young people with social anxiety can make a huge difference in your life.

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HOW TO SUPPORT A FRIEND YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT

1. **Mention you've noticed that they seem to be withdrawing** from friends or are not going out as much, or that they appear to be particularly concerned about what other people think. **Ask if there's a reason** they've started to act this way.
2. **Let your friend know that you are there for them.** Provide emotional support and encouragement by listening to concerns and let them know that you care. It's tempting to solve problems for your friend, but it undermines confidence. Ask them: "What do you think you should do?" or "How do you want to handle this?"
3. **Help them find motivation, see their point of view, and identify benefits and challenges:**
 - Highlight the benefits: spending time with friends and finding new ones, making decisions without worrying what others may think, enjoying social activities
 - Identify stumbling blocks: not knowing how or where to start, worrying about how to be prepared for anxiety provoking situations, being concerned about what others may think
4. **Offer to help** them practice pushing through anxiety. Maybe you could go with them to a party for a short stay and then go get dinner by yourselves. Or perhaps you can help them practice their presentation just for you in the same classroom where they will later make a presentation.
5. **Practice strategies** for managing stress with them, like meditating or journaling.
6. If they are clearly struggling and missing out on things they could be enjoying, **encourage them to talk to their parents or another trusted adult** who can help them treatment. Emphasize that working with a mental health professional can really change how they feel.

TYPES OF TREATMENT

Good treatment can make all the difference when coping with anxiety. The treatment for social anxiety can include both behavioral therapy and medication.

- Therapy:**
1. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) teaches you skills for coping with anxiety without avoiding anxiety-provoking situations. With a therapist, patients practice facing things that trigger anxiety until the anxiety response fades.
 2. Group based CBT is effective in providing real time practice with peers in a supportive setting.

- Medication:**
1. SSRIs, or selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, have proven effective at managing some symptoms of social anxiety disorder.
 2. Medications called beta blockers may also be prescribed to curb the fear response and reduce physical symptoms of anxiety, such as palpitations and sweating.

HOW TO FIND TREATMENT

Professionals can be found by asking parents or other people you trust, using Psychology Today or through an insurance provider. WebMD provides a helpful guide on how to start your search and what to look for.

RESOURCES

HOW TO ADDRESS A CRISIS SITUATION

1. Call 911 immediately if you're concerned that you or a friend are unsafe, may be in danger of self-harm, or may be suicidal or overdosing. Tell responders as many details as possible so they can be prepared when they arrive.
2. Free, 24-hr, anonymous hotlines:
 - Crisis Text Line: text UROK to 741741
 - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: call 1-800-273-8255

EXPERT INFORMATION

- Child Mind Institute
- National Alliance for Mental Health (NAMI)
- National Center for PTSD
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- WebMD

COMMUNITIES

- Project UROK
- Born This Way Foundation
- To Write Love On Her Arms
- The Mighty

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