

Social phobia is a fear of being scrutinised, evaluated or the centre of attention. Underlying this fear is the idea that the person will be evaluated negatively – people will think that they are strange or incompetent. It may be that the person with the social phobia believes that people will see that they are anxious, or that they will say something embarrassing, or make a mistake or that some aspect of their appearance will attract criticism. They often fear situations including public speaking, writing in public, eating or drinking in public or even using public toilets. Social situations are endured rather than enjoyed. The person may be prone to panic attacks and avoidance behaviour. It is estimated that about 5 per cent of the population have some element of social phobia.

The cause of social phobia is largely the same as any other phobia. Some people may have a more reactive nervous system, coupled with experiences in childhood where social situations were anxiety provoking and often avoided. People who are sensitive to criticism or overly concerned with 'creating a good impression' may be more susceptible to social phobia.

■ Treatment of social phobia

There are five elements to the treatment of social phobia.

- ① Learning to control anxiety and panic through relaxation exercises, hyperventilatory control, distraction, and positive self-talk.
- ② Correcting faulty and distorted thinking patterns and beliefs.
- ③ Gradually increasing involvement in social situations through a programme of graded exposure. Confront situations, drop safety behaviours.
- ④ Being more assertive. 'This is me – this is what I think – this is how I feel. I'm OK.' – build confidence.
- ⑤ Reduce self-consciousness – focus on others rather than yourself.

■ Distorted thinking patterns

The person with the social phobia often worries about situations, focuses inwards, starts to avoid, loses confidence and then worries and avoids more.

A classic vicious circle of worry, anxiety and avoidance.

- ① The person with social phobia usually over-estimates the extent that other people will notice their anxiety. Most people do not pay a great deal of attention to other people that they don't know. If the social phobic blushes in front of ten people, they will assume most of the people noticed, whereas in reality maybe one or two might have.
- ② They will then over-estimate the negative evaluation that other people will make. If someone did notice somebody else blushing the chances are that they would not make a negative evaluation at all. Most people that you know have already made their minds up about your character and are not going to have an extreme shift in opinion on the basis of one event.
- ③ Social phobics often have one set of rules for themselves and one for other people. If asked whether they would evaluate somebody negatively whom they saw being anxious or blushing or shaking they would usually say no! However, they assume that other people will evaluate them negatively. The person with social phobia needs to recognise these distorted thinking patterns.

