

Social Anxiety Tips for Families

Social anxiety includes many forms of worry about how others perceive, accept, or judge us. Those with social anxiety may feel anxious about a variety of social situations: the beginning of a new school year, oral presentations in front of the class, or attending a party with teammates. Even kids who did not experience significant social anxiety in elementary school may begin noticing more anxiety during middle school and high school. Adolescence typically highlights questions about identity and feeling included, and social anxiety relates to these concerns. While many kids worry about being judged or excluded by others from time to time, these worries can be more intense, persistent, and impairing for some kids than they are for others.

What are the symptoms of social anxiety?

- **Worries about what others think.** Significant concerns about being judged, embarrassed, made fun of, or being rejected are common. These worries can sound like, “What if I do something stupid? What if everyone laughs at me? Are they mad at me?”
- **Avoidance of social situations.** Social anxiety might lead to trying to get out of going to parties, pursuing a talent or interest outside of school, speaking to unfamiliar people (even family members), and participating fully in class (e.g., raising our hand, giving a presentation, working in groups, and even talking to others at lunch or recess).
- **Perseveration (or sticky thoughts).** We may replay things we said or did (online or in person) over and over again to figure out if it was ok, if we sounded dumb, or if we upset or disappointed someone. Likewise, we might worry a lot about an upcoming social situation, imagining all the different ways it could go poorly.
- **Withdrawal or isolation.** We may remove ourselves or stay on the sidelines of social interactions due to anxiety. This could look like: sitting a distance from peers, avoiding eye contact, or hiding under clothing or accessories (e.g., hoodies, sunglasses, headphones).

When does social anxiety become problematic?

Social anxiety disorder affects approximately 7% of youth, with relatively higher rates found in adolescents. In a class of 35 students, 2 or 3 would have social anxiety severe enough to impact their lives.

Persistence: Once an anxiety-provoking situation is over, the social anxiety does not go away. For most sufferers, the anxiety happens in different types of social situations.

Distress: Anxiety can cause us and our families distress. We may feel significant anxiety ahead of, during, and/or after a social situation. We may also feel physically unwell when anxious (e.g., stomach-ache, nausea).

Impairment: The social anxiety gets in the way of school, family, and/or social life. For instance, youth with social anxiety may not participate in class (and then get a lower class participation grade, might have difficulty talking with extended family members, and/or could struggle to meet people or make friends.

How is social anxiety treated?

Social anxiety disorder is best treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT teaches about the connection between our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Most importantly, treatment focuses on facing fears in a planned, gradual way while adding new skills to best manage anxiety when it happens.



For more information, resources, and advice, visit

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