

Social Anxiety Tips for Professionals

Social anxiety is characterized by worries about being negatively evaluated by others. Youth may feel anxious about a variety of social situations, such as starting at a new school, giving an oral presentation, or wanting to fit in with a peer group. It is natural to see an uptick in social anxiety during adolescence, when identity and social inclusion are important for many youth. However, some youth may experience social anxiety that is more intense, persistent, and impairing than what would be expected for their age.

What are the symptoms of social anxiety?

- **Worries about negative evaluation.** Significant concerns about being embarrassed, made fun of, or perceived negatively are often observed. Common concerns include, “What if I do something stupid? What if everyone laughs at me? Are they mad at me?”
- **Avoidance of social situations.** Social situations that are commonly avoided include parties, extracurricular clubs, speaking to unfamiliar people, and class participation (e.g., raising their hand, giving oral presentations, speaking in groups).
- **Perseveration.** Youth may replay past social interactions in their head repeatedly to check whether they may have come off negatively, or worry excessively about an upcoming social situation.
- **Withdrawal.** Youth may withdraw and stay on the outskirts of social interaction due to anxiety. This can manifest as physically sitting away from peers, avoiding eye contact, or hiding under clothing (e.g., hoodie).

When does social anxiety become problematic?

Social anxiety disorder affects approximately 7% of youth, with relatively higher rates found in adolescents.

Persistence: The social anxiety does not go away after the situation has passed, and typically occurs across multiple social situations.

Distress: There is significant anxiety in anticipation of, during, and/or after the social situation. Youth may have physical complaints when anxious (e.g., stomachache).

Impairment: The social anxiety is getting in the way of academics, family, and social life. For instance, youth may experience lower class participation grades, have difficulty speaking with distant family members, and/or making new friends.

How is social anxiety disorder treated?

Social anxiety disorder is best treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). The child learns about the connection between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and how they impact each other. Most importantly, treatment focuses on facing the feared situations and developing skills to best manage the anxiety. Given that youth with social anxiety disorder often avoid social situations, the therapist works with the child to gradually re-approach these situations, fostering important opportunities for peer interaction and socialization.